

Rate Point Interview
June 17, 2010

Lon Safko: So hello, my name is Lon Safko. I'm the co-author of The Social Media Bible published by John Wiley and Sons, the largest book every written on the subject of social media. And holy cow, we're here today with Neal Creighton the CEO of Rate Point and we're going to be talking about social media, but more specifically we're going to be talking about email marketing.

Man, I just absolutely love email marketing and I love Rate Point. I've always said, "Email is the original social media." So let's get into it and we're going to have Neil explain to us why email is the original social media.

Could you tell us a little bit about your background and then a little bit about Rate Point please.

Neal Creighton: Sure Lon. I've been in internet businesses for a while now. The first company I started was a company I called GeoTrust. I was the CEO there; it was a pretty proper company. It was securing like 30 percent of the transactions on the internet. It was acquired in 2006 by VeriSign which is a well-known brand. But the GeoTrust brand is pretty well known as well.

And I got together with the founders and we really decided we wanted to do something bigger. And you know, securing 30 percent of internet traffic is a good thing, but we thought there was a much bigger idea out there and that was really why we started Rate Point and why we got together.

Lon Safko: Okay, that's cool. Now Rate Point is an email marketing company. Now a lot of small businesses don't really understand the value and importance of what an email marketing company is. Can you kind of explain some of the services and why it's important if you want a business to be aware of and a member of Rate Point?

Neal Creighton: Yes. You know Rate Point...you can tell by its name it has a variety of services and email marketing is one of the services. You know we've combined email marketing with a complete review platform so businesses can get reviews from their customers and republish those out in different places, and a lot of that is social. That's a big part of our services...surveys and email marketing.



But while email marketing is an important area and people have been doing it for a very long time, and as you described it was one of the first places for having a dialogue with your customers where you were telling them what you were doing, it was much more personal. So it was the kind of the first phase of things but we've changed a lot recently with a lot of other places like Facebook and Twitter where you can have an ongoing dialogue.

But email marketing is the base part of our service. A lot of businesses use it. The ROI on it is very, very clean; for like every dollar you spend you get \$43 back. So it's a very effective way to reach your customers and it's a big part of our service.

Lon Safko: So you also mentioned reviews. You have some kind of product in there that you can interact with your customers and get reviews?

Neal Creighton: Yes. I mean we're right in the middle of a revolution on the internet. A lot of it has to do with social media but the number one thing people look out for before they transact with a business...you know it could be calling a landscaper or plumber...is do I buy from these businesses reviews. And they generally start at Google and they generally look up the business name and reviews can pop up; and 70 percent of people believe reviews or they trust reviews from people they don't know. But they see them on the internet. They're looking for something; they pop up. If they are good they tend to believe it; if it's bad then tend to believe it. So we believe that business that participate with their customers solicit actively reviews from them, try to resolve negative issues before they get published. And you know they have to be transparent.

Social media is a good place to do that. But then we end up syndicating the concept back out to Google or Yahoo! or Bing, and a bunch of other places. So it really is...you know the name of the company is Great Point and it's all about reputation building. Email marketing is part of that but the reviews are the revolution that we're part of that is going to fundamentally change the way businesses and consumers interact as we go forward.

Lon Safko: Yeah, it's great that you actually use that word. In the second edition...the new edition of The Social Media Bible I use it throughout my presentations as well...a fundamental shift in power. And the way I define that is the way people (just as you said) are looking for peer reviews. The funny question is if I've got a choice of going to a company's website and reading the rhetoric that they put on their website or if I get a chance to go into



Facebook and ask ten people that I trust about your company, which information am I more likely to believe.

And there's this fundamental shift in power where corporations are actually losing control over their corporate message and it's actually moving more towards the peer-to-peer. So if I'm hearing you correctly you're providing those tools; you're aware of it, and you're encouraging it and providing the tools for just that type of peer review.

Neal Creighton: Yeah, absolutely. It's the most important thing that is happening on the internet and it's happening on social networks and if you can get within social circles you could really be powerful if you're doing the right thing.

