SOCIAL MEDIA TO THE RESCUE? FACEBOOK VERSUS THE ROBOCALLER

Alabama banker's anti-fraud effort drafts social media solution

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Alabama banker Bob Jones has a 70-year-old pharmacist on his board of directors who had been urging him to get their bank onto Facebook. Jones, an open-minded veteran banker, admits to being a bit of a "tech geek," but says he didn't care to get involved with Facebook. He'd seen much of the buzz about Facebook and thought it was a bit silly.

Now, the pharmacist-director's point had been, we've got to get this bank out there where people are. While Jones' United Bank of Atmore, a $481.6 million-assets institution, is well known in its communities, the director felt that the bank needed to get better known to those in its physical footprint who do part of their living in the social media world.

Jones just didn't go for the idea.

As a matter of fact, Facebook is one of the sites that the bank had long been blocking on employee computers.

And then United Bank was hit by a "robocaller" attack.

Putting out a fire

The robocaller scam hit while Jones was attending the ABA's 2011 National Conference for Community Bankers. He'd been in sessions, and received an urgent call from the home office.

Customers had started reporting that they were receiving prerecorded calls from a voice claiming that it was United Bank. The message was a familiar one. There were alleged problems with the person's account, and would they please input some key account information.

Jones and his staff have had experience with natural disasters like hurricanes as well as attempted frauds, so they had a pretty good idea of what to do and how to do it.

The bank's staff swung into action, Jones said. A press release was prepared and distributed, a notice was posted on its website , and the bank also asked a local web-only news publication to post what was going on.

It seemed all the bases were covered.

Then something else hit Jones. There was another way to get the word out. And a reason to go down that road.

Spread the word-fast!

Several sessions at the ABA conference had addressed the world of social media and related channels and avenues that even community banks need to explore.

One speaker had warned the bankers that, for all they were spending on traditional marketing and promotion, consumers tend to trust the input of friends-including those made online in social media-over any message from an actual provider like a bank.

Suddenly a bell went off in Jones' head.

He pulled out his mobile and called the bank.

He told his head of IT to remove the bank's block on Facebook and asked his lieutenants to relay the word to bank employees:

If you've got a Facebook page, please tell folks what had happened and why they shouldn't cooperate with the robocaller. If you haven't got one, consider starting one to help get the word out.

Two days later, Jones was having a drink with another banker and ABA Banking Journal's Steve Cocheo after a long conference day. He'd told the story you've just read, and then he added this:

"And you know, we had hundreds of people get that message through Facebook. Some of them posted thank yous for the warning on the employees' Facebook pages. Others called the bank to say thank you."

He's a convert now. While recognizing that the Facebook outreach with employee's personal pages worked better than an official site might have, he's decided to take the plunge.

When Jones returned from the meeting, he immediately got together with the marketing staff to see about starting an official Facebook page.

One might say that that pharmacist-director had the right prescription after all.

Share your bank's own social media success stories with ABA BJ readers below, or email Executive Editor Steve Cocheo [Bankers only, please.]