

VIEWPOINT: RHODA MIEL

Balance: A personal touch helps with social media. So does knowing when to be quiet

Social media can be a cesspool. It can also be an open line of communication directly between customers and companies. It all depends on how you use it. Used well, companies can convert social media shares into free advertising. Highlighting employees and work-related perks can help attract talent. Use it poorly, and you can turn off that same talent or those same customers.

It's all about balance. Just as Mom told you to eat your vegetables and not just dessert, it's important to generate a mix of content when posting about your company. And when picking who to follow, it's important to be open to different viewpoints.

This is our third special report on social media in the plastics industry. (We try to avoid

duplicating past individuals and companies on the list.) When going through the list of suggested accounts to follow from both *PN* staff and readers, we try to emphasize those that stand

out. Typically, those accounts feature a personal take on business, shine a light on employees or celebrate connections to the community.

There are a lot of accounts out there that mostly consist of reposts of content from elsewhere. There are also accounts that haven't been updated in months or even years. I've run across more than a few that



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have one post from several years ago — from organizations that I know are very active in the industry elsewhere.

It's not surprising that LinkedIn is the most popular platform for the industry. *Plastics News*' Sarah Kominek has coverage elsewhere in this issue about companies embracing alternative social media platforms such as TikTok where they can connect with a different audience.

The social media accounts we mention in this week's report are just a slice of what's out there, obviously, but there are a lot more to explore.

I'd suggest to begin by mixing things up. Make sure you don't follow just companies that are in the same business as you. If

you're a maker of blow molded packaging, then be sure to see what thermoformers and injection molders are up to. Perhaps you have common problems you can learn from. Or maybe they're getting into a line that you supplied previously.

Follow groups with a different point of view from you. If you follow plastics industry supporter Chris DeArmitt, consider following someone like Judith Enck or Jan Dell — both of them involved in environmental issues but from a very different perspective. Add both the Plastics Industry Association and Greenpeace or Oceana to balance out what each group is saying.

That's not to say that you have to agree with them. And

you definitely don't need to argue with them. Think of it as opposition research so you can keep up with what arguments may be used against the industry. (With the caveat that sometimes, for your mental health, you've got to mute people every once in a while. Heck, I have family members I love but need to mute on occasion.)

Social media isn't just a tool to get your message out; it's also a stream to bring in new information. But if you're only hearing familiar echoes from friends in the industry who think like you do, then you're probably missing out.

Rhoda Miel is Plastics News' managing editor. Follow her on Twitter @PNRhodaMiel.

PERSPECTIVE

How will boomers exiting the workforce impact business?

With the skilled workforce of baby boomers leaving the manufacturing industry, there is a knowledge gap that is not being handed down but instead replaced with newer technologies such as 3D printers and computer-aided design.

The next generation is less likely to be involved in tool and die machine shop manufacturing, which involves understanding cutting tools, metallurgy, speeds and feeds, setting up CNC, and running fabrication equipment. Fortunately, 3D printing has come along, and the computer-aided design functionality is now part of engineering courses at schools, making it more accessible to younger generations. However, the skills of machinists are not as broad as they used to be, which is a problem for tool and die and mold makers.

While there are advanced manufacturing programs at

community colleges and vocational schools that teach the fundamentals of being a machinist, the employer has to do the rest. According to the National Tooling and Machining Association, the skills gap is a significant concern for the industry, and it is estimated that 3.5 million manufacturing jobs will be available by 2025, but only 1.5 million workers will be qualified to fill them.

The need to have people coming up through the ranks getting trained is essential to have a deeper bench. The pay rates have also changed a lot due to the rising cost of manufacturing.

Can we still engage boomers as consultants once they retire and age out? Firsthand experience suggests it is difficult. An employee who retired at 70 tried to teach a class at the local vocational school but found that the students weren't inter-

ested and didn't have enough math proficiency. With boomers aging out, there will be a lag time for younger workers to catch up. An article by *Forbes* reinforces this situation, suggesting that younger workers may not be interested in working with older consultants, and the older workers themselves may be reluctant to work in a consulting role.

