



Gaining Brand Advocates Through Employee Engagement

 **Penheel
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Marketing solutions for small businesses.

What is a brand advocate?

According to [Webopedia](#), a brand advocate “is a person, or customer who talks favorably about a brand or product, and then passes on positive word-of-mouth (WOM) messages about the brand to other people.”

Those people are often trusted by their friends, family, colleagues, etc. You know them and have seen them in action. They are the ones people turn to about new product purchases.

Think about that time you were getting a new cell phone. You put the notice on your Facebook™ page and asked, “What type of phone should I get?” Answers came onto your page, and you took that advice over any that the brand itself were sharing.

Advocates are also known to defend a brand against negative feedback. Think about those folks you know who will defend a sports team or product they love (or hate). Those too are brand advocates.

It’s not surprising, then, that companies are looking for brand advocates. And, in many cases they are right under our noses. Think about the **employees** within your organization.

While not without possible issues, employee advocacy can be an inexpensive and easy way to increase a company’s social media reach.



Think of it this way...

Employees can be the first, vital link to a long network of person-to-person shares.

According to [HootSuite](#), “Increasing the number of starting points for social sharing, a company greatly improves its chances of viral marketing success.”

What to consider?

All employees should be asked to assist with the social sharing of your company’s content; however, having a **social media policy** in place first is recommended.

Be willing to share your thought leaders with the world. Remember, just because the person is not a company executive or partner doesn’t mean they have limited expertise or lack networking skills.

Team members with specialized skills, such as a technical expert, is considered pretty credible. Increasing exposure for thought leaders via social media helps to increase their personal brands as well.

Consider those hot, up-and-comers in your organization. Are they chomping at the bit for more opportunities and exposure? Here is a chance to give them a platform to expand their brand, while helping you to increase yours.

How do you do it?

Ask them to **write blogs, share social media posts** with their network, **add links** to your company’s social networks in email signatures and social media profiles, and ask them to participate in content creation—whether that’s a blog post, video, data, photo, and more.

A Zuberance whitepaper states that brand advocates are worth at least 5x more than average customers. This is because they spend more and their advice drives sales.



10 Social Media Policy Questions

1. What are the social **media policy goals**, e.g., setting regulation, identifying crisis communication teams, providing sharing guidelines for staff, leaders, and people of influence, etc.?
2. How will the **policy be enforced** across the organization, e.g., who will be monitoring activity and determining when to step in if something goes wrong or highlight it when something goes right?
3. How may **employees be leveraged as brand ambassadors**? This must be clearly stated so they know what they can and cannot say/do. One of the best ways to do this is to provide messages they may share via a monthly content calendar posted in a company-wide Intranet.
4. Who will **oversee the social media policy updates and distribution**, as well as determine the social networks your company should be using?
5. Who defines and **establishes the tone** of the messages and brand consistency?
6. How will employees know what **information may be shared**, e.g., confidential and proprietary content must be defined? In some cases you may not want to share information.
7. What media will be used and who will **monitor conversations** about the brand on social channels? Some of this may be addressed with online alerts and with social media monitoring tools, such as [HootSuite®](#), [SalesForce Marketing Cloud®](#), and others.
8. What methods will be used and who will **respond to consumers** reaching out to the brand via social media channels? Having a clearly defined workflow is key. Remember, a viral, positive response may be as overwhelming and time consuming as a crisis.
9. Who is **authorized**—staff, teams, geography, regions, etc.—to actively post on the company’s behalf?
10. What determines a **social media crisis**? Having a clearly defined workflow for this process is key. No one wants to try to think of it when the crisis is actually happening.

Motivation

What motivates an employee to be a brand advocate for his/her organization?

The same thing that motivates them to do more than going through the daily motions of their job, such as:

- Feeling engaged in his/her work;
- Wanting to contribute to the greater good of the company;
- Desiring a sounding board for ideas;
- Increasing face-time with other influencers;
- Influencing the goals and strategy of your organization; and
- Developing and growing a personal brand.

How to Identify an Advocate/Influencer

When looking for a brand advocate within your organization, think about the employees who seem fully engaged; who align with your organization's mission, vision, and culture; and those who are proud to be part of your company.

Creating an Advocate

At times it's not easy to get employees to go above and beyond their normal, day-to-day activities. Those who are already going above and beyond are often the quickest people to turn into brand advocates. They can then have a great impact on bringing others along for the ride.

