

Using Social Media to Market Your Business

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Social marketing provides businesses opportunities to connect with potential customers. To achieve success, it's important to understand how to choose and use the social marketing tools available.

With the tremendous growth in the Internet and mounting global communication resources, innovative social media marketing tools are creating a revolution in how we communicate. These tools level the playing field for businesses of all sizes and have created entirely new ways to market a product. Social marketing allows businesses to affordably and effectively market products, instantaneously reaching diverse clientele with the intended message or brand.

What is Social Media?

It's important to understand what social media websites are before beginning to use them. Social media has become a common term, made of two familiar words. The first word, social, refers to communication and the way people interact. The second word, media, is a communications tool such as television, newspapers, or radio. Together, these terms describe a two-way conversation through the sharing of print, photos, video, and audio primarily hosted over the Internet. Social media websites do not just provide information; they allow users to interact with a business and with one another. This interaction can be as simple as comments left on a blog or product recommendations based on ratings from people with similar interests.

Using social media to market your business is about creating a conversation with your customer. It allows you to share information about products and services, and interact with clientele. As shown in the following statistics, people want to have conversations about products and services with businesses.

- Of social media users, 78 percent interact with companies or brands via new media sites and tools (an increase of 32 percent from 2008).

- Ninety-five percent of new media users also believe companies or brands should have a social media presence.
- Eighty-nine percent believe businesses should interact with their consumers using social media.

Social media is a broad term that covers a large range of websites and online tools. The important link between them is that they create a venue where users can interact on the website with other participants. Examples of social media websites include:

- Social Media
 - Facebook
 - Myspace
 - LinkedIn
- Publishing
 - Blogger.com
 - Wikipedia
 - WordPress
- Photo Sharing
 - Flickr
 - Photobucket
- Audio
 - iTunes
 - Rhapsody
 - Pandora
- Video
 - Hulu
 - YouTube
- Microblogging
 - Twitter
- Virtual Worlds
 - Second Life

The four most frequently used social media tools are:

- **Facebook**—A social utility with over 400 million active users. Facebook allows businesses to share information, connect with users, and create brand awareness.

- **LinkedIn** — A professional network with over 60 million members that connects people to their trusted contacts and helps them exchange knowledge, ideas, and opportunities with a network of professionals. It is a form of professional networking.
- **Twitter** — A tool that makes it possible to quickly share information with people interested in your business, gather real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners, and others who care about your business. Customers can use Twitter to be immediately notified of special offers.
- **Blog** — A web-based information logging tool that allows individuals, customers, employees, and management to share knowledge and opinions. Blogs are an excellent way to share expertise, build additional web traffic, and connect with potential customers.

Using a combination of social media tools may help you increase traffic to your blog or website.

Benefits of Social Media

There are numerous benefits to social media marketing, most focusing on brand awareness and direct customer communication and feedback. Direct sales are not one of the major benefits. Social media marketing is not meant to make the hard sell, but you will find that if you connect with your clientele, they are much more likely to buy your product or service. A short list of potential benefits are:

- brand recognition and exposure,
- increased traffic to your website,
- identification of new partnerships,
- increased rank in web-based searches,
- new marketing leads, and
- reduced marketing expenses.

Social Media Demographics

What started out as a socializing platform for teens and young adults has since reached later generations. The age groups 35-44 and 45-54 make up a large percentage of users on social networking sites. The 30-40 year-olds are the biggest users, spending an average of 10 hours per week on social media.

How to Make Social Media a Success

With time and effort, there is great potential in social media marketing. There are no guarantees that social media will bring in more business or increase customer satisfaction; however, if you do not take the time to put together an effective social media marketing campaign, you definitely will not see results. In the same respect, a bad social media campaign could harm future and current client satisfaction. To help safeguard against such failure and to make the task seem less challenging, here are six tips for a successful social media campaign.

