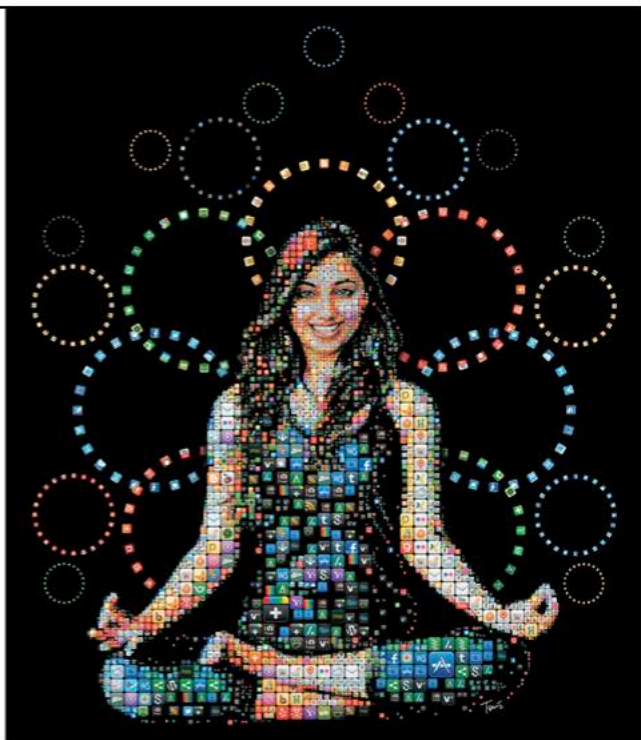


Zen Master of Social Media

Today, social media is part and parcel of any solid marketing program. But Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn are in a constant state of flux. So how can exhibit and event marketers understand and effectively use these transposing platforms? According to author Shama Hyder, marketers must tap into the "Zen" of social media — awakening to the natural flow of the medium to reach social-media marketing nirvana.

By Kelli Billstein Illustration: Charis Tsevis



A common complaint that author Shama Hyder hears from exhibit managers and event marketers is that social media "isn't working" for them. They have Twitter accounts and Facebook pages where they broadcast their companies' marketing sound bites - yet results are as elusive as lofty Zen koans. Like a wise Buddha, Hyder calms these frazzled exhibit and event marketers by teaching them that social-media results are often slow to come simply because individuals are going against the grain. There's a path to online enlightenment, she counsils, and it involves realizing that social media is a far cry from traditional marketing.

Because pitches to sell products and services via social media's networks often reek of spam, Hyder tells marketers to approach the medium with an inverted agenda. Instead of spitting out slogans and barking their companies' catchphrases, marketers must wade into social media's stream ready to listen, share, and adapt. To obtain successful social-media results, then, event marketers today should model themselves as online dharma bums: open minded to these platforms' shifting currents.

As social media becomes more robust, companies can't afford to miss out on disseminating their messages through its channels. In Hyder's book "The Zen of Social Media Marketing" she illuminates the way marketers should think of social media and how they can use it to create a successful online presence - all while keeping a meditative calm.

EXHIBITOR Magazine: What is the "Zen" of social media for marketers?

Shama Hyder: I wrote this book because I've seen a lot of marketers using social-media platforms like you would a billboard or a radio advertisement - mistaking the medium for the message. They get a Facebook page or a Twitter account and paste a message like, "Go see my website" on their wall. When only a scant handful of people do, marketers complain that social media is useless. But that's because they're not engaging with their followers. It's like erecting a blank billboard, then standing back and waiting for something to happen. That was the old, traditional way of marketing. For today's social-media marketing to be effective, there needs to be participation - a call to action. I thought, if only people understood the principles of social media, then they would know that using it successfully can be so easy. Making social media work for you means understanding and going with the flow in these channels. Done correctly, this is the Zen approach to social media: not trying to control the platform, but flowing along with it.

SHAMA HYDER

Shama Hyder, author of "The Zen of Social Media Marketing," is president of The Marketing Zen Group, a webmarketing agency based in Dallas. Her insights and approaches to social-media marketing have earned her the titles of "online shaman" and "millennial master of the universe" from FastCompany.com. In 2009, Businessweek honored her as one of North America's Top 25 Under 25 entrepreneurs, and in 2010 she won the Technology Titan Emerging Company CEO award from the Metroplex Technology Business Council. Hyder explores the Zen of social media, guiding marketers to a fruitful socialmedia presence. The second edition of her book will hit stores this spring.

EM: What does it mean for marketers to go with the flow of social media?

SK: The Zen of social-media marketing is about understanding the mindset of people who are using social media, then using it to your advantage. It's a balancing act between active participation and passive listening to what's being said online. Because so much of social media is about conversation, it's important for marketers to jump into a conversation, or start one of their own. It's a two-way dialogue now; marketing is no longer a one-way street. And with social media, the people are becoming the media by spreading messages themselves. Going with the flow means that marketers have to leverage that paradigm shift.

EM: When exhibitors find their social-media groove, there are still dos and don'ts they should be aware of. What are some don'ts that you continue to see marketers doing?

SH: I think the biggest mistake that marketers make is neglecting the social-media strategy before diving into the tactics. They decide they want to use Twitter at a trade show, for example, but they never identify what they're going to tweet about or who's responsible for doing it. Too much of social-media marketing is off-the-cuff and hasn't been thought through. This is where exhibit and event marketers get frustrated and ask, "Where's the return on investment?"

