▶ **TIME TO GET SOCIAL**

In 2009, when I ditched an ad agency career in Los Angeles to move to Napa Valley, I didn't expect the social media scene to be as sleepy as the grapes come wintertime. While former clients like Sony, Warner Brothers and Nestle were pouring thousands of dollars into social media and dumping even more loot into all-digital ad campaigns, local wineries scoffed at the mention of social media infiltrating the wine game. It was mind-boggling, given the stranglehold social media already imposed on businesses outside the Wine Country bubble. But much like the grapes that have won us worldwide acclaim, our industry has again proven it prefers to ripen in its own due time.

Since then, I've witnessed a much different scene. Dismissive comments have been swapped for sentiments like: "If people can't find you online and interact, you might as well not exist," spoken by Alison Crowe, winemaker and partner at Garnet Vineyards. "Social media has moved us to real-time conversations, not something you can get to later," says Jim Sullivan, vice president of public relations and marketing at Castello di Amorosa, who cops to tweeting in the middle of the night and in line at the supermarket to stay constantly connected with consumers all over the world.

For Ashley Teplin, partner at the public relations firm Teplin+Nuss, social media is a way to control the visual statement. "People are so visually inclined. It takes 20 seconds to look at a beautiful photo or a wine and food pairing. People are more apt to do that than read, as attention spans for the general population change. To be able to look at a visual, and interact, has presented a great opportunity for brands. That's the biggest thing with small wine brands: owning their online voice," she says.

Sullivan also has observed the power of the visual play. "It's not all about the number of fans and followers, it's about engagement. Are we engaging with the right people? In our photo contests, we've found engagement levels to be very high." Sullivan started implementing photo-centric social media campaigns in 2010 and 2011 with the help of Wildfire. "Since then, we've developed our own on Instagram, and the number of people who liked our page went from 800 to 13,000." Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker and general manager at Chimney Rock Winery, says, "We started with Facebook and Twitter in 2009. We weren't sure what the benefits would be, but it seemed glaringly obvious that these could be new and exciting ways to communicate with our public. Social media has definitely been effective at driving traffic to the winery, building relationships with wine media and getting people to come to

off-site events."

Dan Donahoe, founder and chairman of Free Flow Wines, adds, "It lets us reach such a huge base of people, including fans of wine on tap, trade professionals and casual wine fans. This is a huge advantage."

At Jordan Winery, the catalyst behind its social media and content marketing strategy—which Lisa Mattson, communications director, believes should go hand-in-hand—spawned from interesting roots. "It was actually the most recent U.S. presidential elections. John Jordan was fascinated by the role that digital/social media played in the elections and decided it was time to bring venerable Jordan Winery, founded in 1972, into the digital fray." Mattson isn't the first I've spoken with to credit the explosion of YouTube as a driver behind the diversification of winery communications. "Being a great storyteller requires more than good wordsmithing in the digital age. It demands that brands tell their stories directly to their customers rather than rely only on media gatekeepers."

She echoes another sentiment shared by others regarding the connection between social media and sales. "Social media and content marketing aren't just sales or brand awareness tools. These are platforms to create meaningful relationships with people online, which—if we do our jobs right with the type of content we create—build trust and loyalty; sales comes naturally from that. We use social media to hopefully enlighten and entertain our customers." And entertain Jordan has done, by poking fun at pop culture with YouTube parodies. Two of the notables, "Blurred Vines" and "Gangnam Style" have each clocked in more than 33,000 views."

The key to social media success, which could change at any second, isn't only about engagement, but relating. Which, when we get right down to it, mimics the strategy that print media took eons ago—enticing readers through common interests. The game changer, current day, being that we can interact with consumers in the same instant we entice them. What once worked in wine marketing is no longer as effective. Educating consumers on the nuances of wine used to present a golden sales opportunity, but it may no longer be enough, according to Mattson. "Extensive wine education videos haven't yielded many views. We tried to do a series where we were teaching consumers about the "Seasons of the Vineyards" and each only got about 300 views."

Teplin regularly makes a case for her clients to get social, though cautions, "Look at the long-term commitment. Don't jump onto something you can't finish. You have to be ready to own it, live it and breathe it. The biggest thing is consistency."

Sullivan agrees, "If someone is talking about you online, you go and engage with them, right

then. It becomes a part of you. It's not like we engage with social media during the hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. You may go home, but you're still engaging with people at 9, 10 or 11'oclock at night."

It seems my Pops was onto something when he preached, "If you're going to do something, stick to it. Being a quitter never pays." Perhaps more eloquently summed up by Teplin, "Social media lets you market yourself and control your voice on a regular basis. It used to be all about getting a score, but that goes away. With social media, you're creating a voice that stands the test of time."