

SOCIAL MEDIA EXPLAINED

BUSINESS OWNERS ARE TURNING TO SOCIAL MEDIA TO MARKET THEIR BUSINESSES AND REACH NEW CUSTOMERS. ANITA CAMPBELL DISCUSSES SOME OF THE BEST OPTIONS

If you've ever visited a blog, set up a LinkedIn™ profile, watched a YouTube video, left a consumer review on a site like Yelp® or surfed through Facebook® to reconnect with old college friends – then you've participated in social media. “Social media” refers to a type of website, application or communications vehicle where people connect with one another; discuss and interact; share content and ideas; and build relationships. The most important word in the phrase “social media” is “social.”

Being more social online is a growing trend in our society. According to a Pew Internet & American Life Project tracking survey in December 2008, over one-third (35 percent) of adults now have a profile on a social networking website. That number has quadrupled since 2005 (it was 8 percent then). You can see how quickly this trend is growing. And although social media started out as personal activity, businesses have caught on and are getting in on the act.

Marketing maestro Seth Godin has written about today's “attention economy”: “In an attention economy, marketers struggle for attention, and if you don't have it, you lose.”

Let's carry Seth's idea one step further. One way that a small business can get attention is by becoming more “social” and engaging prospects and the public in more active ways in multiple places online – and also by sharing expertise and content freely at these sites.

This may require a change in your approach. Instead of thinking of your Web presence as consisting solely of your website, think in terms of creating satellite outposts on the Web at social media sites where your business interacts with others. In other words, you go to where your customers and prospects are. You join in communities where they are participating, or you start your own micro-communities inside larger social media sites around the Web.

MAJOR TIME SINK — OR ESSENTIAL 21ST-CENTURY MARKETING TOOL?

Whoever coined the phrase “there's no such thing as a free lunch” could have been talking about social media marketing. All marketing costs you something, in either time or money. Social media marketing is no exception. In fact, social media marketing often costs more

ANITA CAMPBELL

Founder & Editor
Small Business Trends
www.smallbiztrends.com

Anita Campbell is the founder of Small Business Trends, LLC, which manages online communities touching more than 250,000 small business owners and managers each month. Her award-winning Small Business Trends online publication has been highlighted in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, and has been recognized by MSNBC's *Your Business* as “Website of the Week” and HP's “Best Business Blogs.” Anita is a featured expert on the topic of Innovation for OPEN Forum. Find more insights from Anita at: www.openforum.com/innovation.



in time than in money. This reality has been a rude awakening for many a small business owner who was initially delighted with all the “free” marketing and PR possibilities afforded by social media.

Take the example of a blog. Setting up a blog is now considered a well-established technique to connect more closely with customers and the public, learn what your customers are thinking and share your messages in a conversational voice. A blog can be free and involve literally no out-of-pocket expense. But for your blog to be effective, you must “feed” it by adding content. Blogging takes time. It's nearly impossible to write a

substantive blog entry in under a half hour – chances are it will take you an hour or longer. Like any business activity, it's not without its cost – in this case, time – but that time can be well spent in terms of customer engagement for your brand.

When it comes to large social venues like Twitter™ and Facebook, it's frighteningly easy for you and your staff to fritter away huge amounts of time. It may be fun, even addictive. But from a business perspective, if this is done aimlessly it can be more noise than signal. At the end of the day, you may have no business results to show for it – no better brand recognition, no additional sales, no

happier customers. Often this disappointment results from approaching social media without a clear strategy and plan. Social media is not a one-size-fits-all activity; it's a rich landscape of websites, tools, applications and techniques.

YOU NEED A PLAN

Successful social media marketing for any business starts with a plan. It should be a subset of your overall marketing strategy, with very clear goals and a tactical course of action. To properly take advantage of social media, first step back and ask yourself some questions:

— *What are you trying to achieve?*

Refer back to the overall marketing objectives you created for your business. Are you trying to drive new customer acquisition? Brand recognition? Deepen relationships with existing customers to retain them? Cross-sell your products and services to existing customers? Just as clear goals and objectives are the foundation of your overall marketing plan, they should also drive your social media plan.

— *Who exactly is your target market?*

Be specific. Ideally you already have a clear picture of your target market in terms of demographic requirements and other characteristics. If so, this step should be straightforward. If you aren't sure, you'll need to do some research to identify which social media sites and tools to focus on (start with my short list on the opposite page). But think broadly, as social media can have a viral effect. People pass along links to content. This means that your message or content may be shared in one venue, yet often reach people through indirect means.

