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SPOTLIGHT ON SMARTER SALES

Tweet Me, Friend Me, Make Me Buy

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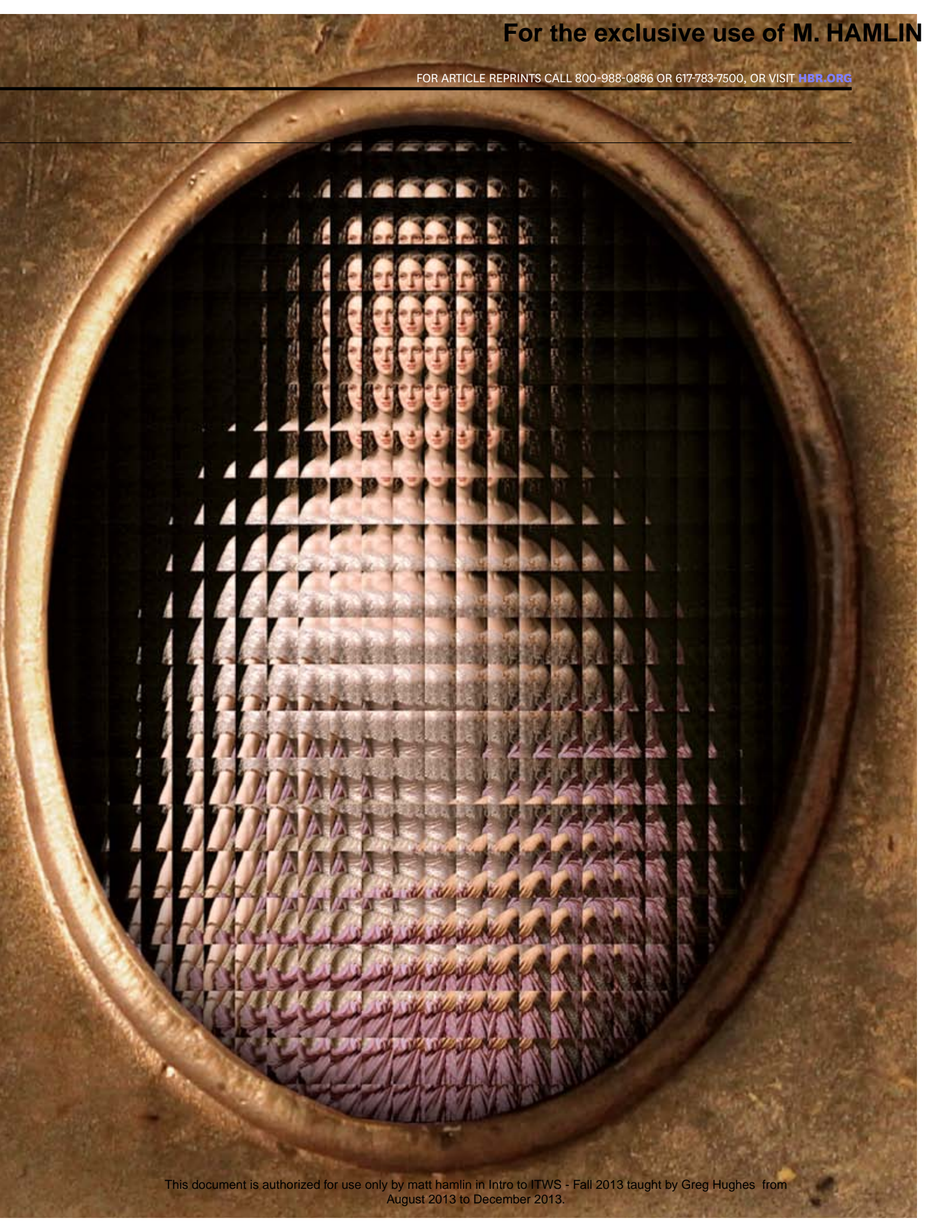
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*by Barbara Giamanco
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NOT LONG AGO a B2B rep for the virtual-meetings company PGI made the fastest sale of his career. One morning he contacted a CEO—someone who was no pushover, having had bad experiences with the type of product the rep sells. By late that afternoon he had a signed agreement. How did the rep pull off this feat? By using social media.

Here's the way it worked. The rep is a Twitter user. Drawing on the TweetDeck feature, he had specified keywords so that he would be alerted when they appeared in a tweet, whether from someone he "followed" or not.