Businesses need to assess whether this will have a short-term or long-term economic impact. Small manufacturing companies will be disproportionately affected. Fewer people want the headaches of owning and running businesses and the broad technical requirements of running a business in manufacturing.

The manufacturing industry must find ways to replace the knowledge and skills that will be lost and encourage younger generations to become involved



PAUL K. STECK is the president of Exothermic Molding Inc. in Kenilworth, N.J., a third-generation family-owned specialty plastics molding company.

especially small manufacturing companies.

Plastics News

1155 Gratiot Ave., Detroit, Mich. 48207
Tel. 313-446-6000 www.plasticsnews.com

KC CRAIN, CEO
CHRIS TAYLOR, vice president and general manager, Global Polymer Group

EDITORIAL
313-446-5869

Editor Don Loepp, 313-446-6767
dloepp@crain.com

Managing editor
Rhoda Miel, rmiel@crain.com

Assistant managing editor
Steve Toloken, stoloken@crain.com

Senior art director Amy Steinhauer

Senior staff reporters
Frank Esposito, 330-703-7290

Jim Johnson, 937-319-0469

Catherine Kavanaugh, 313-446-0346

Staff reporters
Bridget Janis, 517-898-7903

Sarah Kominek, 207-271-7782

Special projects editor Jordan Vitick

Audience engagement editor Erin Sloan

Editorial research coordinator
Hollie Keller, 330-633-2192

Correspondents Stephen Downer, Rebecca Kanthor,
Kent Miller, Jeannie Reall, Anna Flavia Rochas,
Satnam Singh, Kate Tilley, David Vink

Editorial cartoonist Rich Williams

Economics editor Bill Wood

EVENTS AND INTEGRATED MARKETING

Director, conference & event content
Joe Pryweller jpryweller@crain.com

Custom project editor
Christian Davis christian.davis@crain.com

Digital campaign specialist
Quincy Smith quincy.smith@crain.com

Senior events coordinator
DeShonta Dupree deshonta.dupree@crain.com

Email marketing specialist
Meaghan Crawford mcrawford@crain.com

Trade show coordinator
Lindsay Crawford lcrawford@crain.com

Reprint account executive
Lauren Melesio lmelesio@crain.com

ADVERTISING

313-446-6783

Display and classified ads kristin.rentschler@crain.com

Plastic News sales director
John Hickey 260-437-8502 jhickey@crain.com

Advertising and marketing specialist Kristin Rentschler

Regional managers

Tony Antolini 917-705-8252 tony.antolini@crain.com

Peter Bianchi 312-265-6484 pbianchi@crain.com

Linda Hickey 330-576-6536 cell 330-592-4857
lhickey@crain.com

Diane Owen 313-446-0445 downen@crain.com

Sales representative Betsy Connolly
(Non-Endemic and Processor sales)

248-770-8315 bconnolly@crain.com

Benelux, France & Scandinavia
Arthur Schavemaker/Kenter & Co.

tel. 31-547-275005, arthur@kenter.nl

Greater China Lago Poah Yang
M +86 138 1643 7421
lagoipoah.yang@bridgemediacn.com

Germany, Austria, Switzerland & Eastern Europe
Randy Krings/ EuroMedia Connect Ltd.

tel. 49-611-5324-416, pn@emcmedia.de

India representative Bhupal Potdar
tel. 91-98211-51035, bhupalpotdar@gmail.com

Italy representative Fabio Potesta
tel. 39-10-5704948, info@mediapointsrl.it

Japan representative Yutaka Mogi/Tandem Inc. tel.
81-3-3541-4166, y.mogi@tandem-inc.com

Classified sales manager Betsy Connolly
248-770-8315 bconnolly@crain.com

Director of Media Services Sam Abdallah
313-446-0400 sabdallah@crain.com

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