— *Which social media activities can help you achieve your marketing objectives?*

Now tie your social media tactics and activities to your marketing objectives. Do you need to find platforms to display your expertise and thought leadership? Amplify your brand by sharing your messages and content? Drive traffic to your website? Spread the word about discounts or special offers? Publicize events? Establish a dialogue with customers and the public, and create a two-way conversation? Monitor your brand at social sites?

Once you identify clear goals and objectives, it becomes much easier to figure out what you need to do each day, week or month with social media. A concrete plan helps you separate the activities that are enjoyable personal diversions (or downright time wasters) from those that drive real value to your business.

MONITORING YOUR SOCIAL IMPACT

Sound overwhelming? It's not, really. Some tools and utilities can make it much easier to manage. There are tools just to help monitor mentions of you, your products or your brand on the Web. Set up Google Alerts and Google Blog Alerts to be notified via email whenever you or your brand are discussed online. TweetBeep.com is a similar monitoring service that will send you alerts whenever you're mentioned on Twitter.

A variety of toolbars and applications exist that make it easy to update your social presence too. For instance, Ping.fm™ allows you to update numerous social media sites simply by posting a message in a single place. There are even applications such as TweetLater and Adjix™ that allow you to schedule Twitter updates in advance. TweetDeck and Seesmic Desktop allow you to better monitor and update your Twitter account from your computer or mobile device.

New tools are being developed all the time. Try some of them out. They can make your social media activities considerably more efficient and effective.

AND FINALLY...

Social media is a learning experience. It presents a dynamic, constantly evolving landscape. You'll want to refine your social media approach as you get your feet wet. You and your colleagues should spend more time on the activities that bring results, and eliminate activities that haven't panned out.

Make sure that you adjust your approach as your business grows and changes, too. What may serve you well today may not be what you require next year or the year after that in your business.

Whatever you do, don't remain static. Open yourself to the possibilities of this new "social world" on the Web.

WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA APPLICATION IS RIGHT FOR MY BUSINESS? SOME ADVICE FROM ANITA CAMPBELL —

There are literally hundreds – strike that – thousands of social media sites and applications. For small businesses, the following are the digital outposts Anita Campbell recommends as giving the best ROI for the time and money spent.

Twitter.com —

Twitter is a powerhouse for connecting with like-minded people, developing relationships, getting customer feedback and increasing brand visibility. It's also becoming a major traffic driver back to small business websites. Twitter works especially well with a blog, if you share links to your blog content with your Twitter followers.

LinkedIn.com —

Every professional should have a LinkedIn profile to display credentials. But to get real value out of LinkedIn, you need more. Consider setting up a LinkedIn Group around your business or around a topic your customers are interested in. Participate not only in your own Group, but join other related Groups too. Ask and answer questions in the LinkedIn Answers section. LinkedIn is a particularly good outpost to monitor those who market to the corporate or enterprise market – or who are hiring.

YouTube.com —

You can set up a YouTube channel to display videos that relate to your business, such as product demonstrations, how-to tutorials or website tour videos. People will find the videos by searching on YouTube itself, or by finding video results through search engines. Videos are one of the most viral (shared) forms of content today.

Facebook.com —

For many small businesses, Facebook is where your target market is networking and spending free time. You want to be seen there with a personal profile (for personal branding as an expert, speaker or author) and with a business/fan page around which your business can build a community. Remember to update your business page regularly.

MySpace.com —

If you are in the entertainment business or market to the youth market, a MySpace™ page is a useful outpost.

Slideshare.net and other document-sharing sites —

If you are in any kind of business or profession where you generate knowledge pieces in the form of PDF reports, PowerPoint® presentations, spreadsheets, forms and the like, then document-sharing sites are a way to show off your expertise. Set up a channel at key document-sharing sites. Remember to feed your content to these sites regularly.

Vertical-interest forums —

Don't forget the old-fashioned online forum/discussion board, especially for niche industries. You can find forums on just about any topic or any industry. Become an active participant or a moderator, answering queries and dispensing advice. Don't forget product forums on corporate sites if you have product expertise and are a service provider or consultant – they are a great place to show off your knowledge.

For more on how small businesses are using these sites to gain brand awareness, visit www.openforum.com.