

Using 21st Century Tools to Sell Water Technology

By Jim Lauria

The water conditioning and purification industry is full of modern technology that helps water treatment professionals tackle 21st century challenges, from 'sick buildings' to managing ever-scarcer water resources. Now that we are into the second decade of the 21st century, isn't it about time that we in the water industry adopt tools of the digital age? We need to represent our technology, and our expertise, with the digital resources that customers (whether consumers, engineers, architects or government officials) are increasingly using to discover and share information. We need to collaborate with our stakeholders and sell water treatment technology with these tools.

"When looking for answers about products, customers aren't starting by calling customer service the way they used to," notes Kim Seabrook, Regional Sales Manager for Salesforce.com, a leader in cloud-based customer relationship management (CRM) solutions. "Instead of picking up the phone, they are looking for alternate routes for getting instant information about your product or services."

Customers are tapping into volumes of information online. A few keystrokes yield thousands of results in web searches. Customers and prospects have immediate, 24/7 access to information on your products, and even on where many of them are installed. Water treatment equipment is no longer hidden away in a locked room or dark corner—it's online in 16.7 million colors on computer monitors worldwide. And now, more than ever, people are using the mushrooming social media elements of the Internet to share their opinions.

"At first, the web was mostly a read-only medium," says Michele Ursino, founder and CEO of foldier.com in San Francisco, CA, a web-based tool for searching, aggregating and publishing content (more on that later). "Now it has become the read/write web. The most popular sites are the ones where members of different communities update their status, express their opinions, post interesting articles and share links to sites. People can now express their opinions about anything, and be heard by huge audiences." The bottom line is that we need to be there, too.

"You've got to have a tool that connects you to where your customers are already interacting," agrees Seabrook. "You have to participate in the conversation that's already happening out there, or you miss key opportunities to service your customer, sell them your products and *control* your brand."

Array of tools

There's a dizzying array of tools that help companies build links with the people they need to reach. But nowadays, there's no silver bullet, no *Yellow Pages*, no single best bet. Instead, success in modern communications will grow from the interconnection of a variety of tools and media—it's truly a web, just like the name implies.

Here are a few of the tools that ought to be in your toolkit—the basics that should be with you always:

Email

It goes without saying. Email is the foundation of much of today's interaction, and you can embellish it by creating e-newsletters to keep key customers, prospects and stakeholders informed about your company. Hardware is driving this further. Hand-held devices (like iPads and other electronic tablets) make it easier than ever to read these newsletters as well as blogs, magazine articles and other online publications.

Your website

Make it good. Not just pretty, but useful. Make sure prospective buyers can learn the details about your products and services. Make it possible for a specifying engineer to get the details she needs when she's working on a drawing late at night. Include features that allow visitors to ask questions and register their interest in your products and services.

YouTube or Vimeo

The web allows you not only to talk up your products but to show people how they work. No DVDs to load, no monitor to lug around. Use streaming video to televise your sales pitch and demonstrate your product. Not convinced people are watching? Consider this: in 2009, the use of Facebook and YouTube exceeded the number of Internet searches.

LinkedIn

An excellent tool for connecting with colleagues, posting your contact information and expertise, and for joining any or all of the many water communities tied in to this free service. It's also a great recruiting tool—two of the last three people I hired were located through LinkedIn. (Warning to bosses: it works both ways!)

Patrick Gallagher, publisher of *WaterOnline*, describes how online presence ties together many of these tools. "From a newsletter, you can get your hands on a brochure, or go to a video that shows the product working," he says. "A link from that video to a spec sheet can give details of a product that an engineer can now use to spec the product."

That's a lot of contact with a customer you may never have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. That contact is likely to start with a web search, which is why it's vital to make your content easy to find online. That comes down to three letters: SEO, or search engine optimization. SEO is the art of gaming the search engine, leaving tasty crumbs for the automated search engines to find so they move you up higher in the results column. The words you use, the data you bury in unseen parts of your web page, and the links to and from your site all play into SEO, and can turn your website into a powerful marketing tool—especially for small companies with limited budgets.

“What we’re finding is that when people need something, the first thing they do is go to their computer and do a search,” Gallagher notes. “If you’re doing a good job and positioning yourself well on the Internet, you’re going to be found. You can really use Google, Yahoo, Bing and other search engines to compete with big companies.”

That’s not about advertising, it’s about understanding what search engines are looking for—and delivering a huge return on a small investment. “Big companies have more money to spend, and they can buy keyword ads,” Gallagher explains, “but research shows that when people go online to search, especially to Google, it’s more likely that they are going to go to the results they search for rather than the ads that pop up.”

