

The background is a light-colored wooden floor with vertical grain. A red dashed line starts from a red footprint in the top right, loops around the title, and ends at another red footprint in the middle. Two more red footprints are at the bottom left.

Dancing With Digital Natives

**STAYING IN STEP
WITH THE
GENERATION
THAT'S TRANSFORMING
THE WAY BUSINESS
IS DONE**

Edited by **Michelle Manafy**
and **Heidi Gautschi**

The Social Media Imperative: Learning to Engage Digital Natives Where They Live

Shashi Bellamkonda

When speaking to groups on the theme “Social Media to Grow Your Business,” I ask the audience to tell me by show of hands how many have purchased something in the last three months because they saw an ad in the paper. A couple of hands go up. Next I ask about how many bought a product because a friend or coworker recommended it. This time more than half the audience raises their hands. As this simple example illustrates, businesses have to realize that their traditional marketing audience is deserting them in droves. This trend will only accelerate as digital natives, who have grown up in a digitally connected world, increasingly rely upon social tools and methods to get information. Undoubtedly, their relationship with social technologies will have an impact on which companies they choose to do business with.

Rohit Bhargava, author of the book, *Personality Not Included* (McGraw-Hill, 2008), explains this phenomenon by saying: “Many

marketers assume that just because the younger generation has grown up with digital technology as a part of their lives, they will be much better at ignoring your marketing messages and therefore will be tougher to reach. That's dead wrong. Actually, they can be a marketer's best friend. When you grow up with instant access to the knowledge of the world, you actually become much better at finding what you want." He goes on to say, "The implication for marketers is this . . . that content becomes so much more important because a 'digital native' can find it and share it with her entire network—including people older, like their parents. Not only are they more likely to be reachable online, but if you're not offering your content to them in that way, you're missing a huge opportunity."

In the *Wall Street Journal* article "The Greatest Generation (of Networkers)" (November 5, 2009, on.wsj.com/1SMuPi), Steve Gallagher, the vice principal of Millwood High School in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is quoted as saying, "Young people today are connected socially from the moment they open their eyes in the morning until they close their eyes at night. It's compulsive." He points to an example: Once, when he was reprimanding a student for texting during class, he noticed the student's fingers moving on his lap. The student was texting while being reprimanded for texting.

Gallagher's experience is not unique. The article goes on to say that almost a quarter of today's teens check Facebook more than 10 times a day, according to a 2009 survey by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit group that monitors media's impact on families. August 2010 research from Common Sense found that 22 percent check social networking sites more than 10 times a day and 51 percent of teens check social networking sites more than once a day.

If you have a business, understanding the role of social media is essential for survival. It is clear that a generation of customers is growing up today with a level of immersion in, and reliance on, social media that must influence the ways businesses communicate with their customers. Given the rise of the digital native as the dominant consumer base,

social media savvy may well become the factor that separates the successes from the failures.

Recommendation Nation

Today, when people consider purchasing a product, many turn to social media first: 61 percent rely on user reviews for product information or research before a buying decision is made (Razorfish, “FEED, the Razorfish Consumer Experience Report,” 2008, bit.ly/80TOTI). Recommendations can take the form of reviews on sites, in blogs, or within individual pages in social networks. On Facebook or Yelp, for example, friends and acquaintances trade recommendations.

This trend will be even more pronounced with younger buyers. According to Pew Internet & American Life Project’s “Generation 2010” report, 73 percent of teens and 83 percent of Millennials use social network sites, significantly more than older generations, especially adults over 55. While half of younger Boomers use social network sites, only 16 percent of adults 74 and older have (bit.ly/ikk19Y).

At a GrowSmartBiz business summit I attended, customer relationship management guru Brent Leary pointed out that customers today *expect* companies to engage with them via social media. He said that if a business is not monitoring the conversations, it will not know what is already being said about it online. Thus, if businesses are hesitant to engage with customers using Web 2.0 tools because they are afraid that bad things will be said about them, chances are that such negative conversations are already taking place online (of which they are probably woefully unaware).

