



# An interview with Guy Kawasaki and REI

Jordan Williams, manager of Digital Engagement for REI

One in a series of interviews, brought to you by Dell, between Guy Kawasaki, former Chief Evangelist of Apple and author of *Enchantment*, and corporate social media innovators.

**Guy Kawasaki:** I know a little of REI's history because I wrote about your company in my book. As I recall, the founders couldn't find a good ice axe here so they had to buy one from someplace in Austria.

**Jordan Williams:** We were the original group-buying model back in 1938 — we had Groupon beat by 70 years. Yes, it was a couple here in the Seattle area, Lloyd and Mary Anderson. They were mountaineers and they couldn't find good equipment at a reasonable price. They discovered a supplier in Austria that sold good-quality ice axes, and they found that the best way to get a good price was to ask their climbing friends to pool their money and make a group order. That was the start of the cooperative and it slowly grew into the national retailer we are now.

**Guy Kawasaki:** Could you describe your social media efforts?

**Jordan Williams:** Our social media efforts started quite small with a Facebook page and a Twitter handle. We began by publishing the sorts of things that we thought were interesting, whether it was news about REI or information we thought would appeal to people interested in the outdoors. We still tend to observe a 75/25 rule, which is to say that 75% of the time we hope to be talking about things that aren't necessarily about REI. We believe that the gold is in conversations with people who love the outdoors. Now we've got social embedded in our call center, and we're in the midst of launching a local social media strategy, so we're starting social presences for all our stores and markets around the country.

**Guy Kawasaki:** And that local level will be through Twitter and Facebook?

**Jordan Williams:** It will. By the end of July we will have 53 different markets around country with their own Twitter and Facebook handles and pages, and those presences will be owned and

operated by our local retail teams with our social media team in headquarters acting as a sort of center of excellence to model best practices.

**Guy Kawasaki:** The retail team meaning that someone local is behind that Twitter and Facebook account?

**Jordan Williams:** Exactly. So, in Austin as one handy example since we're talking with Dell, we have a handful of stores. There's an @ReiAustin Twitter handle and an REI Austin Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/reiaustin>). Austin store management, sales associates and customer service people are responsible for monitoring, posting, helping customers, answering questions and such. It's based on our belief that much of what we hear are localized questions or concerns or experiences. People were asking what sleeping bag they should get in Atlanta, and while we could certainly take a shot at answering that from here, there's a lot more validity to the answer coming from somebody at a store in the Atlanta area.

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Is it now a **must-have** for companies to **connect with their customers**?

**Guy Kawasaki:** What if headquarters sees a tweet asking what sleeping bag do I need for 50-degree weather? It's from LonelyBoy15 but you don't know where he lives. Who handles that?

**Jordan Williams:** Ultimately it becomes about load distribution. We have more resources here and certainly more in our call center than perhaps the retail teams do, so it's a balancing act. There's probably a really solid answer we could give from headquarters based on our product knowledge. If they're asking something that requires somebody local then right now we're leveraging the enterprise version of CoTweet, assigning it down to the Atlanta team so they'll jump in and reply directly to the customer and get back to us if they have questions around it.

**Guy Kawasaki:** Is this Atlanta person now purely social media, or is he still wearing green vest and working on the floor, too?

**Jordan Williams:** The latter. We're going to launch and see how this goes, frankly, but our belief is that a distributed model — both distributed across the country and distributed locally — is the best answer. The reason why we've gone that route rather than a dedicated person is that even within our store teams there's a variety of skill sets. Someone might be great at customer issue resolution and somebody else is always up to snuff on the latest gear so they might have the best take on a product question. We also have a role called Outreach Specialist that's about connecting with local nonprofits and is really tied in to the outdoor community, so they might have a great answer to "where should I take my kids hiking?" That distribution helps get the right person to help the customer as opposed to if we had just a dedicated social media person.

**Guy Kawasaki:** It sounds like all in all you have 250 or 300 people involved in social media in REI.

**Jordan Williams:** We have 300-plus in retail and probably 20 at this point between headquarters and the call center who are schooled in social media and have gone through our training program.

**Guy Kawasaki:** Are you also using Radian6 to measure sentiment towards REI? Or is it more CoTweet and service-oriented?

**Jordan Williams:** It's really more the latter. We've certainly done some work around sentiment with Radian6 and Sysomos, but we're in an enviable position in that our sentiment tends to be off-the-charts good. Which is great — don't get me wrong — but it's also a tenuous act in that we want to keep it there, so what we've found is that investing in sentiment was not producing a lot of actionable items for us. If we were a brand that had a much stronger mix of positive and negative then I think we would be more aligned around driving positive sentiment. For us, what we're really going after is specific issues. Somebody had a bad experience at a retail store or somebody has a problem with an online order or somebody has a product question.

**Guy Kawasaki:** Has anybody figured out how to calculate ROI?

**Jordan Williams:** I have to say that we are again in an enviable position in that my team would like to get to an ROI because, frankly, we would like to build a long-term defensible budget argument for the growth of our work. But there's an enlightened sense within the leadership here at REI that social has multiple effects. There will ultimately

be some tactics that we will choose to say that's a direct conversion driver that we're trying with that strategy and therefore we do have ROI, but ultimately it's more about customer retention and member retention.

**Guy Kawasaki:** You really are in an enviable position; you lead a charmed life. *Hallelujah.*

**Jordan Williams:** I think at REI it comes from this notion of co-op. We have such a strong culture of customer service that if we can position the program to support members and customers, there's a lot of leeway before making sure we've proven that we're doing right by them.

