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Five Social Media Lessons for Business

A Home Depot executive discusses the retailer's strategy for engaging consumers via Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, relying on store associates for much of the social interaction

By [Brad Shaw](#)

At Home Depot ([HD](#)), we first realized we needed to have a real conversation with our customers back in 2007. A blogger flamed us about customer service in a post that drew thousands of comments. In the past we might have responded in a corporate voice, but our chief executive officer took a different tack. He wrote a personal response in the comments, acknowledging that the blogger was right and that we had to work to improve.

Social media has since become a way for us to improve our customer service—not merely a vehicle for us to talk about it. In 2008 we started on [Twitter](#), but many of the solutions our customers were looking for needed more than 140 characters. In 2009 we launched our [Facebook](#) page and a year later started a DIY (do it yourself) community online.

One of our more important decisions was to use store associates in much of our social interaction. They are the ones with the project and product expertise customers need. It was the right choice.

Here are five lessons we've learned about social media from our own still-evolving experience.

You can't control the conversation. You have to learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable. You're going to see and hear things about your brand that you might not like in a public forum. You can let people have the microphone exclusively, or you can be part of a conversation where you address their concerns. We shouldn't just broadcast a message. It has to be a genuine dialogue.

On the plus side, the positive things people say about your brand are amplified as well. Customers will use your Facebook page to compliment a store or an associate, and that positive messaging about your brand has much more impact and credibility than anything the company itself could say to its Facebook fans.

Be authentic. Don't try to make yourself a different kind of company online than you are offline. Social media will expose the real nature of your corporate culture. If you try to be

online. Social media will expose the real nature of your corporate culture. If you try to be something you're not, it will be apparent—and you will get called out.

For example, don't try to be hip or edgy in your social strategy if that's not what you really are as a company and culture. Your social activity should reflect reality. Welcoming constructive criticism and feedback will make for authenticity and transparency.

Likewise, encourage associates who use social media on the job to write the way they speak. They shouldn't be afraid to say "hey," to keep it informal and conversational, and to use their real names.

It's about people. To really engage your audience, strike a balance between making the communication about people as well as your products. We've found that the level of engagement and impressions created are significantly higher for our human interest content. We got positive reaction from a story about one of our team members building a wheelchair ramp for a veteran.

One of our stores adopted an abandoned kitten they found there; every week, associates posted about the cat's progress on Facebook. Someone else created a page around the ubiquitous orange Homer buckets we sell—and where they're spotted. These types of posts will draw people to your brand and make them realize you're not just a faceless monolith.

Your people need hands-on expertise in what customers care about. We decided to use real store associates for most of our DIY content in our online community, as well as on Facebook and Twitter. We can teach store associates about social media (though, in many cases, they've taught us a lot), but we can't give anyone else the knowledge and expertise our associates have about products and projects. That's what our customers are looking to us for. Just as we are trying to mirror our culture online, we are striving to give customers the same experience they would have if they came into a store.

The challenge is in making sure that the associates stay connected to the product and the stores, which is why we have them do this only a couple days per week. If we need more content and input online, we won't add hours to those of the associates we already use. Instead we'll increase the number of associates who participate. Our reasoning? If associates spend too much time out of the store, their product knowledge degrades. It's their up-to-the minute, hands-on knowledge that makes their advice so valuable to our customers.

Be patient and flexible. As we launch new initiatives in social media, we realize that things rarely turn out as planned. For example, we originally thought our DIY community would attract more professional contractors and hard-core DIYers, when in fact, it's really more about direct interaction between everyday DIYers looking for solutions and our associates providing the answers. We love what our associates are doing—and

what they are doing for our brand.

The advantage to doing it the way we've done it—minimal investment, not hiring people especially for these jobs—is that it gives you a lot of agility. If you make a big investment, you look for big returns. No one in the industry has been able to really home in on a definable ROI for this, so we're happy to invest modestly, build organically, and tweak the model in line with changing technology and sentiment and shifting demand for new kinds of content.

Right now, we are more focused on quality than quantity. If there comes a point where we can say there is a definitive value we can place on a Facebook fan, that equation will change.

Shaw is Home Depot's vice-president for corporate communications & external affairs. During his tenure, Home Depot has acquired more than 400,000 Facebook fans.