Engagement in social media is imperative for business today. It also levels the playing field to some extent: If you master digital technologies, your company will have the same chance as the major players in your industry to be heard, quoted, cited, and interviewed about your expertise and your business. Remember that not so long ago, the only way a

reader could communicate with the newspaper was by writing a “Letter to the Editor.” Today, only seconds after an article is published, readers can comment and have their comments responded to by writers, editors, or fellow readers.

And the news media is only one example of how times have changed. In an August 2009 article “Twittering May Have Impact at Box Office” (Michael Sragow, August 20, 2009, bit.ly/7IVLxk), the *Washington Post* replied, “Although word of mouth could always make or break a movie, it usually took days to affect the box office. But the rise of social networking tools such as Twitter might be narrowing that time frame to hours. And that has Hollywood on edge.”

This is very true. For example, because of the time difference, the East Coast audience could easily impact opening day viewership on the West Coast by using Web 2.0 tools. Audiences no longer wait for a mainstream movie review when they can look straight to their networks for a virtual thumbs-up or -down.

The entertainment and media industries are not alone in feeling the incredible impact of social media. Yelp began as an online network for people who eat out and write restaurant reviews. The site boasts a devoted following: In fact, according to an October 2009 user survey Yelp conducted, a whopping 94 percent of respondents turn to Yelp first to make a purchasing decision. Contrast that with the 43 percent who indicated they would consult a friend and the mere 2 percent who would turn to the Yellow Pages. It seems the community aspect of Yelp, where people share information about themselves and get to evaluate their fellow reviewers, plays an important part. Indeed, 80 percent noted that they prefer Yelp because it emphasizes reviews from trusted members of the community.

This trend is clear in the activities of digital natives in particular: In its 2010 ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, EDUCAUSE found that the percentage of students 25 or older who use social networking sites increased from 33 percent in 2007

to more than 75 percent in 2010. Facebook use increased from 89 percent in 2008 to 97 percent in 2010 (bit.ly/g9SGlN). In May 2009, Youth Trends found that Facebook was the number three source among college students for learning about new products and services—after word-of-mouth and television commercials.

Business Advantage

There are certainly some notable examples of social media being used by major organizations to engage with customers. Comcast, Dell, and Best Buy are among the leading brands using social tools to connect with their customers. For example, Comcast provides Customer support using the Twitter handle @comcastcares, which was launched by Frank Eliason, previously senior director of national customer service operations. “If anyone wants to tell me good or bad experience with myself or my team please email me frank_Eliason@cable.Comcast.com.” His candor and style captured more than 43,000 followers in his first two and a half years on Twitter.

However, as previously suggested, one particular advantage of using social media tools—in addition to reaching digital natives where they live—is that they have the potential to level the marketing playing field between large and small organizations. The following are just a few of the many illustrations of businesses that are using online tools to help them lead their field.

Gary Vaynerchuk of Wine Library TV (tv.winelibrary.com) is a wonderful example of a digital native who was successful in reaching digital natives. Tara Hunt writes in her book *The Whuffie Factor* (Crown Business, 2009): “In less than a decade, [Vaynerchuk] helped turn his family’s New Jersey store with 10 employees into a global business with 100 employees and annual sales in multiples of 10 million dollars.” Vaynerchuk did this first by taking the business online with a website (winelibrary.com) in 1997. As social networking grew in both audience

and participation, he decided to start an online TV show at tv.wine.library.com.

On this homemade show (presented in a video blog), Vaynerchuk tastes two or three different wines every day and makes recommendations in a seemingly unrehearsed style. People like the frank and conversational nature of this daily webcast. His audience has grown quickly; Tara Hunt writes, “A year after [Vaynerchuk] began Wine Library TV, he had over 15,000 daily downloads and nearly 100 comments on every show.”

