

8 WAYS

to Be More Human When Engaging Customers

BY MERILEE KERN

Nobody starts out automatically caring about your products or services. They care about how you can make a difference in their lives.

No matter the context, all relationships begin with a “handshake moment,” whether literally or figuratively, and these first few introductory moments reveal a great deal about the character of the person standing before you. Why should company interactions with current and prospective customers or clients be any different?

Sure, “content marketing” has been a crucial ingredient impelling the evolution of traditional marketing into today’s more personalized approach, bridging the gap between cookie-cutter TV, radio, and print mass marketing to highly customized digital and social media-driven communications. Even so, today’s more personalized digital communications have plenty of challenges, all too often falling on “deaf ears” and “blind eyes” amid a marketplace becoming highly desensitized to the glut of advertising and marketing messages it’s exposed to any given hour of any given day—year in and year out.

So how can brands make and maintain meaningful connections and create a lifetime value with customers in ways that’ll set them apart in a “noisy,” increasingly jaded, and discriminating marketplace? How can businesses tell an authentic story to foster maximized marketplace

engagement and breed brand loyalty? According to Kevin Lund, author of *Conversation Marketing: How to Be Relevant and Engage Your Customer by Speaking Human* (Weiser, 2018), the proverbial key to the kingdom is for companies, no matter their size and scope, to simply “speak human.”

Lund, who’s CEO of T3 Custom—itself a content marketing firm helping brands learn to “speak human” and supercharge ROI reportedly by as much as 16 times—provides an in-depth analysis of what’s required to succeed in today’s modern marketing era, which he’s aptly coined the “Conversation Age.” Specifically, he details key principles that are critical for driving the more evolved conversation marketing approach, which can help companies amplify results on multiple fronts.

According to Lund, “Those who are wildly successful at conversation marketing understand the strategy is not simply about propagating online content and sharing through social media accounts. Rather, it’s a disciplined approach to communicating with a target audience in a way that tells a simple, human story that will educate, inform, entertain and, most importantly, compel customers in a way that fully captures mind-and-market share through

messaging that truly resonates. Companies must stop talking 'at' their customers and, instead, connect with them by simply speaking human. And, it's far beyond that initial 'handshake moment'—it's through a constant stream of congenial engagements with each individual consumer, or the marketplace at large, based on trust and performance.”

Think it's complicated to be an adept conversation marketer and speak human to your constituents? Think again! Here are eight of Lund's tactical strategies that can help companies large and small become more engaging and relevant with customers and the marketplace at large:

1. Earn attention. To gain attention in today's crowded marketplace, it's prudent to do the opposite of what most everyone else is doing. That means don't deliver clichéd, boring content that's written for robots—search engines or otherwise—and for generic consumption. It's unsustainable for you and your brand as well as frustratingly futile for the audience you're trying to reach. Instead, speak human by engaging your audience with eye-level language to gain their attention and set your brand apart. Learn to use language that educates and entertains the audience.

Earning attention starts with asking yourself what you and your company are passionate about and conveying that genuinely in that all-important “handshake moment” of first contact—online or otherwise. Assume you're meeting the person on the other side of the screen for the first time. Think of what you can say that's new, memorable, a standout, and jargon-free. Also, understand and adapt to your audience. You wouldn't talk the same way to an aging Baby Boomer as you would to a teenager.

2. Tell a story. How do you hold someone's attention long enough to break down a topic and engender his or her trust, but also in a way that's unforgettable and leaves that person feeling more knowledgeable than before? The answer lies in good storytelling.

Good conversations are filled with good stories and anecdotes. But be mindful that the hero of the story isn't your company or its products, but rather how your product or service will have a positive impact in your customers' lives. If you can elicit an emotional response, you're onto something. Some standout companies have figured this out. Apple's story, for example, isn't about devices. It's about innovation and how our lives are being changed for the better with Apple technology in them. Learn how to make your story short, to the point, and easy to share online.

3. Stay humble. Being humble begins with letting go of ego—that instinctual part of the psyche that screams for a marketer to make too much noise about products or services and brag about themselves. Sigmund Freud developed a psychoanalytic theory of personality he coined the “id,” and marketers often tap into their own ids by telling the world how great their company and its products are, and how



“Unlike a monologue, a conversation is a two-way endeavor. Knowing when to stop talking is as important as knowing what to say and when to say it.”

great a potential customer will be for buying them. The id operates based on the pleasure principle, which demands immediate gratification of needs.