You know I tell people trying to make them understand a small business, "It's like you're walking on the street and you decided to go to a restaurant. And before you go in there are four people standing outside telling you they just got sick from eating the food there; you probably would not go in."

So if you started Google and you looked up a business and you see bad reviews you're going to tend to believe these vs. positive ones. It's the same within your social circle. If you ask for advice there's a lot of statistics talking about how people will rely on that today. When they see things they actually will, within their social circle, believe it. So as a business if you can advantage of that in a positive way participate and understand that you will have all the power if you can participate with your customers you can build a really strong competitive edge for yourself.

Lon Safko: Okay, so what I am hearing is that not only do you get the entire message and understand the power of email, but you are actually coupling it with the power of social media. And you get that you are providing all of those tools to your customers.

Neal Creighton: Yeah, and you hit on it...I mean we believe that people are using email marketing as, kind of, the first social area for all good candidates for reviews because anyone who wanted to communicate with their customers and tell them what they were doing certainly wanted to sell more and wanted to have a good quality business. So reviews are a big part of that so they were good candidates. So we find people coming in to use email marketing and the converting to our review services every day because they understand, again, how powerful it is.



Lon Safko: That's absolutely amazing and I agree 100%. That is the trend that everybody's moving towards. I mean if you look at Jive and Google Buzz and all of the directions, that's the technological trend; to tie the best to the best. And my opinion has always been that the best of the best is coupling social media with tools.

Now as an email company yourself, I mean let's just talk about that for a second. You provide pretty much all the features and benefits that an email marketing company provides?

Neal Creighton: Yes we have a complete service. You could compare it to other companies out there like Constant Contact and other folks. We have a very similar service. I think one of the things that we've done very differently is that we very interested in the entry-level people in the market. Those are the people that are coming in and they want to do email marketing for the first time. So we have this free-for-life product that gives you 550 free contacts that you can use and we hope that you will upgrade and then you'll see the benefit of our review service as you go through it and end up a paying customer. But we're really focusing on the entry-level market and we do have many large centers, many large companies. It's a complete offering from end to end and fully integrated into social media. So it's pretty cool.

Lon Safko: Well it is cool, too, because I am familiar with a lot of the other companies, the email companies, intimately familiar with them and the one thing that attacks me to Rate Point is that you "get" social media. You had mentioned Constant Contact. They don't really have social media tools but you've got tools...correct?

Neal Creighton: Yes, I think they were very early on this space and we had the advantage of coming later. And you know Constant Contact has been around for a while and with that comes advantages but also disadvantages. When we came around we could see the social media movement and the storm brewing and so we built everything in and we've been widely recognized and just recently got the My Text Award in New England for the best social media company in New England. And our customers love that.

It's not just email marketing and a survey platform but a power in the review platform. So you may have a review that you get within the Facebook environment from our Facebook application that ends up being syndicated out to Google. So you're using your core group of people to help amplify your business and that's also



ending up in a lot of different places. But it's integrated in social media from end to end.

Lon Safko: Okay, so if I use Rate Point service products basically not only am I getting a really cool product but you are also enhancing my SEO implication, my Search Engine Optimizations?

Neal Creighton: Yes. I mean obviously Search Engine is a lot of fresh content. Review Content is like gold and Google has been doing a lot of work within Google Apps too, but generally our reviews show up extremely high next to the business and it's, you know more importantly the number one tool. I think every business understands word-of-mouth and in the physical world if you tell...if you do a good job for a particular customer and they tell a few people and you get some money then it's great. But if you do it in the web; like word-of-mouth of the web is what I kind of like to say, and they tell people there they might tell a thousand people or more and the customer sees that. So SEO is a huge benefit when people see it and when they do see it, 70 percent of the people, or more every day...it's growing...believe what they see. This is because they are credible and people are looking for these reviews.