On the day in question, a message containing the term “web conferencing” caught his eye. The point of the tweet was how poorly web conferencing works. “I clicked on the Twitter handle,” the rep told us, “and noticed that it was a company account.” He called the main number on the company’s website and asked to speak to the person who handled Twitter. Moments later he was talking to the CEO, who, after marveling at the power of Twitter, described his frustration with the various web platforms he had used. “I told him all about GlobalMeet,” the rep said, referring to a PGI conferencing service. “He checked out the website and said he wanted to try it, so I sent over the agreement and received it back within a few hours.”

It’s a great story, but perhaps not a surprising one. Twitter is, after all, a social network, and no aspect of business is more social than selling.

What is surprising is that most sales managers are proving slow to recognize social media’s potential. In a recent survey of B2B marketers by *BtoB* magazine, only 5% said that social media marketing was a “fairly mature and well optimized” part of their mix. A clear majority (58%) admitted to being “in early stages,” and 17% said they didn’t use social media at all. We’re aware of very few sales training courses that cover social media use. And some companies

investigate purchases they’re considering. The shift from a “push” to a “pull” world of commercial messaging has been thoroughly documented by now. It’s not just that buyers start the sales process without you; research has shown that today they typically complete most of the purchase journey before having any contact with sales. And by that point they are far more informed about your business than you are about theirs.

Much of this online activity involves social media. Studies by Experian Marketing Services indicate that social networking now accounts for 15% of internet visits in the United States. LinkedIn, the most professionally oriented of the major sites, announced more than a year ago that it had registered its 100 millionth member and was adding a million more each week. Twitter has more than 100 million active users (out of at least 200 million registered members), and Google+ has passed 65 million members. Most of these people are also on Facebook, which is nearing the one *billion* mark, meaning that it includes 14% of the world’s population.

When the 1950s-era criminal Willie Sutton was asked why he robbed banks, he allegedly replied, “That’s where the money is.” For any salesperson wondering why she should use social media, the answer is similarly obvious: That’s where the buyers are. In fact, 55% of buyers turn to social media when

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forbid their employees to use social networks on company time.

Certainly there are risks, but as customers increasingly engage with social media, sitting on the sidelines is the greatest risk of all. And with early adopters beginning to book their wins and take their hits, the way to venture in wisely is becoming clear.

It’s Where the Customers Are

Understanding why and how to engage with today’s social business environment starts with recognizing the changes in buyers’ behavior. We know that customers are online and that they use the web to

they’re searching for information, according to Business.com.

As you’re reading this article, your prospects are reading blogs and holding online discussions about products and services they’re considering buying. They’re scanning YouTube videos, participating in FocusForums, and tweeting. They might start by using Google to look for information about your offerings, but it doesn’t matter how well you optimize your search terms—most will ignore the marketing collateral on your website. While your communications people are busily creating high-production-value brochureware, your prospects are going to so-

Idea in Brief

It stands to reason that sales, that most social of business activities, would make use of social media. But few organizations employ them in a consistent, productive way.

As sales professionals gravitate to social networking, they will find its tools most valuable in “front end” prospecting and lead qualification, and in maintaining relationships after the deal has closed. Management can support reps’ communications with training and structure.

There are risks, but the worst of them are not the PR and legal issues that grab headlines. These can be addressed with sound policies. Trickier to manage are lapses of etiquette, tone, and consistency. And the biggest risk of all, now that your customers are all linking, sharing, and tweeting, is to sit on the sidelines and leave social selling to your competitors.

cial networking channels to get the lowdown. They know that a peer-to-peer environment holds more promise for candid referrals—and warnings.

Where Social Makes Sense

Chances are that your salespeople are already on social media sites and are even using them in their work. But their activity is probably scattershot, with different people using different tools in various ways and no one person using them consistently. Like selling itself, social media can be approached idiosyncratically, but the highest-performing organizations have outlined a clear process and figured out how to execute on it in a disciplined way.

To bring that kind of order to your organization, start with the sales cycle your representatives are already familiar with. It typically runs from prospecting and qualifying leads all the way through implementing a solution and measuring results. One activity pervades the entire process: Managing relationships is vital to each stage and can lead from the end of one sales cycle to the beginning of a new one.

Your organization probably has detailed procedures to follow and metrics to track at each stage. The question is, How do platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter fit in? How can they be integrated with other important activities, and how can they support better outcomes?

It quickly becomes clear that social media’s greatest potential is at the front end of the sales cycle—during the prospecting, opportunity qualification, and pre-sales-call research that lead up to a face-to-face meeting. But social platforms also offer a means of maintaining customer relationships and building brand loyalty throughout. Let’s take a close look at the key parts of the cycle in this regard.