1. Know Why You Are Online

Know why you are making the effort to have a social media campaign on a particular site. The actions you take should support your purpose for being online, whether it is increased visibility or professional development. Knowing your target audience will help you select the most effective social media marketing tool.

Doing social media marketing without a purpose is like putting the cart before the horse. You should never venture into an unknown medium without a clear purpose and objective. Defining the purpose will help avoid unprofitable mediums and guide you in selecting the social media tools that will most benefit your company and customers.

2. Present a Complete Picture

When potential customers visit your page they want to know who you are and what you can do for them, and most people won't spend time searching for that information. The benefits you can provide should be clear from the first glance. Provide a snapshot overview of your business so visitors can learn what they want to know within 30 seconds. This means providing:

- who you are,
- what you are about, and
- what are you going to do for them.

Once you have gotten potential clients to your page, do not lose them because they cannot find your hours, services, directions, or contact information.

3. Be Active

Social media marketing does not create overnight success. Most often, success is built over time. People need to get to know you, like what you have to offer, and then trust you.

The best way to be active is to start conversations. The difference between traditional advertising and marketing and social media marketing is the difference between talking at someone and talking with them. If you have built the right communities and are sharing the right content, conversations should happen naturally.

There are different levels of conversations. A blog post, a re-tweet (response to a tweet on Twitter), or comment on a status update are forms of communication. Be sure you are tracking these responses and responding. Even something that seems trivial such as a "Like" (illustrated by a "thumbs up") on a Facebook wall post is positive. The important thing is someone chose to respond to your message or content. These conversations, and those between visitors that occur on your page, will have an impact, as the following statistics illustrate.

- Fifty-one percent of respondents to a survey said that social media has influenced their online transactions.
- Seventy-eight percent of consumers trust peer recommendations.

4. Provide Value

Regardless of what you are selling, someone is looking for information about your product or service. They want to be informed, educated, and even entertained. Value can be seen as links to other resources, blogs, bookmarks, pictures, videos, and product reviews. Quality content gives the consumer a reason to like you. If you share good content consistently over time, you have created the opportunity to earn their trust. The more customers like and trust you, the more willing they will be to buy from you. However, jumping into using social media and immediately communicating sales messages can be a big mistake. A sales message here and there is usually fine, but when that is all you do, you may have a problem. Take the time to develop your image and your message before you launch your social media marketing campaign.

5. Build Credibility

By following the previous tips, you will reach a point where people know and like your business, and you will start to gain customer's trust. Here are a few ways to build your organization's credibility.

- **Consistency.** The biggest commonality between leaders in the social media arena is consistency in providing information. Regularly updating information helps customers stay current and learn more about you, what you provide, and your opinions in your industry.
- **Build Relationships in the Community.** You are not the lone duck in the pond. Find others in your industry and make connections. There are great groups within most social media sites that will help you grow your business and allow you to use your own expertise. A great way to build these relationships is to provide links to these other businesses. By marketing collaboratively, you also provide potential customers with a more effective and appealing resource.

- **High Quality Content.** It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to establish yourself as a quality source. Quality is of paramount importance to potential clientele and is why they are doing product research. Providing quality information will help you win the respect of your readers and customers, as well as establish your credibility in the community and industry. This includes sharing useful information from your specific industry.
- **Interact.** Yes, you want to provide an avenue for your costumers to interact, but you need to be active as well. Participate in the online conversations among participants on your site. Get involved in conversations occurring in related groups and businesses.
- **Transparency.** Never try to fool your customers, because they will find out and respond with negative posts and blogs. Build credibility by being honest and explaining your motivations, if necessary.

6. Stay Informed

Social media is a constantly changing landscape with new, never-seen-before communications tools being introduced regularly. It is challenging to stay up to date on current trends and new sources. The Internet is full of resources to help you stay current and effective. Following users on Twitter or blogs can be very effective, as can following websites such as *www.socialmediaexaminer.com* and *www.socialmediasonar.com*

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