

PART 5: CROWDSOURCE YOUR NEXT BIG IDEA

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SMALL BUSINESS

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OVERVIEW

Over the past few years, you may have heard about a concept called “[crowdsourcing](#).” It’s the process of enabling your customers to play an active role in creating a new product or service, or in some cases, solving a business challenge for your company. Let’s face it – our customers know what they want and need better than anyone, so it makes perfect sense to involve them in business-related decisions when they’re eager and able to contribute their ideas.

Social media makes it easier than ever to engage customers in a direct conversation about ideas for your business. In this section, we will share tools, techniques and best practices to help you crowdsource your next big idea.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

Crowdsourcing represents a significant opportunity for small businesses – particularly businesses with a passionate customer base. The key is finding a way to solicit their ideas directly, evaluate their ideas efficiently, and implement the best ideas as they make sense for the business.

In the past, companies may have approached this through a customer suggestion box. Have an idea? Jot it down on a piece of paper and the company will consider it. Some companies have taken this a step further by offering an email address or online form for customer suggestions. These approaches work, but fall short because there is no open dialogue about the ideas and the process doesn’t scale easily.

Dell faced this challenge a few years ago, and in response, created IdeaStorm. [IdeaStorm](#) is an online community where customers can submit ideas related to Dell’s products, services and business. Customers can discuss ideas with Dell and each other, “promote” and “demote” ideas, and see which ideas Dell will implement based on their input. The most popular ideas rise to the top – based solely on customer votes.

IdeaStorm has been incredibly successful, generating nearly 10,000 ideas and 80,000 comments since its launch in February 2007. Dell has implemented hundreds of ideas suggested by customers and fundamentally changed the way it approaches innovation. Additionally, Dell uses similar tools called EmployeeStorm and [PartnerStorm](#) to solicit ideas from employees and channel partners, respectively.

Importantly, you don’t have to be a large company like Dell to reap the benefits of crowdsourcing. The same concepts can be applied in smaller businesses to produce value for your company.

GETTING STARTED

There are several ways to use social media for crowdsourcing your next big idea. You might start small by engaging customers in a two-way conversation on your company Web site or blog. If you have an active customer following, you can pose questions there and invite feedback and ideas in the form of comments.

To achieve a higher level of engagement, you might consider creating an online community similar to IdeaStorm. Here are some tips for getting started:

- Agree on objectives and strategy. What type of ideas and input are you seeking? Who is your target audience, and will they be interested in sharing with you? Is your company committed to listening – really listening – and taking action?

GETTING STARTED (continued)

- Define an idea management process. This may be the hardest part! It's important to define a clear process for reviewing and evaluating ideas so you can allocate sufficient internal resources and be 100% transparent with your customers about the status of their ideas.
- Design and develop the online community. Dell uses the [Salesforce.com](#) software platform, but other solutions, such as [IdeaScale](#), are also available.
- Promote the community with your customers. Invite them to contribute. Post questions to spur their thinking.
- Celebrate great ideas. Communicate ideas in action and give credit where credit is due.

BEST PRACTICES

Based on our experience with Dell IdeaStorm and conversations with small- and medium-size business owners, we've identified several best practices for crowdsourcing, such as:

- Make sure you have support from senior leadership before starting this type of program. This can't be "for show" or for publicity value. The company must be ready to seriously consider all ideas and be genuinely open to change.
- You may not be able to implement every idea your customers request, but you can still build goodwill by communicating transparently about why you can't implement an idea. Through an open conversation and a little give and take, you're also more likely to reach a mutually beneficial solution.
- Don't limit this to customers. Think about creating a crowdsourcing community to solicit ideas from your employees, as Dell has done with EmployeeStorm.

CASE

[Seventh Generation](#), a leading green consumer products company, used a crowdsourcing approach to design an eco-friendly diaper bag as part of its [Wee Generation](#) campaign. Mommies, children and leading environmental experts collaborated to design a state-of-the-art, limited edition bag, which Seventh Generation now sells. One hundred percent of the profits are donated to the non-profit organization, Healthy Child Healthy World.

ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SMALL BUSINESS

Visit www.facebook.com/dellsocialmedia to read all eight guides written by Dell's Small Business and Communities & Conversations teams:

- Part 1: Learn to Listen
- Part 2: Join the Conversation
- Part 3: Start a Blog
- Part 4: Tap into Twitter
- Part 5: Crowdfund Your Next Big Idea
- Part 6: Harness the Power of Facebook
- Part 7: Share Photos and Videos Online
- Part 8: Measure Your Success Online

We hope you will join this Facebook community, share your own ideas, and continue the conversation with Dell and small businesses around the world.

A series of light gray, wavy lines that flow across the bottom half of the page, creating a sense of movement and connection.