Lon Safko: Absolutely and I love what you said. In the new book I use a phrase that I think is really important for all of us to understand. What we're talking about is word-of-mouth at the speed of light.

Neal Creighton: Yes!

Lon Safko: (Laughter) Awesome! Now one of the things that working with entrepreneurial companies, working with mid-size companies, government agencies, nonprofits...even the Fortune 1000's...I get the same thing from everybody..."You know what, I really want to do email."

Let's address this one questions, you can see it get totally side-tracked..."Email is passé. Everybody says email is passé; only my Dad uses email."

Do you want to address that, because...let's do that one.

Neal Creighton: Yes.

Lon Safko: Do you think it's passé?



- Neal Creighton: Primarily if you ask anybody when they come into work what one of the first things they do is and they will say they check their email. It's still the primary way we communicate with each other. We are certainly using social media in a major way but it's the starting point for basically everything on business nowadays, especially for small business. So they check their email first thing in the morning, they look at it during the day. I think now what we have seen is that it's one of the tools in the toolbox and a very important one. You've got to use social media as well and you have to be cognizant of what's happening and integrate what you are doing with an email with that environment and you've got a pretty good solution. But still, today, I bet we could talk 24 months from now...the first thing you would do when you get into the office is check your email...and I don't think that's going to change.
- Lon Safko: I completely agree and one of the things I point out to the people that say that is, "Yeah, the Millennials and the Generation X's and Y's are saying that but they don't know crap about business." So maybe for a social tool they might not use it but for business I think email is here forever.
- Neal Creighton: Yes that's absolutely true. And I think anyone, no matter what generation they are from; if they actually start a business they're using email. They've got to think about where their customers are too and you cannot put yourself in the target segment, I always say. If you build a business around yourself then you're probably missing a pretty good target market. Most of your target market is going to be using email...so...no matter what generation you are from you have to use email if you run a business.
- Lon Safko: Absolutely. And that's one of the things...I love that point. When we talk about all the different tools that are out there this isn't about what you prefer it's about where your customers are and what they prefer.
- Neal Creighton: Yes. And that's a common mistake I see across the board. And I make it myself, too. We all do it. It's like, "Aw, no one will use that," because you are thinking about what you do in particular but you have to think about your target market and what they are doing. And again, when you put it in that light, saying email is dead sounds really ridiculous. When you think about the target market itself vs. what you do personally it definitely far from dead.



It's going to have a long life and in particular it's going to be very important to business.

Lon Safko:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Now one of the questions I started with before I got side tracked on the passé question was that a lot of companies are intimidated by email. Again, they hear the bad rap...nobody opens it; spam...which isn't true. The national open rate can be as high as 17 percent. I sent out an email yesterday and I'm not kidding you I had a 25.5, almost 26 percent open rate. So you know what, that's effective as far as I'm concerned. But a lot of these companies don't know to start. Is putting together an email/social media (now that we added this other level of complexity)...is it really hard or is it common sense? Can I jump into Rate Point and start using it effectively?

Neal Creighton:

Yes. You know it is interesting; we look at our customer base and where they were 18 months ago. Probably 20 percent of them had a Twitter and Facebook account. Today it's probably 70 percent of them. But they don't know quite what to do with it. I think that's a common issue. And so really, my advice would be to look for services that are integrated to help you monetize on top of that. So it's more than just having an account.

It's really easy. If you come to Rate Point the first thing we do is connect your social media accounts with your email marketing set up and your review set up. That's part of the setup. And if you do not have a social media account we try to set you up very quickly with one, and get you going.

So when you come out of the five-minute process we put you through on the sign-up you're ready to go and you're ready to start requesting reviews or explaining reviews in your social media accounts and build your contact list as well.

So it take a little time to build an email campaign. It's very self-driven...not just from Rate Point but any provider. They have very straightforward templates that you can use. For a small business it's very, very easy. You put in your message about what you are trying to accomplish and you send. And when you hit "send" it's going to end up not only going to your contact list (and hopefully you have one or you will start to build one) but it's also going to go to your social media accounts so people that might be interesting in what you are doing might be interested in what you are doing will see it and it can be picked up in real-time search.