Prospecting. Sales professionals know that in order to make their numbers month after month, they need to regularly look for new leads. In B2B settings, much of their prospecting has traditionally

been done through cold calling. That might produce a higher return than other direct-marketing activities, such as direct mail and e-mail communications, paid searches, and internet display ads, but the return on cold calling is dropping with every passing year. Indeed, in a recent survey by InsideView, an online provider of sales-relevant content, more than 90% of C-level executives said they “never” respond to cold calls or e-mail blasts. But salespeople frequently tell us that potential customers are surprisingly responsive to short messages sent via social media.

Even better, in a social network environment reps don’t always have to start the conversation. They can often find potential customers expressing hints of interest in the solutions they sell. Identifying these slightly warm prospects can save a rep from making many unwelcome calls. As the sales blogger Jim Keenan puts it, “A lead today can be a complaint on Twitter, a question on LinkedIn, or a discussion on a Facebook page.” This was the insight that guided the PGI rep. Having noted the executive’s tweeted complaint about the poor quality of web conferencing, he treated it as a conversation already started and plunged in.

Could this sort of fortuitous find become routine? Yes, thanks to social monitoring tools like HootSuite, which act as radar to pick up signals of need. A company geared for social selling would not only equip its salespeople to do such monitoring; it would map out pathways for guiding any resulting contacts toward richer exchanges by phone, e-mail, and even video chat.

According to the 2011 CSO Insights Sales Performance Optimization study, reps spend almost 25% of their time researching prospects. If your reps learn how to access the right intelligence quickly, some observers predict, they could spend as little as 1% of their time researching—freeing up virtually all their time for actual selling.

Where's the Risk in Social Selling?

MANY SALES LEADERS monitor their reps' social media use for purposes of damage control. They're concerned about inappropriate posts that could cause a PR crisis; false representations, unguarded disclosures, and copyright violations that could bring legal exposure; leaks of confidential company information; and the possibility that competitors will

learn too much about client relationships and early-stage opportunities. Deborah Gonzalez, an attorney specializing in social media, has seen dangers arise particularly in industries such as health care and finance, which have strict requirements regarding communications—but she's observed privacy and confidentiality issues in less regulated environments as well.

These risks, however, can be managed with well-crafted guidelines. Policies at IBM, Nordstrom, and the U.S. Air Force, for example, highlight the importance of exercising good judgment, showing respect, refraining from disclosing confidential information, avoiding conflicts of interest, and representing opinions as purely one's own. Each lists

steps to take to repair a mistake, beginning with an apology. Need a starting point for drafting a policy? The consultant Chris Boudreaux maintains a database of more than 200 organizations' policies at SocialMediaGovernance.com.

The harder-to-manage risks concern basic execution. Even if not illegal or offensive, posts can be tonally unappealing,

At PAKRA, a company that provides game-based training, managers have devised an effective way for salespeople to build prospecting networks on LinkedIn. It involves sending invitations to connect and following up within a day via Twitter, e-mail, or phone. Seventeen out of 20 people accept the invitation within 36 hours. They then receive a short, personalized message from the rep that includes a link to the PAKRA website. Half the people in this group respond, at which point the exchange is poised to become a meaningful conversation.

Perhaps the most basic area in which reps need to be supported is in setting up profiles and establishing information-sharing habits that brand them as intelligent and helpful. Virtually every sales professional has a LinkedIn profile, for example, but it may not be optimized to make a good impression. Having gotten a direct message through a social network, a prospect who's at all interested will check out the sender's profile. What should he find there? Content assuring him that the rep has relevant insight and experience. If he encounters a tweet stream or a Facebook wall filled with trivial or mean-spirited comments, or simply ones having nothing to do with the solution he's seeking, the contact will go no further.

Qualifying leads. Not every sales opportunity is worth pursuing, of course. IBM's famous guide to qualifying leads is the acronym *BANT*: Reps must determine that the customer has the necessary *budget*, that their contact has the *authority* to buy, that there's a genuine *need* for the product or service, and that their *timeline* for delivery aligns with the customer's expectations.

There are many long-standing methods for answering these questions. But the information that can be found on social media is often surprisingly revelatory—and it's much easier to obtain.

Using data intelligence tools like InsideView, salespeople can gain relevant, real-time insights

about the companies and buyers they've targeted. They can set up trigger alerts for such topics as leadership change, acquisitions, new products, funding developments, and corporate challenges. They can "follow" companies to receive news of business developments. Beyond picking up free-ranging clues like these, they can use a social network's direct messaging function to ask a prospect a few qualifying questions. Indeed, a message format can be particularly helpful in vetting a lead, since responses must be short and are thus likely to get straight to the point.

