

# Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Strategic Online Advantage & Advocacy: Are your customers your evangelists?

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company



## AUTHOR

**Jason Rudman**

Director, OPENForum.com,  
American Express OPEN

## Innovation and Immediacy through Social Media: The Evolution of OPEN Forum

The rapid evolution of social media over the last two years has significantly increased the opportunities we all have to make more direct connections with our customers. At American Express OPEN, it's meant a shift in not only how we communicate with our customers, but how we think about creating value for them. It has also greatly accelerated our focus on timing, both in how we gather feedback and how quickly we respond.

In a Web 2.0 world, customers expect immediate response to their questions and issues. The tremendous upside for marketers is that you can discover issues and respond to them much more quickly than before. And, you can involve your customers in the process, helping to spur innovation. If some solutions aren't perfect, your customers can help you identify improvements. These are among the lessons we have learned with OPEN Forum, our online community for small business owners.

### STARTING CONVERSATIONS

When we launched OPEN Forum in 2007, one of our immediate goals for the platform was to facilitate online the "networking effect" we saw offline at live events — this was prior to truly understanding the power "social media" could have in transforming the way we do business.

What we knew in 2007 was that our customers told us of the enormous benefits they got from exchanging insights with

other business owners at the offline events. To replicate that online, we experimented with a Web component to a live event, encouraging those watching online to post questions to the hosts. While there were some teething issues with the technology, we still found this to be an eye-opening, insightful experience. Rather than waiting to talk to the hosts, the "guests" started having conversations with each other, real peer-to-peer interaction.

This truly "ah-ha" moment inspired us to develop OPEN Forum as an online meeting space where business owners

could connect and share ideas. We were on to something with the strategy, but then realized that our execution required work — a simple "build it, they will engage" approach wouldn't work. Why? Because to get our customers talking, we needed a conversation starter, and it had to be relevant, timely and authentic to small business owners.

The solution was incorporating content from leading business bloggers. By providing points for discussion, we saw that the business owners started engaging, and the site traffic grew.

# Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Strategic Online Advantage & Advocacy: Are your customers your evangelists?

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company

## RESPONDING TO OPPORTUNITIES

Social media has also increased the opportunities for collecting and analyzing customer response. We no longer have to rely on traffic and click-throughs, but can expand our analysis to include engagement metrics like comments and discussions. We can also take a more qualitative approach, looking at not just how much is said but what is being said.

The benefit of this quantitative approach became clear to us at the beginning of the macroeconomic changes in September 2008. Many business owners were questioning what the crisis in the financial markets would mean to them and how they should react. In response to this “crisis-tunity,” we created the “New Economy” blog on OPEN Forum.

We essentially changed the site experience “overnight.” We recognized the rapid growth in questions and comments related to the topic, and we organized our resources and partners, including our bloggers, to produce a new section for the site. The time we took from when we had the idea to when we published the first blog post was less than 10 hours, an accomplishment that further demonstrated the benefits of the platform for both our customers – and us. The New Economy blog helped drive a 650% increase in traffic to OPEN Forum.

An increase in unique visitors gave us the opportunity to take a more collaborative, Web 2.0 approach toward future development. Given the speed with which Web 2.0 requires you to evaluate and adjust, we started to think about the next version of the site and how we could further facilitate conversations among small business owners.

We started by integrating customers’ feedback and suggestions into our planning and design of the new OPEN Forum, which launched this summer. One of the needs they helped us unearth was to be able to find other business owners by specific industries or geographies. So we

## THE “NEW ECONOMY” BLOG ON OPEN FORUM

The screenshot shows the OPEN Forum website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Home', 'Finance', 'Marketing', 'Innovation', 'Leadership', and 'Management'. A search bar is on the right. Below the navigation, there are several content sections. On the left, there's a 'MORE GREAT CARD OPTIONS' section listing American Express cards like 'The Gold Card from OPEN', 'SimplyCash Business Card', 'Plum Card', and 'Starwood Preferred Guest Business Credit Card'. Below that is a 'FEATURED SMALL BUSINESS EXPERTS' section with profiles for Anita Campbell, Guy Kawasaki, and others. The main content area features a blog post titled 'As The World Turns..Inside Out' by John Battelle of SearchBlog, dated October 1st, 2008. The post discusses the challenges of navigating the economy and the author's perspective on running a small business.

developed a proprietary tool – the Connectodex – that helps business owners find and connect with each other.

