

Passionate employees best suited to oversee social media

Mike Friedman directs interactive services for Darden Restaurants. The Orlando-based company owns six restaurant chains including Red Lobster, Olive Garden and LongHorn Steakhouse — that's a lot of people and brands to manage in the social media world.

The family of restaurants uses a mix of people to manage online marketing. The way Darden keeps things in order is by making sure the people who represent the company have a passion for the product and social media.

"Our consistency is only letting people who understand the brand speak on behalf of [it]," said Friedman, whom we met at a South Florida Interactive Marketing Association event last



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week. "In some cases that's our marketing team, that's our PR team, that's our restaurant managers, that's our chefs."

The event, organized by SFIMA and BGT Partners, an Aventura interactive marketing agency, brought in The Nielsen Company's Pete Blackshaw to talk about how to handle business in this age of social media.

Blackshaw is in charge of

Nielsen's digital Web strategy, so he understands the enormous challenge and opportunity in social media. Still, Blackshaw thinks the first move is for everyone to take a step back.

"Before they think about social media they need to think about fundamentals of how they interact and care for consumers," he said. That's even more important now, with thousands of conversations going on at the same time.

For example: Are the people who manage corporate Twitter accounts connected to the call center causing the complaints?

Once that strategy is clear, Blackshaw doesn't think companies have to go outside to create a social media presence. He said companies can easily follow

Darden's example by finding people within.

"I've worked with hundreds of brands. It starts with people who are most passionate," he said. "The people that are most passionate often have the most experience, hands-on."

And even if you start small, be prepared for it get bigger.

"It's good for companies to see these people as catalysts," he said.

How does your company manage its social media strategy? Weigh in online at our blog Poked, <http://miamiherald.typepad.com/poked>.

Poked is a column about netiquette, social media and the business world. E-mail us if you have a vexing question or need advice.