While downloads provide a good metric for your viewership, the comments that people make on this site are even more significant as a sign of engagement and audience interaction. Vaynerchuk reinforces his use of Web 2.0 tools for marketing by speaking at conferences about his success and inspiring others to do the same, as well as creating a community of wine lovers, which in turn has helped his business. On the Wine Library TV website, he writes, “WLTV has blossomed into a full-fledged community.” The viewers (self-named “Vayniacs”) convene on an extremely active forum and have organized numerous offline gatherings. Vaynerchuk and the viewers have teamed up with Crushpad in the past year to create the first ever *community wine*, “Vayniac Cabernet.”

Another example of a relatively small businessman who has leveraged social media to improve its exposure is that of Chef K.N. Vinod, owner of Indique Heights and two other restaurants on the border of Washington, D.C. and Maryland. After much persuasion, this busy chef started blogging at chefvinod.typepad.com about his travels, recipes, cooking techniques, and other topical subjects related to his culinary adventures. The blog includes photo albums with themes such as “foodie friends” and “heads of state, ambassadors, and celebrities.” Since he started blogging, Vinod has noticed that more food critics visit the restaurant, which in turn has triggered an increase in clientele and raised his overall profile as a chef. Thanks to the success of his blog, he decided

to launch a Facebook page for Indique Heights to engage with his customers and provide information on activities and offers in the restaurant. Customers actively participate on the Facebook page: Guests discuss the food (“best desserts ever!”) and even the New Year’s events months in advance.

A very different culinary example is provided by two enterprising businessmen—themselves digital natives—who have a food truck called Merlindia in the Washington, D.C. area and use Twitter to tell their customers where their van is parked to serve customers. A typical tweet from these lads might be “the fojol bros. are set up and ready to serve at 14th & K.” These young businessmen are taking advantage of their customers’ connectivity and use of Web 2.0 tools to create a totally new business model. They have been so successful that they are going to have another brother join them in the business, and they attribute much of this success to the simple, low-cost marketing they achieve through social media.

Social media can work for businesses of all types. For example, Steven Fisher led a workshop on social media tools for car wash owners. As an impromptu demo, he discussed the Canton Car Wash in Baltimore (www.cantoncarwash.com), which actively encourages customers to join its Facebook page. It is clear this strategy is working, as demonstrated by comments about the quality of their car washes and other conversations.

As I write, I see a tweet from one of our Network Solutions customers, a well-known author, telling another friend, “I know Network Solutions is expensive, but their service is top notch.” Since I monitor the social media sphere for the words *Network Solutions*, I saw the message and thanked her right away. Had I missed it, I would have been alerted when another Twitter friend, who saw the same message and knew it was valuable to me and Network Solutions, sent it to me via a Retweet, which allows Twitter users to repeat someone else’s tweet to their own followers. This example demonstrates not only how important it is for companies to monitor social media but also how effective these

tools can be in helping companies engage with customers to receive both positive and negative feedback.

It is a positive sign that an October 2009 online survey by Internet2Go and MerchantCircle found that 45 percent of small-business owners use Facebook to promote their businesses, and 46 percent have Twitter accounts. In total, 53 percent had created a social network profile. As these statistics, and the other examples, provide evidence that companies see the value of social media to engage with customers of all ages, the need to master these techniques will become increasingly important.

According to Pew Internet's "Twitter and Status Updating Fall 2009" report, age is a strong, independent predictor for use of Twitter and other status updating services. Internet users ages 18–44 report rapid uptake of Twitter, whereas internet users age 45 and older report slower adoption rates. In an April 22, 2010 presentation, Pew's director Lee Rainie reported that 57 percent of online adults were using social network sites as compared with 73 percent of teens.

The good news is that even if you aren't already on board, social media tools are freely available, so now is the time to experiment with them and begin to develop the essential skills you will need as the generation of digital natives become the dominant consumer force.