Think about employee development programs and natural mentors who have a positive impact on your organization's environment. They don't have to be executives or top-tier management. They just need to have the ability to engage others in a positive way.

The **National Brand Research Institute (NBRI)** identified the following six traits of engaged employees.

They:

1. Believe in their company;
2. Have a desire to make things better (not just company-related things, but world-related things);
3. Get the bigger picture;
4. Respect others and are helpful;
5. Go the extra mile; and
6. Stay updated on industry news.



Employee Advocacy Programs

Five Considerations

There are five considerations to take into account when starting an employee advocacy program, such as:

- 1. Programs and Tools:** The goal here is to take the guess work out of the process and tools needed, while formalizing expectations for all those involved. It helps to reduce “gray-area confusion.”
- 2. Methodology and Length:** How long will the program take place? Will there be a recruiting process? Will an HR component be included with goals and metrics? How will the first group of employees be chosen?
- 3. Accountability and Motivation:** Rather than creating a monetary incentive, consider creating measurable goals incorporated into success metrics. Consider building advocacy into employees’ job descriptions.
- 4. Governance:** Many aspects should be built into an employee advocacy program, which is one reason why a social media policy is so important.

Ask yourself these questions before launching the program:
 - What happens when an employee advocate does the wrong thing?
 - Are employees trained on the existing social media policy—if there is one?
 - Are you teaching best practices when it comes to content social sharing?
- 5. Culture:** Does your organization have the type of culture that would support this program? Are you willing to let employees be thought leaders? Are you prepared to change the culture or process if needed? Are you willing to accept positive and negative feedback from employees about the program? Most of all, do employees believe in what they are doing, or is it just another mundane task?

“77% of consumers are more likely to buy a product when they hear about it from friends and family.”

~ Nielsen, 2013 Global New Products Report

The Models

There are **two schools of thought** when it comes to employee advocacy programs, those that *enable*, increasing reach and participation, and those that must be *contained* due to regulatory considerations, such as in the financial services, legal, insurance, or medical professions.

ENABLING MODEL

In this model, employees are encouraged to participate, but are not doing it on their own. They are offered guidance, support from leadership, and a predetermined messaging “tone.” A technical and procedural infrastructure is often followed.

- **Teamwork:** For an internal advocacy team to be effective, workflow, communication channels, and coordination are key. Technology may be leveraged to help pull content from the outside, such as industry updates, important news, or regulations that could affect your customers and clients. Creating an internal team or an external agency of news seekers and content writers is helpful when gathering external content.
- **Content Generation:** Avoid letting advocates simply share any content they think is suitable. Create a content strategy that aligns with your organizational goals and marketing strategy. This is often tackled by the marketing and public relations teams; however, if you do not have the luxury of those teams, consider working with a consultant who understands your industry and knows what appropriate content looks like and how it can be shared across many social platforms.
- **Culture:** For any advocacy program model to work, the organizational culture must be one where employees feel respected and enabled. If this is not the case, no matter what technology or procedures are used, it will fail. If an enabled culture exists, it is championed by leadership. If there is a pool of engaged employees, there is a greater chance for success.
- **Brand:** Many employees might not be able to tell you what differentiates your company from its competitors, which can be troubling. When working in this model, it's imperative that advocates know the brand value proposition and understand the competitive advantage.

The Models, cont.

CONTAINED MODEL

Regulated professions, such as financial services, insurance, legal, and medical, must follow certain guidelines when leveraging social media methodologies to promote the organization or firm.

In these cases leveraging tools and technology to help “listen” and “monitor” what is being said, commented on, and shared by employees is extremely important. Security is the foundation for this model.

Take these steps into consideration:

- **Social Media Management tool(s):** These tools allow you to monitor your brand on many different social media platforms, including keywords, influencers, employees, competitors, and more. It provides a central control system where social media staff may monitor what’s happening throughout the day. Many current systems also allow for content archiving for compliance-related requirements.
- **Social Media Policy:** This policy must outline what is allowed by all staff, including leadership, in email, social media, text messaging, video, etc. Leave no stone unturned in this area. If your staff is communicating with clients, it must be documented according to some industry regulatory bodies. Engage your legal, human resources, information technology, and risk-management teams to help with the development, implementation, and management of the policy.
- **Training:** I’ve often heard people say, “I give this to the younger folks, they know what Facebook is.” My response is, “Do they understand the industry regulations and your firm’s brand well enough to defend it when the time comes?” Providing training to all in-house staff should be a requirement to help them understand the policy and workflow when something arises—good or bad.
- **Documentation:** Regulated industries have serious documentation requirements. Continuous archiving of all incoming and outgoing messaging, plus reporting and analytics, helps administrators to follow the digital trail.

