Face2Face on the Web

What Makes You Human on the Web?

"Being human" online is hard to define, isn't it? Sometimes we "connect" with a company online, but we have a hard time describing why it seems approachable. When searching Google for ideas for this chapter, I had to try a few different phrases before I discovered what I really wanted to find. First, I tried *being human on the web*, which didn't get me too far (bad search syntax, David—bad, bad, bad). Then I tried *being real online*, which led to *being authentic online*.

Scanning through the results of those searches, I finally started finding content that resonated. Even then, I had to wade through some highly irrelevant content. For example, I found some "great"

articles on how to figure out if the prospects found on dating sites were being real or if they were lying. I also found at least one clothing store that wanted you to "be real" with your fashion sense—and it also wanted you to buy its pricey, glitzy clothing.

But wading through all that information was helpful, because I also found some really useful discussions on using an authentic voice online, or how *not* to use corporate speak. That was more like it.

So, back to my original question: What makes you human on the web?

Being "human" or "real" in an online setting is an emerging idea, especially for organizations and businesses that can't hire experts to connect with customers online. For these organizations, the idea of being real online can be rather daunting. There are still organizations that don't have a web presence or are just starting out in representing themselves online. For those organizations, just being online is challenging enough. When you add in the even newer concept of social media, or of marketing as a conversation, that becomes even more daunting.

All of this is very new. For some small businesses, even thinking about a computer that connects to more than their inventory database is a pretty new concept. When you combine the fear of the unknown with open internet access and customers leaving potentially nasty comments everywhere, interacting online can be a scary new world for some.

Transform Your Organization Into a Face2Face Organization

How can we take on this online challenge? For starters, let's examine three general concepts of being human, or authentic, in online settings. These three concepts—listening, authentic communication,

and sharing in a community—are already implemented in our stores or offices, so let's apply them online, too.

Listening

I listed listening first, because this is the very first thing you should do for your business in an online setting. We'll cover listening in more detail in Chapter 5, but let's introduce the concept now—it's that important!

You've probably always listened to customer comments in your business (or should have, anyway). When a business creates a new product to sell, someone first does market research to gauge interest. When a nonprofit organization introduces a new service, this is often because constituents have voiced a need. In each case, the organization listens to its current or potential customers, offers a product or service, and then listens to feedback about the offering and adjusts it accordingly.

What about those times when a customer enters a business or restaurant or library, has a less-than-stellar experience, and wants to complain? Same thing happens: You listen to the complaint. Good organizations will cut through the frustration, listen to the core of the customer's criticism or complaint, apologize, and try to make the customer's experience a better one. If other customers have similar complaints, the organization will probably work to fix the issue. That is basic customer service, right? But it's also basic listening.

This type of listening also works great on the web—possibly even better than in-person listening. Why? Because on the web, you have multiple ways to "eavesdrop" on your customers and learn their thoughts about your product or service!

Some of your customers are probably using social media tools like Twitter or Facebook, or have created personal blogs. Each of these online social tools creates a voice for people. If those people are talking about you, your business or organization, and the stuff
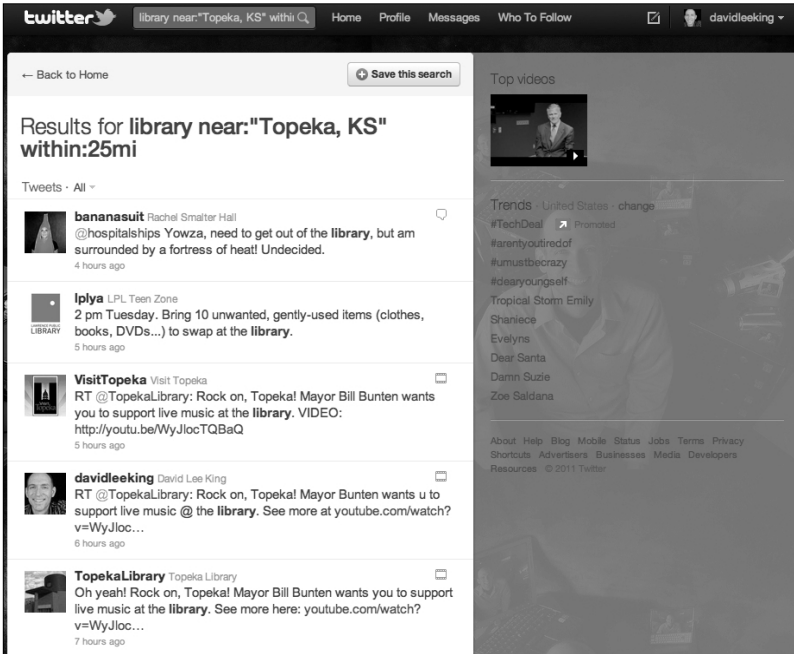
Figure 1.1   Listening to Topeka talk about its library via Twitter Search