Mastering the Art of Conversation

At its most effective, social media is a two-way conversation. Companies must leverage the tools as a way to connect human beings with each other, as well as with information. A great example of this is Lionel Menchaca, chief blogger for Dell Inc., who helps answer customer questions using his Twitter account @LionelatDell. With tweet responses like "Sorry for the delay in responding to you. Please [direct message] me an order number or service tag #. Happy to help if I can." and "Just getting back today from the flu. Sorry for the delay. I'm willing to bet

@LisaG_atDell can take care of you,” Twitter allows Menchaca to re-inject human contact into the overly automated customer service experience we have all come to loathe. Therefore, I would advise against sending tweets to feed followers using an automated message such as, “Thanks for following me. Here is a report you can download <link to the download>.” These kinds of impersonal messages will likely cause you to both lose your followers and result in digital natives blocking you from the conversation.

While many aspects of social *life* remain mysterious, there are three steps that can be taken to engage digital natives in social *media* conversations: listening, participating, and contributing. The following are some tactics, tools, and strategies for effectively engaging in social media to reach users of all ages, digital natives in particular.

Listening

During the listening phase of engagement, you need to monitor social networks and other places where people are mentioning you, your company, and/or your brand online. Conversations often take place in online communities, which may or may not be open.

Closed communities require membership. People join these communities to discuss common interests and ideas, causes, or particular celebrities. For example, I wrote a blog post on the Network Solutions blog, Solutions Are Power, about how fans of singer Josh Groban banded together and raised money for charity. While checking my analytics, I saw several visits from board.friendsofjoshgroban.com, which is a community of Josh Groban fans. However, since I was not a member, I could not see what was being written about my blog post by the “grobanites.”

Listening to open conversations is easier, particularly given the various alerts technology provided by search engines and software companies. With these tools, you can set alerts for your name, your business name, and names of your products (and even those of your competitors), and

also be notified when anything appears online mentioning these terms. Perhaps you'll want to set up alerts around keywords, technologies, or trends that impact your business. The listening phase will provide you with an indication of where your audience resides and, therefore, where you should channel your time and resources.

Some alerting and other real-time awareness tools include:

- *Google Alerts* (www.google.com/alerts) lets you choose to get alerts for the terms you specify when they first appear in a Google search—either instantly or at daily or weekly frequency. (Yahoo! provides similar service at alerts.yahoo.com.)
- *BackType* (www.backtype.com) gives you results from the comments sections of blog posts and social media. You may not find these results on other search engines.
- *Technorati* (technorati.com) is a blog search and ranking site that can tell you if your search terms have been used to tag any blog or microblog post.
- *Radian6* (www.radian6.com) provides reports and alerts for any mention of your predetermined terms in the social media sphere.
- *Search.Twitter.com* (search.twitter.com) gives you real-time results on conversations about your brand or business or even your competitors.
- *Alterian* (socialmedia.alterian.com) is a tool used by PR and marketing agencies to monitor and measure social media.
- *Social Mention* (www.socialmention.com) is a real-time social media search and analysis tool that sends you alerts and lets you know the predominant sentiment about a brand.

Participating

Keep in mind that an actual *conversation* is never one way. You must be prepared to actively contribute to the discussions that mention you or your company brand. Use the knowledge you gain from the listening phase to participate in the discussions.

