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Businesses are told that social media can't be ignored

By James Dowd

Posted February 24, 2010 at midnight

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There's a new breakfast of champions these days and it has nothing to do with either [Kurt Vonnegut](#) or [Wheaties](#).

"You are what you tweet," Amy Howell of [Howell Marketing Strategies](#) told a group of entrepreneurs on Tuesday. "You can't afford not to be on social networking sites today. You've got to have a strategy, develop a policy and get out there and join the community."

Howell's presentation was part of "Cashing in on the Conversation," presented by the [Greater Memphis Chamber's Small Business Council](#). The event drew more than 150 area business owners interested in learning how to use social media to attract clients and increase profits.

Keynote speaker Glen Gilmore, owner of New Jersey-based [Gilmore Business Network](#), said embracing social media requires a time commitment, but is definitely worth the effort.

"It's a medium you can't ignore because your customers are using it and so are your competitors," said Gilmore, who counts nearly 70,000 followers on [Twitter](#), where he's known as TrendTracker. "Three out of four Americans use some sort of social media and 75 percent of small businesses have a presence on at least one social media site. If you want to reach your community, then you've got to be out there in it."

The explosive growth of such social media sites as [Facebook](#) -- now with more than 400 million active [users](#), about 30 percent from the United States -- and Twitter -- where postings or "tweets" have skyrocketed from 5,000 a day in 2007 to more than 50 million a day [now](#) -- has revolutionized information sharing, Gilmore said.

And that means businesses must adapt.

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"Even if Twitter went away tomorrow, the Internet has fundamentally changed the way people communicate to the point that text messages have surpassed verbal exchanges," Gilmore said. "The exciting thing is that through social media, small businesses can compete with large corporations in getting their name and message out there. Don't be afraid to get out there and tell your story. You'll be amazed at how many people are interested in hearing about it."

For social media neophytes, Gilmore and Howell advised strategic planning first, followed by a dedicated Web presence.

Companies should develop policies and procedures for employees with regard to social media usage and maintain a vigorous online presence.

Launching an interactive online site is a great place to start, Gilmore said. Entrepreneurs may quickly grow their customer bases by advertising specials, offering discounts and providing links to interesting and useful material that is found elsewhere on the Web.

Should problems arise -- and it is practically inevitable that they will, Gilmore said -- business owners should confront them head-on.

"If you're afraid that something bad might happen [by using social media], then you might as well stay home and hope you don't have a gas leak and that nothing in your life ever goes wrong," Gilmore said. "Don't let your desire for perfection keep you from joining the conversation, and don't allow someone else to tell your story for you."

Small-business owner and chamber member Susan Mealer has taken that advice and now uses Facebook and Twitter to promote her company, [Answering Advantage](#). She has also started blogging.

"At first I thought I had nothing to say, but then started and it's gotten easier," Mealer told the audience. "You've got to realize that you're the expert in your field, so use that knowledge to your advantage. There's nothing like social media to get your name out there and your message across."

-- James Dowd: 529-2737

Small Business Council upcoming event

What: "Using Social Networking Web Sites in Employment Decisions"

When: 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. on March 11

Where: Ford & Harrison, 795 Ridge Lake Blvd.

Cost: Free, but seating is limited and registration is required by Thursday

Details: Call 291-1538 or e-mail jhuckelberry@fordharrison.com

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