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A conversation with Randall Grahm about social media

Randall Grahm started Bonny Doon winery in 1981. Three years ago, he sold his two other brands, Big House and Cardinal Zin, to The Wine Group. He still runs Bonny Doon, as well as Pacific Rim. He has a book coming out in 2 weeks, *Been Doon So Long*, published by the University of California Press.

SH: I know you Twitter, because we follow each other, but why do you Twitter?

RG: To find out why it is I'm Twittering!

That's very Zen.

Absolutely true. I don't understand why I end up Twittering, but it seems like something worth exploring. Doesn't cost anything aside from time, which is a real cost. And I'm told I'm quite good at it, whatever that means.

How many followers do you have, and how often do you tweet?

I have 1,700 followers, and I tweet usually 5-10 times a day.

How do you decide what to say?

Well, if an interesting bon mot comes into my mind and I'm near my cell phone or computer.



Photo courtesy of Tyler Colman, Dr. Vino blog

Does it have to be about wine?

I think it does, mostly because if it's not, it's somehow not relevant and even more narcissistic.

Whom do you think you're talking to on Twitter?

I hope to people interested in my wines, who are potentially influencers of other people who are interested in wine. It's weird, like being in junior high school and trying to establish your coolness credential.

Do you Facebook?

You know, I'm about to, I think. I made one little initial foray into it and didn't understand how to do it. I worry about Facebook. When I do things I tend to be fanatical, and overdo them, and I worry Facebook could become all consuming. I just don't want another thing to take a big chunk of my time every day.

Do you blog?

I don't, although I'm told by my betters I need to. I'd do it on my web page, but our web page is frankly a bit of a mess, totally non-functional. It's in process of being revamped. But I'm going to. I'm going to use the book site for the primary driver, if you will. It should be up by Sept. 14.

Do you reply to others' tweets, Facebook posts, blogs, etc?

I do respond to people's tweets, 85% of the time. What I'm trying to do, to the extent I understand it, is uphold my end of the social contract. There's an implicit contract that says "I will be responsive most of the time."

How do you see social media in terms of brand building?

Well, it's not clear. Let me put it this way. If it succeeds, it will succeed in building the brand a lot better than in driving sales! I don't know anyone who's driven sales through social media. But I'm told it can conceivably build brands. Not that Randall Grahm or Bonny Doon needs to be built. Certainly I'm extremely well-known, but I don't know that I'm understood by a younger generation. People under 30 may not have heard of Bonny Doon. The problem is, I'm sort of too well-known, or people imagine they know me and know the brand. So the real goal isn't to establish myself as a brand, but to re-image the brand or re-brand it. I think Bonny Doon was tarnished by its association with Big House.

Do you think social media works differently for an older brand as opposed to a new one?

I don't know. We're living in this weird, post-modern universe where everything has the same value. Everything's the same, so I don't know that young people can really differentiate between a brand that comes with a history or pedigree, and a virtual brand that's been in existence for just a year, that doesn't have vineyards or anything aside from a high point score.

Does a high point score still matter?

People tell me it doesn't, but I think it does. What I'm hearing is there's a hyper-inflation with scores. Parker and Wine Spectator award so many high scores to so many wines, including virtual wines, that it's diluted. So high point scores aren't a guarantee of success.

Someone commented on my blog that "a dollar spent on social media can be much more effective than a dollar spent on traditional media." Do you agree?

I don't know. It seems that social media is kind of like a long-term investment, something to build slowly. But it builds uncontrollably. You can't absolutely guarantee a viral effect in anything you do. I was hoping to understand the outcome of the Murphy-Goode campaign, which on its face was totally brilliant, as far as exposure to the brand. But I don't know if anyone has said it resulted in actual sales for Murphy-Goode. People inside the wine industry say, "Mention Murphy-Goode one more time and I can't stand it anymore." But I think people outside the wine industry didn't perceive it very much.

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