To become involved, you must create profiles and join (the appropriate) social networks. Here is a description of some of the most popular social networks in use and how to approach your participation:

- *Twitter* (twitter.com) is perhaps the most widely discussed social tool today, although interestingly, it is less popular with younger users (which is not the case with most other social tools). Twitter provides a way to join the online conversation by collecting a following around 140-character messages. With Twitter, you should adopt the language of the people (i.e., Twitter followers): Send genuine tweets that share feelings, accomplishments, and interesting things happening in the company. Self-promotion, continuous marketing messages, and one-way communications are to be avoided.
- *LinkedIn* (www.linkedin.com) is a business-oriented social network designed to facilitate professional connections. It is frequently used for recruitment or finding contacts at companies you want to do business with. It can be very useful to create or join LinkedIn groups of like-minded business folks. LinkedIn is particularly useful in that it allows you to leverage your connections (and those of your first- and second-degree connections) to build interest in your group and extend the reach of your network.
- *Facebook* (www.facebook.com) provides a place where users create personal profiles to connect with former and/or current classmates, colleagues, family members, and other contacts. Facebook “friends” share news and

recommendations about information, products, pictures, and events. Your organization can have a public profile to share information about your business and products with Facebook users, and Facebook's newsfeed makes it easy to spread ideas virally.

- *Myspace* (www.myspace.com) is useful for building a following for a music group or other arts-related endeavor, although it has declined in popularity since it moved to an ad-supported model. On Myspace, you must build a network of “friends.” Myspace bulletins can be used by businesses to promote products or events to all of their Myspace friends. The more friends they have, the larger the audience they reach. Myspace offers many ways to reach specific audiences through its blogs, forums, and video site. As with other social media sites, providing your “friends” with genuine news, information, and other benefits will encourage them to spread the word, thus increasing your network.
- In some cases, during the listening phase, you will identify *niche social communities* (listservs, wikis, etc.) where lively conversations about your brand, product, or product segment are already taking place. If you do encounter these opportunities, find a way to become a genuine community member who contributes useful information.

Digital natives have an overload of messages coming at them from all directions, so they seek refuge in social networks and do not expect (or want) to receive sales pitches there. They will follow and cultivate networks with people who are genuine and who provide useful information and unstinting advice when asked. If you develop a relationship with this audience, they will return the favor.

In addition to social networks, you should also contribute to forums and community boards related to your business or the interests of your potential customers. These are communities of users or experts with the

common goal of helping each other. On forums and community boards, experts answer questions and, by doing so, establish their leadership and expertise. Users get their questions answered and can rank the answers, which can be a useful lead generating tool.

Some examples of ways in which you can contribute to forums and community boards are:

- On *LinkedIn Answers* (www.linkedin.com/answers), LinkedIn members post questions and other members give their answers. The questions are often about specific products and companies. In addition to making connections by sharing your expertise, you also have the opportunity to have your answer be voted “best,” which will elevate your standing in the community and lead people to click to your profile, thus potentially connecting with you and your business.
- In addition to actively commenting on key blogs in your digital space, you should volunteer to write *guest posts* for blogs related to your industry. Often, all you need to do is send an email to the blogger with your idea for a guest post. It is essential to offer an idea that is valuable to the community. (Darren Rowse, a well-known blogger from Australia, gives good guest blogging tips at www.probblogger.net.)
- The spirit of collaboration and communication on the internet includes the sharing of favorite links and articles through *social tagging* and *bookmarking*. The easiest method is to join social bookmarking sites like Delicious (www.delicious.com) and Digg (digg.com), although tagging content on Flickr (www.flickr.com) and other sites that provide this option can also demonstrate your commitment to being part of the conversation. When you bookmark a link, everyone who connects with you on the social bookmarking site can see your “favorites” (if you choose to make them public). Links that are bookmarked by several people

usually rise to the top of the page. If this happens to any content you create, increased traffic back to your website or blog will be generated. In order to establish credibility, it is important to use social bookmarking to provide value to your network, and your network will reciprocate by recommending you and the links that you bookmark.

Contributing

Once you know where your target market is and you have established a presence, you can then begin to develop your own personal contribution tool. A blog is fundamental to establish your thought leadership. It also provides a place for your customers and connections to converse with you by commenting on your posts. In addition to text posts, you can also use audio (podcasts), photos (Flickr), or video (YouTube, Livestream). For example, you can make videos of yourself or your business demonstrating new product features. Videos can also contribute useful how-to instruction or standards information for your industry as a whole. You can share exciting stories about your business or about your employees' activities and interests. Just remember that even when you are discussing your products, the information you provide must be of genuine interest and value to the community. Obvious sales messages will alienate your audience.

