

Is Your Company Cool Enough?

In today's business climate, image is more important than ever. That's why Entrepreneurs like Amanda Steinberg are putting theirs to work.



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Whether you like it or not, style has caught up to substance in the modern business landscape. Everyone's got an opinion about what's cool, and those opinions can make or break you, 140 characters at a time. It's like the first day of school at Beverly Hills High and, as a small business, you might be feeling like the gawky new kid from the Midwest. Harder still, it's not enough just to get the popular crowd to like you--now you have to do it without alienating yourself from the edgy kids. Long story short: You're not getting anywhere until you can establish yourself as cool, because when it comes to business, cool equals cash.

But what makes products, software, websites, brands or companies cool? Should you go viral on Twitter or YouTube? Can you cash in by attracting other cool people to become

evangelists on your behalf, or is it possible to gain top search engine rankings (and robust sales) by blogging?

To uncover the secrets of cool, we sought out several leading experts, a mega-preneur and two growth-track entrepreneurs. The results may surprise you: Coolness--and the hefty revenues that come with it--is attainable, even for "nobodies" on a skimpy budget.

Cool by Design: Different Strokes for Different Folks

According to Peter Gloor , MIT research scientist and co-author of *Coolhunting* and *Coolfarming* , the first thing you have to be aware of is that "cool" has different meanings to different audiences. Per Gloor, coolhunting is about identifying the right cool people--those who would be inclined to use or promote your product or service anyway. Next, take the time to discover what drives these cool people. Check out the competition and identify leaders and fan pages. Once you've picked out a few popular or very connected people, you have several options. As a "lurker" you can simply observe what the popular people are doing and opining about, and see how the conversations and comments unfold. This quality Intel can be used to tweak existing products or develop new ones, and can also yield valuable insight into smart communications, promotions and ad campaigns.

Gloor advises taking the next step carefully: inviting an identified cool leader to try your product or service (for free, of course). You can also connect with a particular cool leader (and your target audience) via a contest, offering a meaningful or cool first prize that resonates with the specific audience. Gloor says it's important to know the attributes of coolness that are associated with your specific brand. Some Mercedes attributes, for example, are fancy, expensive and high-quality.

Capturing Cool through Problem solving

The story about Zappos' birth is a classic example of how one man created an amazingly cool online shoe company (which is now a highly successful online apparel, shoes, housewares, eyewear and accessories firm) by solving a personal problem. Nick Swinmurn couldn't find the shoes he was looking for, no matter where he went. Some stores had the right size but the wrong color, others the correct color but not his size. He went home, surfed around online and still had no luck. He resolved to become the best online shoe retailer in the country, because he foresaw the immense growth of online business. Today the company is headed up by Tony Hsieh, who expanded the company's deliverables (and attracted devoted clients) through a service-focused business model. Hsieh has a decidedly simple take on becoming a favorite of the masses. "Don't worry about being 'cool'. Create a product or service that changes peoples' lives in a positive way, makes an emotional impact and is easy for people to tell their friends about. The rest will take care of itself."

Cooking Up Cool by Pursuing a Personal Passion

Molly Wizenberg is a perfect example of someone who has profited (albeit circuitously) from doing exactly what Hsieh recommends. She has not spent time worrying about marketing her product in any kind of intentional way. In fact, her product was (and still is) totally free. By design, she doesn't get a penny of ad revenue from her top-ranked food blog, Orangette , but in a *Julie & Julia* turn of events, she met her husband--and scored a book deal to boot--via her personal passion for creatively opining about food, daily life, and family and friend gatherings (along with her versions of many great recipes) in her humorous food blog.

Molly's coolness (and the global number of Orangette's avid followers) grew totally exponentially and organically through her commitment to writing honestly and

thoughtfully about things that interested her. "It's not about what you think people want to hear," says Wizenberg, who has been traversing the country for *A Homemade Life*, her first kitchen-centered living and recipe book. To Wizenberg, her blog's coolness (and resulting popularity) were a direct byproduct of her authenticity, because, she says, that's what savvy consumers are drawn to. Her life narratives, which happen to include striking photos and tantalizing recipes, are brimming with honesty and emotional grabs. "We love unlikely stories, so there's so much more interest in a business that came out of the blue. we are attracted to people who are doing what they love."

Cool Success via Value

David Meerman Scott, an acclaimed marketing strategist and author of *World Wide Rave*, has some simple, strong advice for every CEO and small-business owner looking to make their companies, products or brands the next cool thing.

"Most companies don't focus on what's required--they talk about themselves and their stupid products or services. The truth is people don't care about your products or services. They do care about themselves and solving problems, and they also care about being cool, about being first." Per Meerman Scott, stop talking about yourself and think about what your buyer personas' (target markets') problems might be and how you can create something that is compelling (with mass distribution possibilities) like an e-book, a YouTube video or a blog.

Meerman Scott says the new rules of going viral include a certain lack of control. "Give up the idea that people will talk about you in your own terms. They are going to talk about you in their terms." And think strategically; increase your chances of other people talking about you by removing any barriers to them sharing (the free e-book, YouTube video, blog post). Avoid any registration requirements (data-capturing mechanisms like name and e-mail address fields) and eliminate funky formats. Meerman Scott says simple

is best. He should know--his *New Rules of Viral Marketing: How Word-of-Mouse Spreads Your Ideas for Free* e-book has been downloaded more than a million times, leading to more than 6 million hits on his website. The result: more published book sales, and Meerman Scott's main website comes up on the first page of his top keyword phrases (marketing speaker, social media speaker, marketing strategist).

Tapping Cool via Complimentary Connections

CEOs dream about people clamoring for their products or services. Amanda Steinberg's DailyWorth e-mail company, which features financial empowerment advice for women doled out in small portions each day, has experienced rapid growth because of her diligence in seeking out and connecting with compatible sister organizations and captains of industry. Steinberg is fastidious about creating strong financial models, and minimizing wasted time and dollars in her quest to become the next cool resource for women. She has reaped tangible ROI (and a cool opt-in readership base of more than 20,000) through a range of initiatives, including creative advertising swaps. Besides sharing timely advice and what she calls "lifestyle" content, Steinberg's tactical and practical initiatives include following and connecting with top financial journalists and industry icons about her company, including tweeting with Suze Orman. That one fleeting connection yielded a flood of new followers and a nice boost to her reader base. She also makes sure her company's editorial content includes info on savvy thought leaders, in a way that directly contributes to her unique brand.

Steinberg also created a personal "Power Women Circle"--a loose network of other cool and influential women running similar daily e-mail companies from whom she gets advice, advertising opportunities and leads. Her smart connections and great input have real merit--the end product resonates with her target market through strong and consistent

branded visuals; clever, conversational banter; timely, researched financial advice; and personal stories.

Apparently Steinberg's active, strategic activities and quality product have paid off--she was recently contacted by Oprah Winfrey's people, who bought a sponsorship position in one of Steinberg's daily e-mails.

No matter what your marketing budget is, you can create cool returns for your company. With practical insight into your target markets, careful strategy, authentic interaction and facilitating simple sharing mechanisms (whether you are selling yourself, your brand, products or services), your company's coolness can be a click away.

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PATTIE SIMONE

As president of Pomona, N.Y.-based marketing-advantage and founder of WomenCentric, Pattie Simone empowers ambitious companies, individuals and entrepreneurs, helping them to develop strategic, integrated, well-branded communications that e...