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BRAND

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Six cutting-edge companies are using modern marketing to help vegan businesses succeed and gain maximum exposure.

By Mat Thomas

VEGANISM

IS IT YOUR DREAM to sell your artisanal vegan cheeses around the world, create a knitting empire of non-wool mittens and scarves, or open your own cruelty-free café? Perhaps you've launched a successful Kickstarter campaign to open a vegan soft-serve shop in your hometown, or want to start your animal-rescue non-profit organization. Good for you. Now what's next? In addition to an innovative idea and seed money, your upstart enterprise will need guidance, mentors, design skills, marketing, advertising, and public relations so you can get your amazing venture out into the public eye. After all, if no one knows about your business, how will you be successful?

From excellent web design to top-notch tweets, effective marketing

is crucial for success in today's business world. Having a flat-out fantastic idea is one thing, but knowing how to spread the word about it is another necessary element in broadening your business' (not to mention veganism's) reach. Since these marketing, public relations, and design firms are vegan companies themselves, they know exactly how to market to the tight-knit vegan community—and they share your ethics, too. Vegans are loyal patrons to products and businesses they adore, so investing your money wisely to connect with your customers is a no-brainer. Our consulting experts offer their tips, secrets to success, challenges, and advice for making your business dream a reality.

Chances are you've heard about Coconut Bliss' vegan ice cream, the documentary *Forks Over Knives*—the film that even got Ozzy Osbourne to go vegan—and the outstanding outcomes of Mercy For Animals' brutal undercover investigations. (The public attention from MFA's E6 Cattle Co. video impacted the market price of cattle futures, and the Sparboe Egg investigation resulted in a big economic hit to the factory farm.) But we bet you didn't know that the result of these strides in animal welfare and promoting a plant-based diet stemmed from Evolutus, a Los Angeles-based public-relations firm that is taking these ethical messages to the masses. While there are plenty of public relations and marketing firms that are anything but ethical, Evolutus PR makes veganism a selling point for clients who share a similar commitment to positive social change through media messaging. Gary Smith, who started Evolutus with his wife, Kezia Jauron, in 2006, says, "As vegans, we walk the walk and live the life, so we can translate our client's message into a language that the mainstream press can understand." By promoting clients and getting increasing coverage of veg-friendly stories in the news, Smith hopes Evolutus will persuade even more people to adopt the vegan lifestyle.

EVOLOTUS PR

BEST ADVICE "Work with companies with similar values as you. Evolutus translates its client's message into a language that the mainstream press can understand. People without a real understanding of the issues can't do that."

BIGGEST SUCCESS "Getting undercover investigations from Mercy For Animals into national news, Animal Defenders International's congressional bill to ban traveling circuses, the Fur Free West Hollywood campaign, Beagle Freedom Project's rescues of beagles from animal-testing laboratories, and Stray Cat Alliance's work with feral, stray, and homeless cats. We also ran successful public relations campaigns for *Forks Over Knives*, *Earthlings*, and *Got the Facts on Milk?*"

BIGGEST MISTAKE VEGAN COMPANIES MAKE "Not putting resources in marketing and public relations. Whether you're making films or food, the public and media need to hear about you. If you aren't willing to devote time and money to promoting your work, you're not serious about it."

SOCIAL MEDIA HOW-TO "Social media has been an incredible opportunity to connect and influence others. At least once a week, we hear from someone through Facebook who has gone vegan because of some story we're promoting or a provocative post that made them see the issue of animal rights in a new light."

PLANS FOR 2012 "Promoting *Heal Your Self*, a documentary about people who healed themselves through a vegan diet and positive lifestyle changes, and Ruby Roth's new children's book *Vegan Is Love*."

MORE INFO evolotuspr.com

VEGAN MAIN STREAM

In 2009, Vegan Mainstream, under the helm of Founder Stephanie Redcross, launched in San Diego, CA as a vegan marketing agency designed to work with vegan and vegetarian businesses to connect with consumers. Redcross and her nine employees run a vegan blog network; provide free one-hour marketing webinars every Wednesday to give businesses time-saving tips, strategies, and tools to excel; and offer marketing consultations and services. Through promotional campaigns, VM has increased vegan book sales, product distribution, and online revenue for its clients from 10 to 25 percent in 2011. Redcross and her team are dedicated to making veganism visible everywhere, not just metropolitan hubs. "Imagine vegan retail stores, restaurants, clothing options, and educational materials in every mall or community," says Redcross. We couldn't agree more.

