There's a difference between an online presence and online marketing, says David Meerman Scott.

CLICKING WITH CUSTOMERS

Website? Check. Online press releases? Check. USAToday.com banner ad? Check. This checklist represents many companies' entire online marketing program, points out David Meerman Scott in *World Wide Rave: Creating Triggers That Get Millions of People to Spread Your Ideas and Share Your Stories* (Wiley). Ninety-seven percent of organizations aren't taking full advantage of the Web's marketing opportunities, according to Scott, an online strategist. "Lots of companies think they are doing online marketing, but either they aren't doing much of anything or they are doing it wrong." He insists your firm should be publishing free reports, creating e-books, maintaining a corporate blog, commenting on other blogs and developing relationships with bloggers, and creating and posting YouTube videos. And that's just the beginning. Scott, 48, spoke at *TCB Review*'s New York offices about why businesses are so far off when it comes to marketing online. —VADIM LIBERMAN

WHAT EXACTLY ARE ORGANIZATIONS DOING WRONG?

Unfortunately, traditional-media marketing is heavily product-centered, and companies are translating that approach to the Web by creating banner ads that simply announce products or services. But marketing on the Web should be different. It's about publishing interesting information that people will want to consume. The focus on *product* that offline advertising has had generally is not the right way to go when marketing online, because people searching the Web are looking for answers to problems, not for companies' products.

The problem is that managers are still focusing on doing what they learned in school or have been doing on the job for years. Think about it: The first thing you're taught in school and take with you to work are the four Ps of marketing, the first being *product*. But if you want to get people talking about your product, it's really unlikely that they will do so *because* of your actual product. Stop talking about your product! Nobody really cares about it.

Ultimately, the best marketing understands people's problems and articulates how the product will solve those problems. For example, there are thousands of companies out there that develop similar software or hardware technologies, and their marketing is pretty similar because they talk about the product in similar terms: "a flexible, scalable solution for improving business processing." *But what the hell is that?* It's a router or a piece of software for accountants or some other group of people. It's not "a flexible, scalable solution for improving business processing." Instead of creating jargon-filled, hype-based advertising, you can create the kind of online information that your buyers naturally gravitate to by using *their* words, *not* your own. You should speak in the language of your buyer, not the language of your founder, CEO, product manager, or PR agency staffer.

TRUE ENOUGH, BUT YOUR SUGGESTION HARDLY SEEMS LIMITED TO ONLINE MEDIA.

You're right. It's just that offline marketing reaches people whether they like it or not. But online, you have to *get* people to come to your site, and product-centered banner ads won't do it. Instead, companies need to focus on offering product-related information first in order to get people interested in the product.

We're going through a revolution right now, not unlike the one sixty years ago when television first came out, when everyone wanted to create radio ads, only with pictures. Eventually, smart people realized that there are different ways to market on television than on the radio. Today, though, companies are applying traditional marketing techniques to the Web. It's unsuccessful.

FIRMS SHOULD MAKE ALL KINDS OF INFORMATION AVAILABLE FOR FREE, YOU SUGGEST. WHAT'S WRONG WITH CHARGING?

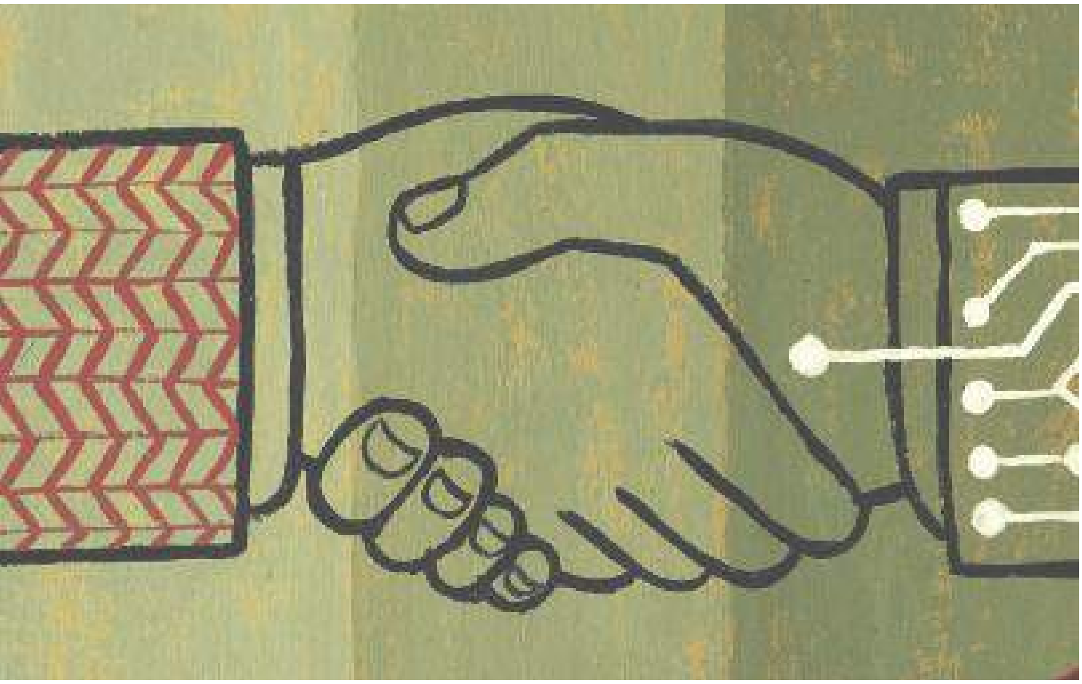
Because it restricts the spreading of information about your company's products and services. For instance, my entire book was available for free for five days online. I actually wanted to make it free online forever, but I had to strike some sort of compromise with my publisher.