you do, guess what? You can easily "listen in" on the conversation taking place and can quickly gauge what your customers think about you—without having to wait for them to come to your store or office space. Simply set up search alerts for your organization's name (learn how in Chapter 5). Figure 1.1 is an example of a library using Twitter as a listening tool.

This type of listening can get visual and audible, too, through the use of online photo and video services. Want to see someone unbox your new product? Go directly to YouTube or Flickr. Want to see someone complain about the same product he just unboxed, after discovering something he doesn't like about it? Or praise your

new product because it's just the thing they needed? You can see all of these types of things online.

Get started on listening by setting up searches, subscribing to some RSS feeds, and creating some email alerts. Your customers have much to say, but they're not necessarily saying it directly to you. When they talk about you, they are talking to each other—to other customers. You need to be in on those conversations, too.

Authentic Communication

After you have created some listening channels, you simply need to respond. But there's a caveat—you need to respond authentically! I like what Taylor Hill at Harkins Creative says about creating an authentic voice[1]:

1. Be a giver. Give of yourself by providing good solid information about what you do or the products you represent. If you think it's the same old information that everyone else is giving away then put your own spin to it with a good true story or analogy. Don't be afraid of putting yourself and your company out there; sometimes it's the only way to get the conversation going.

2. Be yourself. Everyone is unique, and it's that uniqueness that enables each of us to see something from our own point of view. Giving your take on something should always be conversational even if it is different or even confrontational. As long as you always remember that this is a conversation with one or more people who are all a part of the exchange, then civil discourse can take place.

Taylor defines being a "giver" as providing good, solid information about your products or services—or even your organization's

thoughts about the industry. You're not trying to mask an inade-quacy; you're not trying to put a spin on something. Instead, you are merely sharing what you think, how you think a product should be used, or what it is you do.

Taylor also suggests that to create an authentic voice, you should let your unique voice be heard. The unique way we think and how we say things helps us come across as authentic, which makes us seem "more human" online.

To start creating an authentic-sounding voice online, you need to develop conversational, authentic ways to communicate with customers and constituents, rather than edit all the quirks and uniqueness out of your organizational communications. Don't try to turn your online interactions into corporate speak. When you edit out all those quirks, you have sterilized your message—not a good idea if you want to sound authentic online.

This concept doesn't apply exclusively to text-based communi-cation, either. Today's communication paths include everything from text- to image- to audio- to video-based communication. At the library where I work, I've blogged, but I've also created videos to communicate messages. I've been on the evening news. We have a regular podcast to share "what's happening at the library." I have taken photos of a new service to share with our customers. I've even made a screencast to show how a new website works.

The point here? I'm communicating online textually, visually, and aurally—through words, sight, and sound. In each of these set-tings, I need to create an authentic voice. We'll discuss how to do just that in later chapters.

Sharing in Online Community

Now that we've covered listening and communicating with an authentic voice, let's take it on the road.