We then invited a number of customers to participate in beta testing, which helped us identify some improvements just prior to launch. Through their involvement, we made changes to the content organization as well as to the tool that enables them to upload their logos to their profiles. And we continue to incorporate their feedback into the ongoing evolution of the site.

## BRIDGING THE “SOCIAL MEDIA IQ” GAP

An important lesson we learned during the testing and launch of the site was that while many small business owners seem to have a high “relationship IQ” — that is, an innate ability to meet and talk to people – they have low “social media IQ,” meaning they may understand the potential social media holds for growing their businesses, but are unsure as to where or how to start.

OPEN Forum was designed to help business owners find information and connections that can help them grow their businesses, and helping them to develop their social media IQ has become part of that goal. We’ve been building into OPEN Forum content and tools to educate them on social media. We want them to use OPEN Forum as an entry point to using social media and developing a comfort level.

On the flip side, there are many business owners with advanced social media skills; they’re highly engaged on OPEN Forum, Twitter and other social media platforms. Our goal is to provide value to both groups. In July, when we unveiled the new OPEN Forum, we also introduced @openforum, American Express’s first foray onto Twitter.

We’re also looking to provide additional opportunities for our customers to increase their exposure. In October, we launched OPEN Forum Pulse,

# Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Strategic Online Advantage & Advocacy: Are your customers your evangelists?

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company

an online experience that aggregates the Twitter feeds of some of the most-followed business owners, making it easier to find and follow them. We did this to create another way for them to connect with each other and to help them build visibility.

Adding more opportunities for our customers to build connections and exposure are some of the steps we've taken in the evolution of OPEN Forum in the past six months. As previously stated, social media has enabled us to recognize these opportunities and respond much more quickly than we had been able to before. Obviously, thoughtfulness and flexibility are also important. With OPEN Forum, we plan to maintain these attributes so we can continue to innovate and add more value for our customers.

*Jason Rudman, Director of OPENForum.com Strategy and Planning, leads the team responsible for the content strategy and capabilities development of OPENForum.com, which has received several industry accolades including the IAB's MIXX Award in 2008, and acknowledgement as a Webby Award Honoree for Best Business Blog in 2009. An employee of American Express since 2000, he previously worked directly for the President of OPEN to develop and implement business strategies, priorities and drive growth.*

## NEW OPEN FORUM PULSE AGGREGATES TWITTER FEEDS

The screenshot displays the OPEN Forum Pulse website. At the top, it says "OPEN Forum Pulse" with a tagline: "Harnessing the Power of [twitter](#) for Small Businesses, Part of the OPEN Forum Experience". Navigation links include "Industry", "Tweets", "Links", "FAQ's", "About", and "Follow OPEN Forum on Twitter". A "Sign in with Twitter" button is present, along with a "Twitter Login" button. The main content area is titled "What small businesses are doing right now" and includes a search bar for a particular business and a dropdown menu to browse by industry type. Below this, a list of tweets is shown, each with a profile picture, name, and text. The tweets include:

- SpyderWorksInc** reading Looking at the Micro vs. the Macro in Design <http://tinyurl.com/ylogjob> about a minute ago by Spyder Works Inc, Business and Management Services
- mike2977** A bona fide cash flow generator in a tight economic environment: <http://www.healthymatrix.net> about a minute ago by Healthy Matrix, Retailer
- SmallBizPRXpert** Small business, your chance to pitch your story to media for FREE <http://bit.ly/2W7EQX> 2 minutes ago by Cascade Communications, Business and Management Services
- mzkagan** Just sent out invites 2 next #unfiltered Lunch & Learn @ the new W Hotel Boston <http://unfiltered3.eventbrite.com/YUM> 2 minutes ago by Espresso, Business and Management Services
- marketinghuddle** Can SMB Owners Make Social Media Useful?: Though the buzz is strong, a study released last month from Citibank and G... <http://bit.ly/2TaskKk> 4 minutes ago by MarketingHuddle LLC, Business and Management Services

On the right side, there is a "Featured Business" section for "happier.com" with a "Follow" button and a description. Below that is a "Top Links" section with several links related to Twitter and social media. At the bottom right, it says "Fresh Insights From: OPEN Forum".