If available it will be indexed by Google. It can go out to a lot of different places. And then in the end as a small business you can come back in and you can see who clicked on it, what traffic it drove to your site, what the ROI was...and going back to that stat I think it's pretty true that for every dollar spent in email marketing you're going to get a fair return. Forty-three dollars is what I have seen and I think that's about right.

But the same thing goes for reviews. I mean we have customer that sell items that are \$12,000 apiece. When they get somebody who clicked on a review and came in a bought it's very, very significant for them. The ROI is very clear. But it's not hard. Our average customer pays us \$40 a month; they come in and get set up in five minutes and both Facebook and Twitter are integrated in so they can do email marketing and reviews. And they might take a little time to get going but by and large after a couple of hours of looking at it they can be off to the races.

Lon Safko: Well \$40 is really easy in any business; even a small business shouldn't have any trouble using it especially when you look at the effectiveness. So that point is good.

Neal Creighton: Absolutely!

Lon Safko: Now there's one other thing too. There's kind of a little bit of a contradiction between email marketing and social networks and that is the idea of selling. I mean since email came out over the last decade and a half a lot of companies use it for really hardcore selling; HTML emails and cross-selling and up selling and...But social media really is completely different than that. If you start to sell you're going to get "flamed." So can you see that there's some way that there is...especially the new user...that there is some kind of equilibrium and a balance between interfacing with their customers, participating in social networks, but still have that subtle "sell" behind the email?

Neal Creighton: If you believe your customers are a little bit different; the ones you email and the ones you see in social media, one of the great things is to create a different campaign for each environment. So you might have a much harder sell when you go directly to an email box. When you think about it someone's given you the trust of giving you their email address any maybe even more information like their birthday and other things, so you can market to them directly vs. someone following you who likes you. You want to get to that level but you want to entice them. So you can definitely



do different campaigns for those areas and my feeling with Rate Point is that we are very active in asking for reviews in social networks so we can find out what's working and what's not. And that helps you decide how your segments are different.

So if you're actively engaged with them you can find out what they like and what they don't like and you can tailor your campaigns in that way.

Lon Safko: So wait a minute! You're not actually telling a business to ask their customers, talk to their customers, and ask them what they want. (Laughter)

Neal Creighton: That's the revolution we're in! That's what is happening!

Lon Safko: That is exactly what is happening! Way too often they sit in their ivory towers and when I ask they say, "Well we don't want to talk to our customers. They may say something that is mean. They'll hurt our feelings."

No! Use social media and use email and use this two-way communication to find out how to sell them. How do they want to be sold? Right? Isn't that what you want?

Neal Creighton: You've got to talk to your customers. And this is what is interesting. When it comes to the review part of our service I think things are changing rapidly. A couple of years ago people were not really thinking about reviews and I just got back from Internet Retailer and it is a big topic out there. I mean reviews were huge. And one of the issues people have, and I don't think it's as much today as in the past, is what if someone says something bad about me? You know, what happens? And we found out from our system that 95 percent of the time somebody says something bad about you, if you interact with them you can turn them around and you can make them a brand advocate for your business. And they will love you.

And 95 percent of the people who are unhappy go away but if you can be successful and retain them it's huge for your business. So it's extremely powerful and if they are really angry they are going to go and talk about you somewhere else. So why not ask for that feedback, get and try to improve you business. Turn that customer around and try to make them a brand advocate for you. So it's extremely powerful. I think businesses are starting to get that.



Lon Safko: Yeah I absolutely agree. Working with a lot of companies that is their biggest fear; what happens if the conversation goes in the wrong direction. But based on my personal experience when The Social Media Bible first came out people were saying, “Oh ink on dead trees! What are you thinking?”