You have to set the right tone on your blog. A blog has to be conversational yet cannot be taken lightly. Successful blogs have a definite theme to engage and hold readers who are looking for specific content. A blog should be updated regularly; establishing a constant flow of blog posts will help elevate the search engine results for that topic, which will help you get more visitors.

Starting a blog is easy with free services like Blogger or WordPress. The fact is that a blog does not need to originate from your own domain to be considered "valid" within the blogosphere, so free tools will often

suffice. However, many blog hosting sites offer premium levels with relatively easy mapping and configuration.

However, technology shouldn't be your primary concern. Before you start, you need to identify the type of blog you want to write: a CEO blog with high-level musings, a group blog written by your development team, a customer support blog in which your help team provides near real time feedback, or a thought leadership blog written by an executive or other leader in your organization.

Once you have carefully conceived of your blog's focus and approach and have launched it with some initial posts, connect with other bloggers in your space to link content and promote each other's stories. Again, to be part of the larger community, you need to read and comment on other people's blogs.

Keep in mind that building an audience for your blog takes time. Some general ways to build readership include making it easy for readers to subscribe to your blog, including your blog's URL in your email signature and whatever other social media sites you belong to, and specifically inviting comments in some of your posts.

Providing links to others' blogs and feedback on their posts will help build traffic. It is important to recognize the link economy online and make it easy to share your posts. You should also enable comments in your blog settings and engage with readers who do comment. This is particularly important when trying to attract digital natives, as they expect to be able to interact with information.

This aspect of the digital native's information consumption behavior is documented in Capgemini's TME Strategy Lab analysis from April 2007, which reports that "youth are also constantly engaged in community interactions, sharing opinions on what content is worth seeing or experiencing ... Conversations between peers then arise around that content in the form of blog comments, links sent by email, [instant messaging] discussions, merging communication and content into what one could call 'conversational content.'" The report goes on to conclude that

“for an increasing number of young users, content gets added value from the ability to consume and discuss it collectively.” These online community dynamics alter traditional patterns of trust: Consumers, especially the younger generation, have more confidence in peer-generated or “crowdsourced” content.

The term *crowdsourcing* was coined by Jeff Howe in a 2006 *Wired* article to describe a situation in which a problem is broadcast to an unknown audience and the crowd/audience submits the solutions (“The Rise of Crowdsourcing,” June 2006, bit.ly/BHpY). We see it at work on Twitter when someone tweets a question, perhaps asking where to eat or what to buy, and dozens of followers respond or in similar real-time conversations on Facebook.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of crowdsourcing comes from Shel Israel, whose pivotal book on social media called *Twitterville* (Portfolio, 2009) is based on stories that he “crowdsourced” from among his 22,500 followers (as of this writing). Israel described how he conceived of *Twitterville*: “In April 2008, I was stunned by the story of James Buck, a UC Berkley student who was in Egypt doing a photo journalism project as a grad school project. When Egyptian police arrested him for taking photos of food strikes in the Nile Delta area, he posted a one-word tweet: ‘arrested.’ This set off a series of events that got him released within 24 hours. As he was being driven to the airport, he posted a second one-word tweet: ‘freed.’”

Israel continues: “That incident gave me some sense of Twitter’s amazing potential on several levels. I posted a tweet, saying someone should write a book about this incident. I received a reply—I don’t recall who sent it—but it went something like: ‘How about you, Shel? You haven’t done much lately.’”

It was a good point. And that turned out to be the start of *Twitterville*. In writing the book, Israel collaborated with his followers using Twitter. He explained each chapter before he started writing and then asked followers to send him ideas for the book. He received more

than 200 story suggestions, about 75 of which ended up in the book. He also started a “Twitterville Notebook” section on his blog and received more ideas there, as well as receiving fact-checking tips and other insights from readers.

