



## handle with care

With the right approach, online forums can connect restylers with customers and prospects.



By Phil Sasso

Imagine walking into a neighborhood diner and overhearing a table of people talking about their various restyling projects. You discreetly try to listen from a few booths away as wait for your order.

Finally, the waitress arrives with your meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Then your ears really perk up as you hear one of the guys mention your shop's name ...

"They do great work," he says. You puff up with pride.

"And they're fast," replies another. "I got my car back in just over two days. Last place I went it took almost two weeks."

"I like the shop, but I had a problem with some vinyl graphics," chimes in a third. "You could start to see the vinyl shrinking and the image fading after just four months."

You don't know whether to punch the guy in the mouth, defend your shop, or stay out of sight and start taking notes.

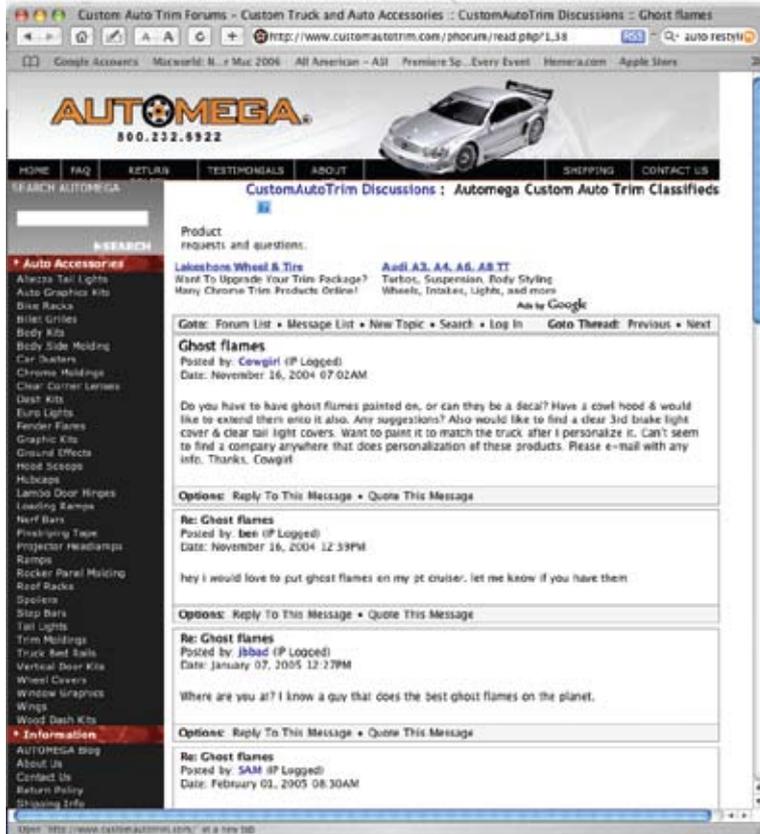
Sound unlikely?

Not as unlikely as you might think. In fact, it may be happening right now. Not in a nearby diner, but in an online forum.

### Online Hangout

Forums are today's Internet version of the 1950s drive-in where guys and gals gather to talk about and show off their rides. The recent popularity of online forums is based on the power of Web 2.0, or more specifically what Internet gurus call *user-generated content*. Internet users are drawn to user-generated content because they tend to value peer opinions more than professional reviews. Today it seems, as Mark Twain once said, "The public is the only critic whose opinion is worth anything at all."

Electronic forums (also known as message boards, discussion groups, bulletin boards, or usenets) have been around in various forms for decades. In fact, I remember sitting up well past midnight



Internet communities such as mail groups and discussion sites can be a powerful tool for restylers—but only if handled correctly.

at my amber-screen PC in the late 1980s discussing computing or religion before anyone had ever even heard of the Internet. Recently, I joined a Yahoo group that conveniently sends forum posts to my e-mail so I can now rest at night and respond at my convenience—without sleep deprivation.

There are many different types of forums: regional and national, non-profit and commercial, private and public, business-to-business and consumer-to-consumer. But, at the core, all forums are about the *community*.

For restylers, I suggest regional forums, since they will connect you with more local prospects. If you can't find a restyling forum that serves your area, consider starting your own. By using free online services like Yahoo Groups or Google Groups you can sponsor a community of users for free. (There are about 40,000 automotive forums in Yahoo Groups.)

Adding forums to your Web site can be another way to build community among

your customers and prospects. It gives you the perfect chance to keep a finger on the pulse of your customer's wants and needs. It allows you to participate freely in the forum without seeming overtly commercial, since you are the forum's sponsor. It also allows you to moderate the forum to control inappropriate content.

### Making It Work

In my experience, the key to successful forum participation is integrity.

For instance, making inflammatory comments about your competitor or fellow forum participant is not just bad manners—it's bad marketing. The Chicago-based Word Of Mouth Marketing Association ([womma.org](http://womma.org)) is an organization of professionals involved in online and offline marketing. The most common technique is using forums. WOMMA promotes best practices and a strong sense of ethics. In fact, the WOMMA website ethics page

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explains that they believe in honesty and transparency at all times:

- Honesty of relationship, opinion, and identity
- Respecting the rules of the forum
- Rising above the minimum requirements in privacy and permission

I agree with WOMMA. Pretending to be an end-user will catch up with you. Posting blatant ads on the forum will only annoy people and get you flamed (see sidebar). Respect other's privacy and they will respect you.

Think of aftermarket forums as that 1950s drive-in and you'll understand how

Some guidelines for successful use of online communities include honesty and respect—just as you would expect for in-person encounters.

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to successfully participate in forums as a marketing technique. Relate to people in a forum like you relate to people in person—by being real. Compliment their cars, offer ideas that aren't all self-serving, and avoid being overtly commercial. Subtlety works best online.

When you join an existing forum, spend several days just monitoring the forum before posting anything. This will help you to get a sense of the culture of the community and help you understand what's acceptable and what's not. Forums can help you build a reputation as an expert in your area. It can give you a chance to listen to what customers and prospects are interested so you can follow trends. And just like in that diner, it can be a lot of fun to relax with a good cup of coffee and just shoot the breeze about your passion.

*Phil Sasso is president of Sasso Marketing, Inc. (www.sassomarketing.com), an after-market advertising, public relations and Internet agency located in Franklin Park, IL. He's also a speaker and consultant. And he hasn't been to a good diner in years. ☺*

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