Well let me tell you what I’m thinking. The C-Suite...the CMO’s, the CFO’s, the CEO’s, the Vice-Presidential suites in most companies are over 50. And you know what? We’re all comfortable with books.

So by having that question posed by someone else that gave me the opportunity to address it, completely diffused it and the rest of the comments on the blog were, “Hey, this author is right. I’ve got books. I like books.” And it completely turned it around. So I love that interactive conversation.

Neal Creighton: Yes it is interesting. We work with thousands of businesses and when they get reviews they get both good and bad and the bad ones are usually highly emotional. They are very straightforward...you know...”I cannot stand you guys. I’m not going to go near you with a 10-foot pole. I’m going to tell all my friends.”

Lon Safko: (Laughter)

Neal Creighton: ...and within 24 hours of interacting with the business they are like, “Wow, I didn’t understand that. I appreciate the fact that you talked me into solving my problem. I’m going to tell my friends that you are a good business.” It is just really powerful.

Lon Safko: It is powerful and along that line is there any success stories that you can think of maybe that you or your customers came across using these kinds of tools?

Neal Creighton: Yes. We have many customers and many case stories and by and large because it is the #1 tool people look at we have customers that have lifted their sales a tremendous amount. I just got back, as I mentioned, from Internet Retailer and we were fortunate enough to have one of our customers on the stage with us. There was a company called Go Green Solar and they lifted their sales 20 percent by making reviews part of their culture.

I mean every time they sell a product they ask for a review and it’s just a culture of excellence they have. The other day one of their



products was featured on the game show The Price is Right because they were out there and they saw the reviews and they thought this is a good company. They didn't know Go Green Solar but they called them up because of those reviews and so that's a tremendous success story.

But we have a lot of customers like that that use it and love it and they get big returns out of it.

Lon Safko: The part that I like that I just heard also besides that incredible success story is the way you provide the tools. Correct me if I'm wrong but it actually encourages the customers to give you a review. I forget all the time especially about the book and some of the other stuff. I never ask. And if I don't ask people don't do it. But this encourages it so that you can build that positive side of that conversation.

Neal Creighton: Yes. That's a very good point. I mean if you are proactive 25 percent of the people will give you reviews. If you are not...I mean happy customers generally just go away. They might tell someone around them that they had a good experience but not everyone on the web. So if you are proactive you get those. And if you are proactive you will also get the negative ones before they go to Yelp or somewhere else and post them. Because primarily a consumer wants his or her problem resolved and if you can do it for them they love you. So the trick is be proactive and you can use that content of peer quality business to your favor and amplify your business on the web.

Lon Safko: I love that being proactive. That absolutely sets you guys aside from pretty much everyone else because they provide the tools but they don't encourage it. And it is not really core to the system to get that interaction from the customer. I think you have a real competitive advantage there.

If I wanted to put together a campaign similar to what we were talking about for a product for my company and I'm starting fresh, is this really an expensive process? You mentioned the \$40 before being average but to get into this what can I expect to pay?

Neal Creighton: It is a pretty inexpensive process. We know small businesses do not have a lot of time and that's our target market. And so we automate it; pretty much everything we do is turnkey. So from the email marketing system I mentioned there are hundreds of templates in there that are very professional that you can pick from



for every occasion. There are many different verticals; we tailored it so you do not have to have design skills to really do it. You just need to be able to type.

And as far as the reviews go it is very much automated. We have stuff that hooks up and automatically will send out review requests or things you put on your website to request reviews. We have more sophisticated things for larger retailers; we have full product review sweep. It doesn't take long. We have people set up for reviews and in a matter of minutes it will come through. And we have coaches here. We believe strongly in talking to our customers so we have, not salespeople but coaches. They will work them through and get them set up. But it is not a big investment. If you look at the return, like I mentioned with Go Green Solar, you get a 20 percent return for some time invested in making that part of your culture.