What’s more, software and a little brainpower allow you to track leads from the search-engine query all the way through the sale—including which of your web pages gets opened and for how long—for a measurable look at what works and what doesn’t.

The next level

With the basics in your pocket, you can explore the next step. Tara Hunt, author of *The Whuffie Factor*, points out that it’s vital to join online communities as a participant. Her advice: be nice, be noticeable, be notable. That’s what allows you to start cashing in on the information flying around out there, and helps you build your credibility and social capital online. Here are some more tools:

Online communities

No, they’re not just for video gamers anymore. Through global online communities and listservs (which are basically lists of interested people who get broadcasts of emailed questions, comments and discussions), you can connect with experts and prospects around the world, understand what your customers are interested in, and stay on top of the latest industry news and trends.

Facebook

There’s more to Facebook than baby pictures and online games, as Ewing Irrigation figured out. Ewing’s Facebook presence—with regular posts on special deals, job listings, water conservation issues and details on the company’s remarkable commitment to community service—was recognized last year by the Irrigation Association’s SmartMarketing Award, and for good reason. To see it done right, check out Ewing Irrigation on Facebook.

Twitter

It’s not easy to deliver a message in 140 characters or less. But tweeting messages via Twitter has become a powerful connection around the world. It’s a great way to alert your contacts—called *followers*—and *their* contacts about salient information, your thoughts on key issues or news of the day, blog posts, website updates, special offers and the like. It’s also a great way for people to reach you. Just remember that it’s a conversation, not a broadcast—if someone reaches out to you with a question via Twitter, you’re obliged to respond.

Blogs

Online opinion pieces, called blogs (a contraction of *web logs*) are an outstanding way to share your perspective with a global audience. A blog I posted on the *Huffington Post* a few months ago elicited comments from readers including a Harvard University fellow. It was also picked up via RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication) by several online sites as part of their content, sending the message in widening ripples worldwide. In fact, one

of those pickups was by a company I wanted to do business with, which posted it as *Industry News*. Talk about an icebreaker!

Wikis

Here’s your chance to shape the way people view the water industry. Wikis are collaborative websites that can be created and edited by any user—including you. Where we all grew up checking *World Book* or *Encyclopedia Britannica* as our first source of information on a subject, today’s information seekers often start with wikis. Find them, create them or contribute to them to help people understand our industry and technology.

The reach of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter are no surprise to trend-watchers. Citing a Morgan Stanley *Internet Mobile Report*, Seabrook points out that in July 2009, the number of unique users of social networking surpassed the number of users of email somewhere north of the 700-million mark. *Time* noted in December that Facebook now links nearly one-tenth of the world’s population, making it the third-largest ‘country’ in the world.

“If that’s where people are interacting more than email, they’re also going to have interactions about products and services that interest them as well,” says Seabrook. “Instead of going to Google to find out about a product, thousands of people are starting with Facebook and asking their friends about it. They’re tweeting about you and your competitors, so leading companies need to have a strategy to communicate on Twitter and Facebook.”

It’s time, as Hunt said in *The Whuffie Factor*, to stop talking and start listening.

Keeping track

The increasing popularity of social media led Salesforce.com to develop a tool for monitoring Twitter, Seabrook says, linking it to the company’s powerful CRM tools.

“Salesforce.com serves as a central command center for all customer interactions, including Twitter, Facebook and anywhere else on the Internet your customers are,” she says. “That way, a company knows in real time when somebody is talking about their product, allowing them to respond, support and grow their brand.”

Of course, the billions of messages coursing over the Internet every day represent a flood of information, most of which is far out of our range of hearing. That’s where search programs like Google Alerts, LeapFish, MonitorThis, Social Mention and other social-media search sites can come in handy—they comb through blogs, tweets and other social posts for mentions of your keywords. There can be a lot of junk in those results, but they can help you *hear* what’s being said out there.

Just as we can’t catch every tweet or Facebook post, we can’t be expected to sit at the computer all day updating our social-media accounts and websites. Enter another layer of uniquely modern technology, the aggregator, which automatically searches the Internet for items of interest to you, collecting them into a tailor-made ‘newspaper’—a detailed stream of market intelligence that used to be reserved for big companies with in-house research departments.

The same tool can work well for outbound messaging, too. A good aggregator will also allow you to broadcast your blogs or even your collected content to a targeted assortment of recipients.

“The presence on the web with a single website is not enough anymore,” explains Ursino, Founder of foldier.com. “It is very hard for a small organization to update each and every social outlet out there,” he says. “With foldier and other tools like Ping.fm or Friend-Feed, you can post once and broadcast on multiple targets.”

