

# 10 Ways to Make Social Media Matter to Skeptical CEOs

By Lois Kelly

“Stop on that slide. Go back to the first point. That’s the big issue,” said a CEO during a recent talk I was giving about conversational marketing to a group of C-level executives from major companies like Disney, Motorola, and AT&T.

The slide was about obstacles to adopting social media marketing and the first point was this: CEOs have a command and control mindset, but there is no control in our talk world. Customers control our brands and how they want to engage with us and talk about our products and services. This CEO mindset is in the way of how customers want to get to know their companies. Big time.

The room was quiet for a few minutes.

“Okay, Okay, I get what you’re saying,” said another executive. “But I’m NOT going to abandon control. That would be irresponsible, and maybe even dangerous. How do we let go of some control and evolve into conversational and word of mouth marketing?”

The other executives fiercely agreed. Show us how to wade into this new talk business world with some degree of control, or at least proactiveness. And show us the business value. The last thing we need is another marketing fad that sounds like dot com mania all over again, said the executives.

So to continue that conversation, here are five ideas from our conversation that day – the very same ideas that helped turn around some very skeptical CEOs.

**1. Make meaning, not buzz:** “talk” marketing isn’t about superficial buzz that sizzles fast and fades fast. The goal is helping people make sense of information through conversations. The more meaningful the conversations, the faster people are able to connect to your organization, product or service. This shortens sales cycles and helps employees more quickly buy into change. For companies selling a considered product or service, which is most business-to-business companies, professional service firms, pharmaceutical, health care and educational organizations, the goal is making meaning, not buzz making..

**2. Listening leads to innovation:** Conversations are at least 50% listening, perhaps much more. Marketing’s purpose today isn’t just pushing out information and producing things; it’s listening and bringing ideas back into a company. Ideas that can spark innovation, influence product development, pinpoint ways to get access to and attention from decision makers. Listening is a new strategy, and it happens through conversations whether those conversations are face-to-face or in online communities and social networks.

**3. Points of view are more interesting than your products:** Unless you’re Steve Jobs talking about the iPhone people don’t want to talk about your products or capabilities; they can look that up on the Web. What they do want to talk about are your points of view about the industry or category. What common mistakes do you see? What are one or two emerging trends do you believe may upset business as usual? In what area are most people wasting money and don’t even realize it? What “best practice” do you think is a waste of time? Points of view jumpstart meaningful conversations and distinguish your organization on more than products. And every

CEO has those points of view to share with their organization, with customers, with media, and with employees. So share those interesting views. They'll get talked about.

**4. Nothing to talk about is why people don't talk:** The reason everyone in a company is often telling a different story -- or not saying much at all -- is that they don't have anything interesting to talk about. Elevator statements, product messages, and mission statements are, let's face it, pretty boring and not something that makes you want to get together with a prospect, or an analyst. Nor is it something employees want to talk about when they get together with company partners and agencies. Take your points of view and set them free. Share them with everyone in the company, and encourage them to talk about the ideas and what they hear from the resulting conversations. People will remember and talk about fresh points of views that get people to say, "Gee, that's interesting. Tell me more." But they're not going to talk about messages and value props.

**5. Measure involvement vs. awareness:** the new measure of marketing effectiveness is involvement. The more involved people become with your ideas, your sales reps, the more vested they become in those ideas and people. More importantly, involvement is the pre-requisite to action, whether that action is changing your mind, asking for an RFP, or making a decision to buy. The objective is to engage people in conversations that get them involved with you and you with them.

One last point that resonated at that skeptical CEO meeting, I played the new Paul McCartney song, "Fine Line," whose lyrics are "there's a fine line between recklessness and courage." Not embracing conversational marketing and letting go of some control is reckless because it puts a barrier up between you and your customers, I reminded the execs. Change that makes a big difference, however, requires just a small bit of courage.

And what CEO wants to be seen as lacking courage?

# # #

Lois Kelly is author of *Beyond Buzz: The Next Generation of Word of Mouth Marketing* and a partner in Beeline Labs. She blogs at <http://blog.foghound.com>.