In conversation marketing, speaking human dictates that your customer's needs, not your own, are top priority. Your audience wants to know what you can do for them, and that means you must stop talking about yourself and drop the megaphone. Embrace a different approach that thoughtfully and humbly explains why you do what you do and why it can make a difference in someone's life instead of focusing on your bottom line. Stop beating them over the head with the fabulous features and benefits of your products. Instead, tell stories that inspire and resonate with their own life experiences.

4. Pick your party. Equally important to the “how” of your conversation is the “where.” It should all fit seamlessly together and feel natural and organic in that moment. Part of learning how to talk to your audience and engage them in any form of conversation is deciding where to talk to them in the first place.

This means doing the footwork to learn where your potential customers gather and meeting them on their own ground.

Where do your potential customers hang out on social media? What are they saying, and what challenges are they discussing that you can compellingly weigh in on? Easily available research tools can help you join the right conversation at the right time and in the right place with consistency.

5. Be relevant (on a molecular level). True listening is about far more than hearing words. It's also about fully understanding the message and concepts being imparted—whether they're needs, wants, desires, or even complaints. Being relevant means making sure you're talking about topics that are of sure interest to your audience, and that's often achieved by addressing their pain points. Before a marketer can aptly communicate and speak to such pain points, however, he or she must first hear what the prospect, customer, or marketplace has to say. It can be dangerous, expensive, and ultimately futile for companies to presume to inherently know what should be said in conversation marketing.

whether to stay the course in your strategy or tweak it on the fly. Once you hear preliminary reaction, you can respond to questions and concerns before moving ahead or otherwise course-correct as needed. Also bear in mind that what your audience isn't saying can be just as impactful as what they do convey.

Once your message is out, take a step back and "read the room." That could mean monitoring online response to your blog post or using various tools to learn which of your resources are drawing attention. Are people engaged? Are they adding to the conversation? What should you do if the feedback is bad? Don't consider a negative response or lack of response necessarily a failure. Instead, see it as an opportunity to adjust, make changes, and perhaps find ways to better meet your audience's needs.

8. Ditch the checklist. Before every takeoff, airline crews verbally work through an extensive checklist. There's a detailed set of tasks to cover before the plane can even push back from the gate. However, in an ebb-and-flow

"Embrace a different approach that thoughtfully and humbly explains why you do what you do and why it can make a difference in someone's life instead of focusing on your bottom line."

6. Start the conversation. How do you gain audience attention in a way that prevents you from just being part of the noise? It's no longer a question of whether you should insert yourself into the world of content marketing. It's a matter of when you're going to start talking, what you're going to say, and how you're going to say it. One good approach is to base that initial conversation on your unique value proposition for the given audience.

It's important to always remember that your target audience doesn't care about you. They care about what you can do for them. If you've done your research, you'll be familiar with their pain points and better prepared to offer answers that address their needs. Don't be a "me-too" marketer who dishes out the same information as everyone else. Instead, develop a unique angle with a thought-provoking headline that sparks attention—even better if it disrupts conventional thinking. In addition, know your topic inside out before communicating, and make sure any other people handling your communications are experts in the field. You don't want to risk sounding trite or inaccurate.

7. Stop talking. Unlike a monologue, a conversation is a two-way endeavor. Knowing when to stop talking is as important as knowing what to say and when to say it. It's the only way to truly get a sense of what your audience (or your potential customer) is thinking in reaction to what you've offered, and

conversation marketing context, this adherence to a certain protocol can pose limitations.

Indeed, one problem with simply sticking to a checklist is that a content marketing strategy will never evolve with the times or differentiate itself in any way from what everyone else is doing.

Successful marketers endeavor to open new horizons. They take a step back and ask bigger questions about themselves and their companies' ultimate goals, as well as what sort of new challenges their audience or customers might face over time and how to aptly adjust when needed.

Lund also suggests finding sources of inspiration. "Explore some of the successful content marketing plans that showed passion, ditched the tired old language, zeroed in on what customers needed, and started a real conversation with the market," he urges. "Then scrutinize your own strategy and see where it might be lacking, so that you can continually refine your own checklist." [AQ](#)

Merilee Kern is a media voice and lauded communications strategist. As the executive editor and producer of "The Luxe List International News Syndicate," she's a trends expert and travel industry voice of authority who spotlights noteworthy marketplace change makers, movers, and shakers.