Worldwide office

The Internet is shaping far more than just 24-hour-a-day outbound messaging to customers and prospects. It's also shrinking the world down into groups and communities that cross the boundaries of time and space, fostering collaboration as if we all worked in the same office as our far-flung colleagues. It's the solution to the age-old business quagmire of buried knowledge, lamented in the old saw: "If we only knew what we knew." It's the path to what management guru Seth Godin calls 'tribal knowledge,' a platform that allows people to spread ideas that work. Seabrook gives an example from her own experience on Chatter, Salesforce's in-house social networking tool.

"You can post a question like: 'I'm looking for a user case in a manufacturing customer for business-to-consumer e-commerce. Does anyone have an example of how we've done this that I can tell a customer about?' You don't have to know who in your company has that information. It could come from a person you've never met, someone you would never have known to ask. I can leverage the collective expertise of my company without having to know every one of our 4,000 employees."

That's exactly what James Surowiecki encourages in *The Wisdom of Crowds*: tap into collective intelligence. The closer a person is to a problem, Surowiecki says, the more likely he or she is to having a good solution. That makes your customer even more valuable to you than ever, and makes them more valuable to each other. Linking customers through your business would achieve one of Hunt's biggest goals: becoming a social catalyst by creating connections among customers, bringing relationships to a whole new level.

Co-opetition

Online tools can also invite our distributors and end users into our virtual offices—even colleagues in the industry with whom we can engage in 'co-opetition,' the practice of teaming up with competitors to craft multi-stage solutions to water treatment challenges. Envisioning how you could team up with a competitor, an engineer, a distributor rep and a customer to craft a water treatment system is no pipe dream. It just takes a wireless connection and a hook-up through any of the dozens of online conference sites like Webex, GoToMeeting, GatherPlace or others. Use software like MindManager to offer an on-screen tool that all participants can brainstorm around, linking ideas to documents and web pages as well as to each other. There is no limit to what you can accomplish. That collaborative model illustrates what John Kauke, former COO of Team Chemistry, called the extended enterprise: the productive, collaborative link among a producer, a distributor and an end user. Jeff Jarvis wrote in *What Would Google Do?* that customers should have a seat at the table when products are designed and decisions are made. With 21st century tools, we can have the conversations with our customers that Jarvis envisions, and we can literally bring them right to the drawing board—or at least bring the drawing board to them.

Focus and flexibility

The bottom line on all of these online tools is the importance of keeping your focus. Don't let the vastness of the Internet pull you away from the job you have to do.

Think about your Internet and social-media tools as tactics that reinforce your strategy and play off of each other. First and

foremost, make sure your old-school print press releases (or your radio spots) are also posted to your website, your Facebook page, and other social outlets. Then use your online tools to amplify key parts of your communications plan. For instance, when considering your outbound messages, think of Facebook as the primary tool for talking about community service and good deeds in the places you do business, while blogs are your soapbox and tweets are your way of building your brand and passing along useful tidbits, as well as links to your online press releases, Facebook updates and blogs. Inbound, check Facebook friends' sites for what they think is important, scan the tweets of people you respect and follow, and keep in touch with the industry through your aggregator.

The most important thing to remember about online tools is that mistakes can happen at the speed of light, and their residue can bounce around cyberspace forever. As blogger Christine Taylor points out, that's why it's vital to make sure the direction and oversight of your online campaign isn't handed off to the youngest person in the company because he's comfortable with computers. This is the new core of your marketing program, and all the conventional wisdom of targeting, messaging and tactical discipline still apply. Make sure that comes from the highest reaches of the organization. And make sure your employees know what constitutes an appropriate post and an inappropriate one (hint: anything that involves beer or bare skin is probably not in the marketing plan). It's also important to monitor your sites. The water industry doesn't tend to be a lightning rod for activists, but it pays to react quickly and confidently to angry posts, or the sorts of organized attacks that groups like Greenpeace and PETA have perpetrated on Facebook.

Last, don't confuse focus with inflexibility. Twitter is a driving force in communication today, but it didn't even exist five years ago. What will a billion people be using online five years from now? Beats me, but you can bet it will be something new and exciting. And powerful. Be ready for it.

And as you tweet and type and search and plan, remember that water remains at the heart of this electronic revolution. All this connectivity requires silicon chips and plastic cases (both constructed in water-intensive manufacturing processes). It needs an array of metals for wire and circuitry, all extracted and refined using plenty of water. It requires vast amounts of energy, extracted with water and converted to electricity via steam, or even spun in hydroelectric turbines. And the massive server farms that shuttle the electrons carrying our messages are huge generators of heat, requiring enormous cooling-tower capacity that continues to grow as the world becomes more wired.

Once you're done contemplating that, email your thoughts to me (jim@amiadusa.com) on the future of water technology, and let's get the ball rolling!

About the author

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