We want Rate Point to be part of your business. It's part of what you do; it's part of your culture of excellence; it's part of your ongoing dialogue and reputation with your customers. So I think it is well worth it. It is not technically difficult. It does not require you to hire a designer or anything like that so it's very straightforward. We're making it more automated and improving it more every day but right now it's \$40 and some of your time.

Lon Safko:

You cannot go wrong with that and I love the idea of the templates. Some of people that are just getting started that are watching or listening to this interview...correct me if I'm wrong...you have some really awesome, really professionally designed templates. Those are HTML and I use the HTML word! It's probably going to scare off half the people who are listening but really you just make it easy with a type of a dashboard where you can just select different sections of the HTML and then just add in your own information. And then when you hit "save" and that email goes out it's a professionally designed HTML. It looks as good as something you would get from a Fortune 500 company.

Neal Creighton:

Yes that's exactly right. You just have to be able to type and one of the things we also do differently is that we the ability to type and also pull in your reviews and testimonials from the review platform right into your email marketing campaign so you make that front and center when you send these things out. It looks extraordinarily professional, it's easy to do and, again, you just need to be able to type on a keyboard and you get your message across as soon as it sends out.



- Lon Safko: So all of this is integrated as well.
- Neal Creighton: Yes, we cross them all together. It's one platform so for \$40 you get everything. You get the review stuff, you get the full survey system, and you get the email marketing system together. You might want to use all or one of them. We find that like to use them all, but it's all part of an integrated platform.
- Lon Safko: And it is easy to use and you don't have to be a programmer to know how to use it.
- Neal Creighton: That's right. It's designed for small businesses that don't have a lot of time.
- Lon Safko: I love that. So let me get it straight...you have all the tools, you understand an email, you provide templates, you understand social media, you are all about communicating with your customers (but you listen to your customers as well), you have survey, you have the automated replies asking people to review your products, it's completely integrated, runs off a standard dashboard so you do not have to know anything other than typing and you can do it all for \$40 a month.
- Neal Creighton: That's right. And it's a product for business and a lot of small business are their service is their product. So its business reviews and product reviews. You've got that integrated as well. But you are right it's all integrated as well.
- Lon Safko: Okay so when I hear that then I only have one other question, "Where do I sign up?"
- Neal Creighton: Well, you know the name is Rate Point so you go to www.RatePoint.com. And a lot of people come in and we've got this incredibly cool free-for-life offering that has social media integration and has surveys and integration and you can have up to 550 contacts. So that's pretty large for anybody starting email marketing, especially a small business. And you can use it forever and if you want to get bigger and you want to do more questions with the reviews you can pay. But our goal is to introduce as many people as we can to this space and get them going.
- Lon Safko: Awesome. I completely agree. I just love email and I really love Rate Point. Is there anything else you want to share; anything you think we might not have covered that might help the beginners?

Neal Creighton: No. Just to reiterate; I've been speaking at a lot of different places lately and I've seen a trend recently and it's clear that businesses are starting to understand what's happening that is revolutionary about talking to your customers. But it is the #1 sales tool you can use; it is your own customer. If you can harness the power of our customer and the great thing about social media is it allows you to do that.

If you can do that you can do incredible things with your business and grow it substantially. I know I like to be repetitive but I just wanted to make that point again.

Lon Safko: Well those are important points. I appreciate that. Grow your business, easy to do, inexpensive. What else could a small or medium business ask for?

That's great. Neal, really thank you. In closing I would like to say I would really like to thank you. I understand how busy your schedule is.

Today we are here with Neal Creighton the CEO of Rate Point. So thank you for the amazing interview and all that incredible information about email marketing and social media. This is the first interview that I was able to legitimately able to put those two words together; email marketing and social media.

This has been Lon Safko, author of The Social Media Bible. Check out our other valuable information at www.TheSocialMediaBible.com website for additional tools, tactics, and strategies or more information about Rate Point. And for more information about me just hop on over to www.lonsafko.com.

And again, Neal, really it was a real honor speaking with you here today. Thank you.

Neal Creighton: Thanks for having me on. I appreciate it.