One company we know through our training work has social media to thank for learning of the impending retirement of the CIO at one of its targeted accounts. Its immediate question, of course, was who the replacement would be. That news came within 24 hours of the retirement announcement, in a daily summary of the activity on various social networks. Then it was time for some homework on the incoming executive. LinkedIn revealed where he had worked, which areas he was interested in (indicated by the LinkedIn groups he'd joined), and whether anyone in the sales team's network knew him. The strongest connection turned out to be a good friend of one rep, and he was happy to make an introduction.

Managing relationships. So far we've focused on using social media to get in front of the right buyers faster and to shrink the effort required to close deals. But social tools are also invaluable for maintaining customer relationships and working on retention at the back end of the cycle, after the sale is complete.

Developing in-depth knowledge of the client is the fastest way to position for a long-term collaboration. Sales remains a relationship-driven activity, but "who you know" is now trumped by "what you know about who you know."

off-brand, or ungrammatical. Inexperienced reps may use social networks as a megaphone for blasting generic pitches far and wide.

The only way to reduce such risks is through training.

Beyond walking reps through the basics of setting up profiles, you need to teach them how to use social tools to network, build referral relationships,

prospect, generate leads, and conduct pre-sales-call research. Be sure to cover the etiquette, with its dos (personalize your message, participate often, listen, give value) and don'ts (send sales spam, show impatience, pretend to be something you're not).

It's especially hard to teach the nuances of online communication. First impressions

count, and without a face-to-face or phone interaction, it can be hard to gauge what impression is being made. Much of social selling happens in short, staccato messages that are easily misconstrued.

A risk that's often overblown is the fear that social media will distract from real work. This kind of worry is not new; reps have always engaged

in activities that may seem purely social. It's typically been addressed by a relentless focus on outcomes. In other words, salespeople have always had to think about the return on social activity; they're unlikely to stop doing so now. And to the extent that the risk is real, it's easily mitigated: Connect with your reps on LinkedIn and follow them on Twitter yourself.

In this realm, even more than at the front end, salespeople can benefit from organizational support and structure. At any given time, the urgency of pursuing new business means that maintaining established relationships takes a back seat. Todd McCormick, the vice president of sales at PGI, has addressed this problem. One of his solutions is "Blog Tuesday." Each Tuesday he publishes a post on an issue common to many of PGI's customers. This gives his reps a reason to make social contact once a week, without having to spend time thinking up content on their own. As soon as the post is live, they start tweeting about it, "liking" it, and sharing it through LinkedIn status updates.

It might seem unlikely that a business buyer would "follow" or "friend" a rep. In fact, it's quite common. Norms of reciprocity in social networks are well established by now; following someone and engaging with their content—by retweeting a message, for example—often generates a follow in return. Whether the connection endures depends on whether the rep's content has sufficient value for the buyer.

The social world is about giving without expecting an immediate return. That can be tough for salespeople to swallow when they are anxious to close deals. It may feel counterintuitive to share white papers, case studies, and other materials when there's no guarantee that those efforts will lead directly to a sale. But such activities are part of a larger behavioral shift that must take place if sellers are to move successfully from a transactional approach to a value-focused process.

Jump In, the Water's Fine

Platforms for online collaboration are rapidly changing the way we work, offering new ways to engage with customers, colleagues, and the world at large. Sales reps now have the ability to participate in

global conversations about their products, their field, and their expertise. But some companies are so worried about potential mistakes or loss of control that they don't allow participation. That's a bad idea. Choosing not to be present in social networks puts your company and your salespeople at a competitive disadvantage. (See the sidebar "Where's the Risk in Social Selling?")

With the right social media policies and training programs, a company stands to gain an enormous amount from its sales organization's online communications. And here's another thing to consider: Social media might alter *whom* you recognize as your sales organization. The social media consultant Mark Schaefer tells the story of a meeting with executives during which he displayed the names of the people in their company who had the greatest social media influence. (He used a tool called Kred, which considers both the number of followers a person has and whether those followers engage with shared information.) One of the executives said, "I don't know any of these people! You mean they're representing our company?" It turned out that 80% of the top influencers were in functions other than public relations, sales, service, and marketing.

As you equip your people with a social media tool kit, don't stop with the social media team or the marketing organization. Don't even stop with sales. Make the whole workforce comfortable with the possibilities. It's only a matter of time until your competitors do so. And once your customers have learned to expect social network connections, it may be impossible to sell without them. ♥

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