BEST ADVICE "You should test out a new marketing avenue every other month. It not only ensures you don't over-dedicate resources to a project that might not meet expectations, but it also helps an individual or team feel comfortable exploring new marketing channels with limited risk."

BIGGEST SUCCESS "Since most vegan companies are funded by personal savings, family donations, or 401(k)s, the stress of success can be paralyzing. We've found that by offering free webinars, boot camps, and classes, we inspire and help business owners know they are not alone—there's a community and company to support them."

BIGGEST MISTAKE VEGAN COMPANIES MAKE "It's easy to assume that just because your product or service is vegan, that the entire community will flock to your website or store. Businesses need to understand that they will need a diverse and long-term marketing strategy to attract vegans and non-vegans."

SOCIAL MEDIA HOW-TO "Social media is a universal channel for community building, education, collaboration, and recruitment. If someone has a question about being vegan, they can tweet it to the hashtag #vegan and get answers or help. No one has to go vegan alone."

PLANS FOR 2012 "We're launching a vegan marketing guide for new or first-time vegan business entrepreneurs and hosting local seminars for hands-on training. We are also developing a Vstream Zine focused on progress and transformation written by a global network of vegan bloggers, to help vegans and non-vegans know how they can drive change individually, locally, and globally."

MORE INFO veganmainstream.com

VEGAN CUTS

When Groupon, a mass discounting service, launched in 2008, it offered subscribers significant savings on everything from massages to meals. The site spawned a host of similarly minded daily-deal coupon companies, but none focused solely on vegan products until husband-and-wife team Jill Pyle and John Wiseman started Vegan Cuts in 2011. When customers sign up, they receive emails with offers for 25- to 60-percent off 100-percent vegan products. In addition to the deals, VC offers vegan gift guides with discount codes for like-minded companies. Recent deals include a raw snack pack from Twin Cakes Bakery, Vaute Couture vegan T-shirts, and Nicobella organic, fair-trade truffles. Businesses can benefit from partnering with VC by exposing their product to consumers interested in buying animal-free foods, clothing, and beauty products. And for savvy vegans, who doesn't love saving money on truffles, kale chips, and vegan shoes?

BEST ADVICE "Start off on the right foot with a quality product and a positive customer-service experience. Consistently listen and respond to feedback, and thank customers for their patronage."

BIGGEST SUCCESS "We've been selling a large amount of vegan goods in record time, growing a community of thousands of vegans in less than a year, and supporting our partners' Kickstarter campaigns."

BIGGEST MISTAKE VEGAN COMPANIES MAKE "You can't create a product, build a website, and expect people to hand over their credit cards. You need to market yourself through social media, trade shows, veg fests, blogger outreach, and advertising."

SOCIAL MEDIA HOW-TO "Social media makes outreach and education about veganism more affordable and manageable because it allows us to quickly share information with a large audience."

PLANS FOR 2012 "Partner with new vegan businesses to sell their products and create new resources to help people shop vegan and enjoy a cruelty-free lifestyle."

MORE INFO vegancuts.com

As a former purchasing director for national natural-product chains, All Things Vegan Owner Lisa Shapiro saw company after company succeed in getting their goods placed on shelves at the retail level—only to fail when their ambitious product launches flopped for lack of effective planning and promotion. As a solo entrepreneur with more than 25 years of industry experience, Shapiro started ATV in 2011 to help veg-brand clients see the big picture. "Getting customers to buy your product is the ideal outcome, but you need to work simultaneously on getting distributors to pick up your line while getting retailers to commit to carrying it—then the real work starts," she says. Companies that get their products on retailers' shelves still need to navigate and survive a brutally competitive system. A business plan with a detailed budget and cost analysis is therefore essential, because the difference between success and failure often depends on having enough money to weather financial storms.

ALL THINGS VEGAN

BEST ADVICE "Get a business plan and really look at your numbers—production costs, gross margins, packaging/shipping costs, and labor."

BIGGEST SUCCESS "Helping veg brands such as Tofurky, Edward & Sons, and Beyond Eggs reach a larger customer base."

BIGGEST MISTAKE VEGAN COMPANIES MAKE "Shooting from the hip without a budget."

