

SUCCESS SIGNALS

Lee Wochner and Amy Kramer turn the volume up on social media at Counterintuity



Lee Wochner had his "Aha!" moment about what social media technology could mean to his business while giving what was supposed to be a 20-minute talk to the Burbank, California Chamber of Commerce. The audience was dotted with executives and managers from big entertainment conglomerates, the local airport and city government. He was just three slides into his presentation when the questions started coming, and they were stunning in what they revealed. "I was being asked really basic questions, like 'What is Facebook?' 'What is a friend?'" Wochner recalls. "I was blown away. We assumed that everyone knew this stuff, but they don't."

Counterintuity, the Burbank-based marketing and design firm run by Wochner and his partner, Amy Kramer, already included social media elements in most of the programs it created for clients, but the Chamber of Commerce encounter, which lasted four times the scheduled 20 minutes, opened their eyes to the true scope of the market potential that existed. Following that meeting, Counterintuity decided to increase its focus on social media and the results have been phenomenal. Even during the financial turmoil of 2009, revenues were up 30 percent, and first-half 2010 volume is up 70 percent year-over-year. The company recently landed a big new high-tech client, and Wochner and Kramer have been pounding the Southern California speakers circuit, proselytizing social media's virtues for both businesses and nonprofit organizations, which represent a big part of their business.

"What distinguishes us as an agency is that Amy and I are using new technology to facilitate what are actually very old, longstanding means of communication," Wochner explains. "Word-of-mouth is what really drives any campaign today, so social media was invented for what we do. We take social media and turn it up to 11. We use it to create word-of-mouth buzz and bring that buzz to what our clients are doing."

Kramer started out working in direct response marketing, narrowing her focus to Internet and email marketing about a decade ago and launching her own firm in 2003. Counterintuity, which focused on similar market segments but didn't have robust Internet resources in-house, ended up becoming one of her best customers. She and Wochner decided to join forces in a 50-50 partnership in 2007, and the resulting synergy has been impressive (both partners have theater backgrounds, something reflected in their "show must go on" business philosophy). Since then, Counterintuity has evolved into a full-service marketing and design firm specializing in social media and serving clients mainly in the SMB, nonprofit and public service spheres.

"Our view of marketing is that you need to get people engaged, get them excited and grow your network by using your customers to get new customers," Kramer says. "We were already using blogging and Internet marketing in what we were doing for our clients, so it was a natural to start plugging in social media channels like Facebook and Foursquare."

Wochner and Kramer say there is a general awareness among businesses and nonprofits that social media exists, but, as the Chamber of Commerce meeting demonstrated, there is a widespread lack of knowledge about how it works and how it should be integrated into an organization's overall outreach efforts. A big part of what they do now involves educating their clientele about the differences between social networking and traditional marketing techniques such as outbound messaging.

Wochner stresses that social media initiatives must be built around unified branding and messaging. Content can't be random or helter-skelter; it has to be relationship-based and two-way. "If your social media program is about 'buy me,' you've already lost," he says. He feels that his and Kramer's theater backgrounds make them well-suited for this kind of work, and that the collaborative and inclusive creative process Counterintuity employs is a natural fit with social media. The company provides counseling and coaching services to help clients manage their own social media programs and also offers full outsource services to those who prefer to hand it off to the experts.

With a book in the works and a groundbreaking client campaign involving user-created video content set to break later this year, Wochner and Kramer are convinced that hitching Counterintuity's future to social media technology was the right decision to put their company on the map—and keep it there.