IF IT WERE ALWAYS FREE, HOW WOULD YOU OR YOUR PUBLISHER MAKE MONEY?

We wouldn't make a penny, but we would get more people talking about the book, and then we'd sell more copies of it by driving people to the store. Essentially, the more buzz about the book, the more it will sell.

WHY BUY SOMETHING YOU CAN READ FOR FREE?

To get this pretty souvenir [the hardcover copy of the book]. I do realize that it's a leap of faith. However, there's a parallel in the music industry. For decades, selling music has been about exerting control over music copyright. It still is, as many players in the industry patrol YouTube and other sites in order to say "no." Instead of looking at the new medium of electronic content as an opportunity, they see it as a threat to the old way of selling. But if you step back and look at the ways musicians make money besides the recordings—concerts, endorsement deals, merchandise—you start to suspect that clamping down with rigid controls may not be the best strategy. If I were a music executive, I'd make much of my music available for free online, and I'd encourage people to share it. I would have the confidence that providing music for free would drive sales of my other products.



HOW SHOULD SOCIAL-NETWORKING WEBSITES FIT INTO A BUSINESS'S MARKETING PLAN?

Very prominently. It's just too bad that some 25 percent of corporations block access to YouTube and Facebook and similar sites. Companies think, "Why should we let our employees go on these sites? They'll be wasting the corporation's time."

This debate about social media in the enterprise is just so damn silly. We've seen this before: when personal computers entered the workplace in the 1980s and during the Web and e-mail debates of the 1990s. You might recall when executives believed e-mail would expose a corporation's secrets, and therefore only "important employees" were given computers and e-mail addresses. Years later, companies fretted about employees freely using the public Internet and being exposed to "unverified information." The solution has always been the same: Don't provide employees with computers. Refuse to provide a company e-mail address. Ban the Internet within the corporate firewalls. Block YouTube, blogs, Facebook, and forums from view. Yet how many companies today refuse to provide a computer or don't provide e-mail? So why block these websites?

The way I see it, it comes down to trust. I'm not a believer in making arbitrary rules for how employees should use their time. So what if you make rules to block Facebook and Twitter and YouTube? There are thousands of similar sites that workers can visit instead. You can't block them all. Most companies don't say that you can have a cigarette break but it can only be twelve minutes. They allow you to leave the building to have a cigarette, get a cup of coffee, or pick up toiletries without timing you. So when a business blocks access to social-networking sites, there's an attitude that says, "We don't trust you to do the right thing."

BY LETTING WORKERS POST MESSAGES ON VARIOUS WEBSITES, DON'T COMPANIES RISK LOSING CONTROL OVER THEIR MESSAGES?

Yes, and I realize that it's counterintuitive for corporations to willingly risk losing such control. But if you want more consumers to hear about your products or services, you have to be prepared to let your employees blog, post on Twitter, and say whatever they want online, and, consequently, be willing to lose control over your messages.

It's still worth the risk. In general, a fear that workers will say bad things is significantly overblown. Sure, an occasional employee might vent frustrations online, but the benefit of this kind of communication is that you can also monitor it. Employees, customers, and other stakeholders are talking about your organization offline anyway, so unless you are participating *online*, you'll never know what's being said at all.

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AT THE OTHER END OF THE PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM IS US AIRWAYS, WITH WHOM YOU HAD AN "INCIDENT."

On a flight from Phoenix to Boston, I was amazed and annoyed that ninety minutes prior to landing, while most of the passengers were napping, quietly reading, or listening to music on their iPods, the cabin lights came up and a loudspeaker announcement interrupted everyone. I was jarred from sleep, as were dozens of other people. The announcement stated that flight attendants would be coming around with applications for the US Airways Visa Signature card. As dazed passengers rubbed their eyes, the whole vibe of the plane changed from mellow to enraged.

Afterward, I posted about the incident on my blog and e-mailed the company's PR department. My blog has twenty thousand to thirty thousand readers, and eventually other bloggers wrote about this and pointed to my blog. It would have taken someone from US Airways ten minutes to jump in and say, "David, we're sorry you experienced that. Please accept our apologies." But no one ever did.

PERHAPS SUCH DISSATISFACTION MAY HAVE BEEN WORTH IT FOR THE COMPANY IF ENOUGH PEOPLE SIGNED UP FOR THE CARD.

There were about 180 people on the plane. I saw roughly fifteen or twenty people take the form and maybe five hand it back. I assume they signed up. A social-media guy would say that was a huge friggin' blunder because 80 percent of that plane is pissed off at you, and countless others have read about this on blogs. Meanwhile, a marketer would say that was a huge success: Five signups is great, amazing! But that person is probably not the same person in charge of customer satisfaction. I say to the airline: You're in the airline business, not the credit-card business. Instead, put the application online or in the seat pocket. By focusing on traditional marketing techniques and ignoring my own complaints, this is a clear example of how a company failed to consider the role of social networking and how messages can be spread online. ■