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(Anti) Social Media

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Mr. X sat in the window seat—I had the aisle. He was middle-aged, trim, wearing an expensive suit. He didn't look up when I sat down. He never spoke to me or to the flight attendant who knew exactly what he wanted to eat and drink.

Just before boarding, the gate agent paged me. I'd been selected for a First-Class upgrade—with one condition. I wasn't to talk to my seatmate unless he spoke first. I took that offer. I remained while others deplaned and asked the flight attendant about my silent seatmate. "He's a vice president of the airline. If passengers know, they continually complain to him about the airline, so he flies incognito. He leaves it to his lowly flight attendants to hear about all the grief his policies cause." I'm not sure which shocked me more, a corporate officer hiding from customers or a

flight attendant's venom toward management. How does either translate into United's "friendly skies"?

Is your social media doing a similar thing? Are you hiding from your customers while advertising you're "local and ready to help"?

While the cost may seem low because you're not writing big checks, it's expensive to keep all of those social media channels up and current. The difference between social media and traditional advertising is you now bear the cost of content. When you give the newspaper a check for \$1,000 in advertising it includes money the newspaper uses to pay reporters whose stories are meant to attract readers who will (hopefully) see your ad.

Today, you may pay Facebook \$50 to push your message out to a specifically targeted demographic, reaching more precisely targeted customers than the newspaper could, but that's a small part of the picture. You must also continually create content to keep those customers clicking on your content, be it Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter or Yelp.

Here's the double whammy. True "social" media includes back-and-forth dialogue with constant engagement by the customer. It takes dollars on your part to maintain a team to create and monitor those sites so fresh

content is posted consistently. If a customer posts a question—or worse, a complaint—and it's not acknowledged within a matter of minutes/hours, then you're no better than the dismissive airline executive.

Don't encourage your customers to sign up to all of your social media platforms until you're prepared to continually offer new and varied content. When your devoted customer signs up for every channel only to be flooded with the same messages, you've violated their trust. Consider a statement like: "We're available via many social media platforms. Pick your favorite and receive the necessary information for successful gardening."

Social media experts may point out, "Each platform has different strengths/weaknesses. A garden center should use them all." It's true. Different platforms have individual benefits. It's also true if the customer doesn't feel satisfied with your posts, they'll unfriend/unsubscribe and remove you from their world. Choose what you can do well.

Because many owners are afraid to delegate social media, it doesn't get done. It turns out people who don't work in the garden center every day can sometimes handle social media sites best. Successful social media requires competent individuals able to post constantly, reacting in minutes not days.

Find a way to post fun, fresh, engaging content. "Hydrangeas 25% off" won't consistently work for the average consumer. Your social media has to be more about them than you. They must be engaged, whether through photos of their gardening successes, contests to "guess this plant," exchange of ideas with other users, posted recipes using their home-grown herbs, etc. What can you do to make your media "social," responsive and profitable? **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.