The Checklist

- ❑ **Prepare Internal Teams:** Before you can run, you must walk. Preparing internal teams, such as legal, human resources, compliance, marketing, etc. for this program, and gaining buy-in from a leader or champion is key to the program's success.
- ❑ **Identify Credible Advocates:** Look to those people within your organization who know a lot about your industry, are interested in your business' growth and products, and who are connected to many via social media channels. Be sure to learn about that person's online persona before unleashing them with your brand.
- ❑ **Don't Force the Relationship:** An advocacy program is often voluntary. If you force people to become part of it, they may soon resent the extra effort. Be sure to offer several solutions on how they might get involved. Help them to understand how this program not only benefits the company, but also themselves.
- ❑ **Incentivize, But Don't Pay:** Recognize those who participate in the program with online and in-house thank you's. Share information about key events they can talk about on social channels. Asking them to demo products before others (beta testing)—provided there are clear guidelines about how and when they may share information.
- ❑ **Provide Communication Tools:** Develop ways advocates can talk with each other internally. A place where they can share information and discuss topics among themselves in a secure environment. Also provide guidance on the tools to be used, the tone of the messages, how content may be shared; and most of all what it means to be a brand advocate. Take into account there may be feedback that should be acknowledged, and sometimes it's negative. Embrace the feedback. Act on it. Share it with others.
- ❑ **Identify and Share Success Metrics and Measurement:** If you do not plan to measure the success of an advocacy program, then why have one? Ways to measure it's success are: (1) increased leads; (2) requests for more information; (3) influencers being asked to speak at events; (4) higher attendance at webinars, conferences, etc.; and (5) higher social media engagement.

Remember Your Assets

When it comes to social media, remember you probably have a lot of assets already working for you. There's no sense reinventing the wheel.

Content is king. Keeping content fresh and "shareable" is important for brand advocates. Review your website and blog. Refresh any outdated content with new updates, photos, headlines, and keywords. If you don't have a blog, that's okay, consider a [paperli](#) newsletter that filters content to you from across the Internet. You'll begin forming ideas quickly. Engage those advocates to write about topics.

Repurpose company photos, ads, video, and more to share in social media. Redevelop it in interesting ways. Create infographics that depict statistics you feel your customers would be interested in. You can do this easily with [Visual.ly](#), an easy-to-use tool to create visual content that may be shared via social channels.

Limited-Time Promotions are a great way to engage fans. Referral discounts are usually popular with existing clients. Coupons for a free service, such as a one-hour consultation that is offered only on social media channels is another great idea. Think outside the box. What have your customers been asking for?

Lastly, make **content changes** often. There's nothing more boring than to follow a brand only to have them silent for days or weeks at a time.

"13% of consumers follow a brand on social media channels because of their content."

Crazy Stat: "95% of Facebook wall posts are not answered by brands."

Do-It-Yourself Approach

For those who want to develop an advocacy program in-house, here are some questions to ask before getting started.

- Do we have internal staff with the time to oversee and effectively lead this effort?
- How much time, money, and effort will this initiative take?
- Do we have the internal expertise to create this program, including how to engage, communicate with, and reward advocates?



Resources

Below is a list of resources referenced to write this eBook.

- Jeremiah Owyang, Industry Analyst Altimeter Group. “[Checklist: Develop a Successful Advocacy Program.](#)”
- Zuberance—all about brand advocates and social marketing. “[Brand Advocates Solutions Checklist.](#)”
- HootSuite—Social Media Management tool. “[Putting Social to Work for Business.](#)”
- TopRank—Social Media Bloggers. “Mold Your Engaged Employees Into Brand Advocates.”
<http://www.toprankblog.com/2013/01/engaged-employees-brand-advocates/>
- Buddy Media “10 Ways to Engage Your Fans”.
- Stats provided by Awareness, “[6 Mind-Blowing Social Media Stats](#)”



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