

Social Media Sells Your Shop For Less

Twitter easily connects you with your local community and could bring in more business—free (well, almost).

When Julie Zara joined Twitter last summer, she just wanted to keep up with the ever-evolving social media scene. As co-owner of Zara's Collision Center in Springfield, Ill., she expected that Twitter.com, the social networking website that lets you share your thoughts 140 characters at a time, would be a valuable marketing tool. What she didn't expect, however, was for her presence on the site to bring a nearly \$10,000 job to the shop: When a meteorologist for a local news channel was involved in a deer collision, he contacted Zara—via Twitter. "That one job paid off whatever investment we have in [Twitter]," says Zara, whose shop has 24 employees and earns \$4.5 million in revenue annually.

As Twitter is used by more and more businesses, your customers (and potential customers) will increasingly expect you to use it, too. The good news is that, but for the time it takes you to post your messages, Twitter is free. The not-so-good-news is that Twitter works best when you work with it almost daily. And if you don't consider yourself pithy, you'll want to hone that ability to be both concise and compelling. Do that, and you can "tweet" your way to better community connections and—better yet—bigger business.

SMART BUSINESS

Jeanne Silver, co-owner of CARSTAR Mundelein in Illinois, began tweeting nearly a year ago. At first, she used Twitter solely for personal interest, but after seeing how other local businesses were taking advantage of it to connect with the community, she did the same for her 10,000-square-foot shop. "You can reach a lot of your customers," she says, and "really get out there and get them to see your message."

Silver tweets no more than five times per day and spends no more

than half an hour on Twitter. She tweets quick, helpful tips. For example, during deer season, she tweeted, "Watch out at dusk and dawn," and during winter, "Anti-lock brakes keep you straight." She says people want to be stimulated by your tweets. "They pay attention to comments that are witty, smart and valuable. Don't focus on touting your shop," she says. However, the occasional, clever marketing message—like Silver's recent "Skid into a tree, come see me."—isn't a bad thing, especially amidst mostly community-focused tweets.

TWITTER SAVVY

Because each tweet is limited to 140 characters or less, it's important to craft a quick, concise message. Chris Sheehy, president of Automotive Consulting Group in Providence, R.I., and Ben Littlefield, principal of the interactive and digital marketing agency Three Sixty Solutions in Austin, Texas, share a few tips:

Focus locally. Make your tweets relevant to your community. "Tweet what the market is interested in," Sheehy says. Focus less on auto body news and more on general interest topics that show you're aware of what goes on in your neighborhood or city: information about a local food or blood drive, or a snippet about a local sports team. Go for a connection between business and personal by offering safe driving tips when bad weather prevails, or cautions against drunk driving during Spring Break and high school prom weekend.

Know your audience. What are the demographics of your typical customer? If 60 percent of your consumers are women, Sheehy explains, don't tweet about topics that won't interest them. "Retweeting" (see sidebar) information from AskPatty's female-focused Twitter account, for example, is a good way to connect with women in your area.

Avoid contentious issues. Keep your tweets positive, Sheehy says. Avoid negativity and commenting on touchy industry issues, such as DRPs or OEM vs. aftermarket topics. Plus, your followers likely won't understand the nuances of the auto body industry. "Tweet something they'll understand and value," Sheehy says.

Don't overtly advertise. "The goal on Twitter isn't to sell," Littlefield says. "It's one thing to occasionally say, 'Hey, we're doing this great thing. Check it out,'" he explains, but keep those tweets to a minimum. Aim for tip-laden posts: "Little quick things [you'd] tell your son or daughter before they'd take off on a road trip." For example, how to check tire pressure or battery charge.