The other thing people have to realize about social media is that it's part of a bigger puzzle. By itself, it doesn't do much. But if you plug social media into a larger marketing plan that involves your public relations department and your search-engine optimization team - that's where you really see social media knocking it out of the park. I would urge exhibitors to ask themselves how they can be maximizing these opportunities.

EM: Of course exhibit and event professionals will want to maximize online marketing opportunities, but how should marketers, especially those new to social media, begin?

SK: Always begin offline. Ignore social media; ignore the platforms. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish. So many times companies want to grab hold of something because it's sexy. I call this the "shiny toy syndrome." It doesn't get you very far. Figuring out what you want to accomplish first is paramount. After you've identified your goal or priority with social media, then you can choose which platform makes the most sense based on your company's needs.

I always tell people who are new to social media that consistency is so much more important than quantity. Marketers don't need to start five new social-media platforms and a fan page; they won't have time to give each one consistent attention and maintenance. Remember to ask yourself what the point of all this is. When you can answer that question, you'll arrive at a specific strategy because you have a goal in mind.

EM: So once companies arrive at their specific goals, how can they effectively generate awareness for their brands through social media?

SH: It's all about storytelling and creating value for customers. Storytelling is how people build strong relationships. By relaying exciting messages - and avoiding mundane ones - we foster a dedicated following. Social media is just another way for marketers to be storytellers for their companies, but they have to be relaying content that is valuable to customers. Every good exhibitor understands that to drive attendees to the booth, you have to provide some kind of value, be it a fun giveaway or an educational experience. The same thing goes for social media. We're a culture that's hungry for information, but not just any information. We want quality content that has real value - and we want it wrapped inside a story. This is at the core of all good social-media marketing. And it's how marketing has drawn in people for millennia.

EM: How have you seen exhibitors creating value via social media on the trade show floor?

SH: True value comes from engaging the audience fully - and remembering to extend that engagement beyond the live audience. IBM did a great job of this at a recent show. The company incorporated social media into its booth by creating a "Sweet Tweets" promotion. Playing with the traditional idea of giving away candy at a show, IBM filled its booth with jars of different sweets, and the staffers dressed up as candy makers. Attendees who tweeted about the booth using an IBM hashtag were rewarded with candy.

IBM expected 500 leads by the end of the show, but it ended up with 1,200 - all because the company leveraged social media in a creative way. By realizing that its audience would grow exponentially as soon as social media was involved, IBM more than doubled its leads. Think of it this way: Today, everyone is connected by an invisible thread to the online world. Why would you, as an exhibitor, not want to leverage that 100 percent?



EM: That online world can be unpredictable and overwhelming. What advice would you give to exhibitors nervous about directly interfacing with their customers and prospects through social-media networks?

SH: Online conversations between customers about companies' brands are already happening. Exhibit and event marketers have no control over this. The only thing that's up to them is deciding whether or not they want to at least jump into those existing conversations and participate.

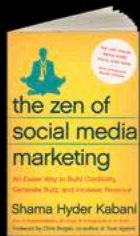
It can be nerve wracking to communicate with customers in this way, outside of a more formal, face-to-face environment, but look, the idea here is to converse in a sincere way - to shed the PR speak and connect on a more human level. This can be scary, but it can also be extremely rewarding.

EM: You've given us some great pointers here. What is one final thing that all exhibit and event marketers should keep in mind while using social-media platforms?

SH: Be patient. Just because tweets are instant doesn't mean the outcome of a social-media marketing effort will be instant, too. It's not; you have to go through what I call the ACT process, that is: Attract, Convert, Transform. Social media is excellent at attracting potential customers. Maybe they read your blog because you've tweeted new posts. Over time, if that blog reader you've attracted is a good fit, he or she might convert into a regular consumer of your content. Eventually, that person might even take the final step and transform into a client. All this takes time. Instantaneous sales and connections are rare. Having the expectation that social media will land business overnight is like thinking you can walk into a networking event, hand a stranger your business card, then stare down the prospect - waiting for that person to cut you a check.

Social-media marketers need to rethink their expectations because in the online world, lead nurturing works on a different timeline. Marketers should be participating in social media by blasting quality content and engaging with others - all while having patience. Remember, all good relationships worth having take time and dedication to build. **E**

CONTINUING EDUCATION



"The Zen of Social Media Marketing" is a guidebook for marketing professionals who are looking to develop and refine their social-media strategies and tactics. Dubbed the first official "living" book on social media, the printed text is coupled with an online version, which is continuously updated. "Social media is a living, evolving thing," writes Hyder, "and the digital copy of the book will be updated regularly to reflect changes as they occur." The printed text features chapters such as "Creating a Social Media Policy for Your Organization," "Online Marketing Basics," and "Websites, Blogs, and SEO," as well as chapters devoted to Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. As such, it works as a primer for social-media newbies and a newsfeed on the latest developments for seasoned social-media marketers.

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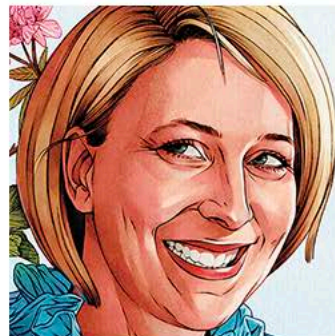
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