In other words, take your message to other websites. It's one thing to communicate via your own blog on your own website,

where you can control your message—and somewhat control the comments and responses that might pour in. It's quite another thing to jump into an online social network, say those same things, and start participating in an active, online community forum setting with your customers.

Authenticity is even more important in these settings. Why? Because people can and will call you out if you don't get this right. It's certainly happened before. For example, back in 2009, Honda's Facebook Page for its Crosstour SUV received a lot of comments—many negative—about the visual design of the car. During the ongoing discussion, one "customer" named Eddie Okubo chimed in and said, "Interesting design. I would get this car in a heartbeat. I may be the older crowd with my kids out of the house and still need some space and performance. Don't need anything big."

However, there was an authenticity problem here. Eddie happened to be the manager of product planning at Honda—but he didn't mention that fact. Honda's customers called him out. One customer responded by saying, "Sounds like you are trying to save your job at Honda?" and another said, "Maybe you like it Eddie because you're the MANAGER OF PRODUCT PLANNING at Honda (light trucks in particular)? Lol!"

Honda officials responded by deleting Eddie's comment from the Facebook Page and responded with this: "Eddie Okubo is a manager in Honda Product Planning. His post was removed for two reasons: 1) He did not first state that he is a Honda employee and that his posting is his personal—not Honda's—opinion, and 2) he is not a spokesperson for Honda."[2]

What do you think? Was Eddie wrong to post that comment? Well, yes and no. We really don't know if Eddie believed what he said about the Crosstour or not. Personally, I hope he did—it's pretty cool when employees at a company actually like the products they help create. There's nothing wrong with that at all. However, Eddie should have disclosed that he worked for Honda and that he helped design the car. Would that have subtracted

from his comment? Probably not. He could have found an authentic way to state that: 1) He helped design it, and 2) he loves the design and would buy the car himself.

There's a third aspect to this story, though. Did Honda handle this PR situation correctly? Again, yes and no. Yes, the company needed to be very upfront with customers, especially customers in a public forum. (An open Facebook Page is most definitely a public forum!) So Honda did all right by admitting that Eddie worked for the company and was only sharing his personal opinion.

However, Honda erred by stating that Eddie "is not a spokesperson for Honda." Why? Because every single person who works at Honda is a spokesperson for Honda. If you work somewhere and tell friends, relatives, and acquaintances that you love your job (or you hate your job because of a bad boss that the company won't fire), you are a spokesperson. When you help create a new product and share the joys and thrills of being part of that with friends at a party, you are a spokesperson. You're not the official "I'm in the PR department, and I make the official statements for the company" type of spokesperson … but you are a spokesperson nonetheless.

The concept of being a spokesperson is changing. It has gone from hiring a PR department that handles all official communications to having an organization's normal, everyday employees sharing what they think—about what they do, what they create, and where they work—online, in social networks. Sharing that type of information is now as easy as typing a sentence and hitting the Send button.

Instead of deleting messages and trying to control the message, Honda could train its employees on the appropriate ways to communicate—including using proper identification and disclosures—and then set them free to connect and share what they like about the company's products. Allowing employees to be part of the conversation can go a long way toward building an authentic, unique voice for an organization. It will help make your organizational voice personal, unique, and authentic. It will

help you connect face2face with your online customers.

That's what the rest of this book is about. So let's consider the how-to's of being authentic online.

Endnotes

1. Taylor Hill, "3 Steps to Being Transparent and Developing an Authentic Voice Online," The Agency Record Blog, accessed January 17, 2012, www.harkins creative.com/3-steps-to-being-transparent-and-developing-an-authentic-voice-online.

2. Jonny Lieberman, "Honda Purges Select Comments From Crosstour Facebook Page," Autoblog, September 3, 2009, accessed January 17, 2012, www.autoblog. com/2009/09/03/honda-purges-some-comments-from-crosstour-facebook-page.