While Israel’s *Twitterville* experiment was extensive, it demonstrates how readers increasingly expect to participate in the process of content creation. Contributing to the conversation is important, but with social media, the interactive and participatory nature is an essential aspect to keep in mind.

There are many ways to appeal to the digital native’s remix and mashup nature, for example, by sharing content and information that others can freely use. This not only demonstrates your knowledge but also promotes your openness. Here are some places where you can upload documents like PowerPoint presentations, white papers, and ebooks that you want to share:

- SlideShare (www.slideshare.net): Share PowerPoint presentations, documents, and videos
- Docstoc (www.docstoc.com): Share public documents
- Scribd (www.scribd.com): Share books, documents, presentations, and spreadsheets

Beyond text-based information, there are other dimensions and channels to create and share content, including multimedia tools for photos, audio and video. A few popular ones are:

- Flickr (www.flickr.com): Share photos
- Photobucket (photobucket.com): Share photos
- YouTube (www.youtube.com): Share video
- blip.tv (blip.tv): Share video
- Viddler (www.viddler.com): Share video
- TubeMogul (tubemogul.com): Share video
- Seesmic (seesmic.com): Share video

To ensure that you gain maximum value from your social media experiments, you should use tools like FeedBurner and Google Analytics to track where your traffic is coming from. This will provide insights into the places your would-be audience is congregating. It will also provide you with insights into which sites you could collaborate and build partnerships with.

Social Media: More Than Tools

While I've focused on leveraging technology, the underlying theme of a company's use of social media must be contributing valuable insights and information to the community in ways that encourage participation and develop genuine relationships based on an exchange of ideas.

There will always be technology haves and have-nots, yet increasingly technology plays a part in everyone's life: Grandparents are joining Facebook to connect with their kids and grandkids. My own parents in India now keep in touch with me thanks to my Facebook status updates that my brother reads to them. I once even found a barber online; perhaps this doesn't sound all that surprising until you learn that the barber doesn't have a website and has never used a computer. In fact, he hadn't even realized his customers were reviewing him online. Luckily, he does a good job and is excellent at customer service so the reviews are positive.

Not every company will be so lucky, however. If conversations about your business are occurring online and you fail to be a part of them, you risk not being aware of your reputation. With the emergence of the digital native—who relies on social networks, peer reviews, and online communities to influence her decision making—as the preeminent consumer, you risk being left behind. As we move forward, social media is no longer an option; it is an imperative for business success.

About the Contributor

Shashi Bellamkonda is a digital immigrant who serves as the director of social media at Network Solutions, with the unique title Social Media

Swami. In this leadership role, he has helped Network Solutions aggressively move into online space so as to actively listen to and interact with its customers. He was included in *Washingtonian Magazine's* list of Tech Titans in 2009. Shashi has presented to several audiences on "Social Media Tools for Small Business," "How to Sell Social Media to Your Boss," and "Online Reputation Management: Best Practices and Lessons Learned" at national and regional conferences. He blogs at blog.networksolutions.com and www.shashi.name, and participates in a number of community sites such as GrowSmartBusiness.com and UnintentionalEntrepreneur.com. A resident of Maryland, Shashi speaks seven languages and ardently works to spin his favorite hobbies into his profession.

Recommended Reading

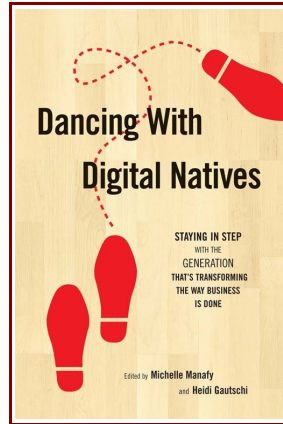
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