

Market to consumers (not just Millennials) via social media

BY KYRA GEMBERLING

HIGH POINT — Contrary to popular belief, when it comes to social media usage, it's not just about Millennials.

In fact, 74% of online adults use social networking sites, according to a 2014 research study on social networking from the Pew Research Internet Project. And while it's not surprising that 89% of 18- to 29-year-old Internet users use social media, it's worth noting that social media is used by 82% of Internet users ages 30 to 49; 65% of those ages 50 to 64 and 49% of those ages 65 and older.



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"We certainly see that Millennials are savvier in using social media," said Marsha Everton, principal corporate director and advisor at AIMSights, a market research firm specializing in generational marketing. "Yet we also see that Boomers especially are adapting to a lot of these technologies very rapidly. They're behind the Millennials, but not far. Things

are definitely changing."

So what does this mean for the furniture industry?

According to Everton, it means that furniture retailers and manufacturers must realign their marketing to address consumers' evolving media habits. "You need to figure out what the stories of your company are and what makes your products special," she said. "That will resonate more with your customers."

West Elm, a growing urban lifestyle brand of Top 100 furniture retailer Williams-Sonoma, has cultivated a distinct brand personality and has looked to express that across a wide range of social media platforms, with each having a carefully tailored message.

On Instagram, photos featuring the retailer's clean-lined, edgy products are showcased in darker, muted rooms with bright sparks of color. Many photos include pets to personalize the products and show consumers how trends can be incorporated into their home life.

On YouTube, smartly dressed West Elm buyers introduce themselves and guide the viewer on choosing the best lighting for an industrial bedroom or selecting the right leather furniture. The tone of each video is conversational and direct to make the viewer feel like he or she is talking to a close friend.

Everton stressed matching the message to the platform is critical. The goal is not always to bring consumers in to the store, but to get them to share

your message. "If customers buy into your story and if they love it, they're going to tell your story to other people," she said. "Social media is basically a tool for sharing stories."

One furniture player that looks to do this is family-owned Top 100 furniture retailer Art Van Furniture. On Facebook, posts about promotions are often outnumbered by heartwarming stories showcasing Art Van's charity efforts in the community. One post shows a photo of a teenage cancer survivor sitting on a plush brown sectional sofa in his comfortably decorated "man cave."

On Pinterest, the retailer's community involvement continues to be showcased with a board of fun

#SofaSelfies as customers of all ages gather together on sofas to take a photo. Smiling participants look comfortable and at-home while piling onto a bright red upholstered sofa with friends and family.

While specific tactics vary by retailer and supplier, Everton emphasized that the key to being successful in social media is understanding that it is not one size fits all.

"A lot of businesses have this 'check the box' mentality: 'Website, check.' 'Facebook, check.' 'Twitter, check,'" she said. "That's doing you no good. If you're out there just screaming at your customers rather than giving your customers content that's shareable and listening as much as you're telling, it's not going to work."

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Wood resources: Online sales are growing part of business

BY THOMAS RUSSELL

HIGH POINT — Wood furniture resources view online sales as a growing part of their business and one that will continue to grow as long as it is managed effectively through sales support, customer service, and consumer access to product information.

Whether they are selling through online retailers such as Amazon and Wayfair or through the websites of brick and mortar customers, many also view the online channel as a way to promote their brands in the marketplace.

For case goods resource Stanley Furniture, a key is to provide information about the product online, but drive consumers to see and touch the product at their local independent retailer.

On its website, Stanley identifies a number of e-tailers that sell its products online, including Wayfair, Hayneedle and Home Click to name a few. But another important feature of its site is its dealer locator, which directs users to a local retailer.

"Our view is that the thing a brand can do best when a consumer starts shopping online is create demand for the brand and

refer the consumer to a local retailer who offers the product and offers excellent service," said David Petersen, vice president of marketing.

To help make consumers' selection process easier, Stanley aims to provide as much information and photography as possible on the Stanley website.

"One of the things to remember is that the Internet isn't just about the transaction, it is about communicating all this information about what the consumer needs to make sure this is the best value for them," Petersen noted. "There is so much more to the process than the transaction.... The Internet has moved on from being just a place where transactions are made to one where lots of information is being communicated."

Dan Masters, president of accent furniture and lighting resource Stein World, said the company sells through e-tailers such as Amazon and Hayneedle and also through the websites of traditional brick and mortar retailers.

He did not say how much of the company's sales are done online, but did say that its online sales grew more than 20% last year, compared to sales that were just

slightly up at its traditional brick and mortar retailers.

As Stanley has done with its pricing, he said that an important part of this strategy has been to establish an Internet pricing policy that determines an acceptable minimum price structure for products sold online.

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"We have established a fair floor price for our product — that tells our dot-com partners what is the minimum acceptable pricing we can see online," he said. "If we see people violating that, we contact them and tell them to clean it up and in most cases they do."

Upper-end case goods resource Hek-

man Furniture also has established such pricing as a way to manage its own online strategy. While it did not reveal any specific details involving its online sales or vendors, the company too predicts growth in online sales.

"We want to have an online presence because we feel it's a viable channel of distribution," said Neil McKenzie, director of product development, adding, "I think it will grow proportionate to how the furniture business grows."

Jeff Wallner, president of Powell Home Fashions, declined to reveal specific numbers related to his company's online sales. However, he said Powell's online sales grew in 2014 and called it "definitely the fastest growing segment of our business."

He attributed that success largely to the marketing efforts of online retailers as well as the simplicity of using those sites.

He said the company has found the most success with items that can be shipped via UPS. By having its factories meet specific packaging standards related to items shipped via UPS, it has also minimized returns and thus lowered associated costs of doing business online.