SOCIAL MEDIA HOW-TO "Finding your community has never been easier with social media. It is relatively inexpensive compared to traditional forms of media and marketing."

PLANS FOR 2012 "Get vegan products more widely distributed, assist vegan manufacturers with social media, and help vegan companies get investment money."

MORE INFO allthingsvegan.com

BRANDING TIPS

We asked the expert team at San Francisco-based Vertebrae, Inc. their top five tips for taking a veg business to the next level. Here's what they had to say.



1 HAVE A GREAT PRODUCT.
Be passionate about what you make, and never stop improving it.



2 GET A BACKBONE.
Stand up for what you believe—it'll make you stand out.

THE SPARROW PROJECT

A NY-based publicity experiment founded by Andy Stepanian, one of the defendants in the SHAC7 (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty) trial, the Sparrow Project is proudly radical and subversive. SP uses art, activism, and education to get important but often ignored progressive causes the broader attention they deserve. As SP's publicist, Stepanian strives to make veganism's message more accessible to the general public. "Instead of restricting themselves to the bubble that the vegan community creates for itself, vegan companies need to identify what the general public wants and then veganize that," he says. He gives the examples of vegan businesses such as Joshua Katcher's Brave GentleMan, Leanne Mai-ly Hilgart's Vaute Couture, the graphic identity campaigns of vegan designer Julie Gueraseva, and the package design of So Delicious products that have perfected the model of both giving mainstream consumers and vegans what they want.

BEST ADVICE "Balance invigorating your base while still engaging in creative outreach that brings the vegan message to a wider audience."

BIGGEST SUCCESS "Assisting the Surfrider Foundation and Clean Ocean Action in crafting a viral campaign that derailed the Safe Harbor Energy Atlantic Sea Island proposed project."

BIGGEST MISTAKE VEGAN COMPANIES MAKE "Making the product, package design, and aesthetics bound by the vegan community. Create a cruelty-free alternative that is easily adored by vegans and non-vegans alike."

SOCIAL MEDIA HOW-TO "The speed of social media campaigns can allow your content to go viral, but it is essential that viral campaigns are coupled with tangible interactions with your idea or product."

PLANS FOR 2012 "Promoting the documentary *Vegucated*; working on a campaign to subsidize the Cinnamon Snail, an amazing all-vegan food truck in New York City; and printing a run of vegan message shirts."

MORE INFO sparrowmedia.net

Just outside of San Francisco, in an eco-friendly office space in Sausalito, CA, you'll find the stylish and forward-thinking team behind Vertebræ, a full-service, six-person design and branding firm (along with studio mascot Smokey the cat). Working with vegan businesses such as Allison's Gourmet, V-dog, and VegNews, the team takes the company's brand to the next level of design. Vertebræ partner, brand consultant, and resident style guru Aimee Kilmer explains the process. "We help companies define their identity, personality, and position within the marketplace and compellingly convey that to the world through conceptual design and language." For example, the team worked with Animal Legal Defense Fund, a group of compassionate lawyers, to develop a corporate identity with a new logo (they replaced the "traditional animals with a playful swinging ape and scratching cat to capture the organization's serious, yet affable personality") and is helping In Defense of Animals, an international animal-protection nonprofit organization, create a clear and concise message. Through the staff's efforts, their clients have won national attention and received much-needed re-branding makeovers.

VERTEBRAE, INC.

BEST ADVICE "Stand for what you believe in without fear of judgment."

BIGGEST SUCCESS "Bringing veganism to the mainstream by branding VegNews as a progressive and modern national vegan brand."

BIGGEST MISTAKE VEGAN COMPANIES MAKE "Watering down their message and their mission to appeal to a broader audience."

SOCIAL MEDIA HOW-TO "We don't use social media right now. It's not something we can do half-heartedly. Plus, most of our work comes from client referrals."

PLANS FOR 2012 "Branding V-dog, a cruelty-free dog food company."

MORE INFO vertebrae.us 

Mat Thomas is a San Francisco-based journalist, animal advocate, and freelance marketing copywriter and editor. Read about his business writing at ultrawriting.com and his animal advocacy work at animalrighter.org.

3 FOCUS ON YOUR NICHE. Don't try to be all things to all people.

4 KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE. How will you entertain, surprise, and delight them if you don't know what they want?

5 BE HUMAN. We're all people, so act like a person—preferably a person who others would enjoy interacting with.