

SOCIAL MEDIA GETTING STARTED

A NEW WORLD OF OPPORTUNITY AWAITS THE ASTUTE BUSINESS USER OF SOCIAL MEDIA: BUT WHERE TO BEGIN? JOHN JANTSCH PRESENTS SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES

It's becoming clear that social media is no longer marketing's new thing; it's marketing in the world we live in today. That's not to say that social media tactics are all you need to concern yourself with, but it does mean that social media tactics need to be considered in your marketing strategy. Rather than ask yourself if you should or should not use Facebook® or Twitter™, the question should be "How can Facebook and Twitter help me achieve my marketing objectives?" From this integrated viewpoint, social media participation can start to make more sense for each individual marketer's needs and goals.

CONTENT AS LEAD GENERATOR

Few areas of marketing have been more dramatically impacted by social media – and the Internet in general – than lead generation. The days of broadcasting your sales messages to willing or unwilling prospects are effectively over, with tools like TiVo®, spam filters and commercial-free radio keeping unwanted messages at bay. Lead generation today is more about being found than hunting. Online, this means appearing in the results when

people use search engines to find answers and products. SEO (search engine optimization) is one of the most important elements of lead generation, but it has changed dramatically over the past few years, becoming undeniably intertwined with social media.

What this means is creating a system of places where people – and search engines – can find your brand. Add a blog and podcast to the mix. Upload, tag and thoroughly describe images on sites like Flickr®, and house customer testimonial videos on YouTube. Create and optimize profiles on Facebook, LinkedIn®, Twitter and industry-related social networking sites. And become very proactive about generating positive reviews on sites like Yelp®, Google™ Maps and Insider Pages™. Otherwise, you're not really marketing "online" anymore.

OPTIMIZE YOUR ASSETS

Creating a profile or uploading a video are good ways to start building your online assets, but it's equally important that you take the time to fully optimize, tag and describe the content so that search engines can index it

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and prospects can engage with it in ways that support all your other branding activities.

In other words, link back to your website, but also write thorough descriptions, add images to profiles and create the most extended version of real estate possible. Give your social media assets the same care and attention that you might give a printed brochure, and they will serve your search engine efforts well.

THE HUB AND SPOKE MODEL

As you create these online assets, you need a primary website or blog as the central hub that ties all your social media activity together.

Your activity – or spokes – functions primarily as a way to lead prospects back to the much more fully developed content that resides on your website.

Your hub is the place where you can engage your prospects in a total education-based campaign that helps them understand that you have the solutions they are seeking. In fact, you can think of a great deal of your social media activity as a way to create awareness and an initial level of trust substantial enough for someone to want to know more. Social media and social networking, when combined, may be the ultimate permission-based marketing tool when viewed in this light.

BUILD ENGAGEMENT – AND TRUST

The social Web is a tremendous place to build your reputation, earn trust and gain influence. All these attributes may indeed lead to sales and profits, but not in the direct manner so many marketers crave. In fact, building trust online requires going to far greater lengths than networking at a local event might. It requires a greater level of initial engagement, transparency and consistency. While those may sound like buzzwords to some, they are generally accomplished by a willingness to give – before anyone ever asks.

This means demonstrating that it's not about you: educating, pointing to helpful information, admitting when your company makes a mistake, thanking, referring and serving customer needs in full view of a social public. By doing so, you can not only overcome the natural cynicism that exists online, you can reap the benefits of trust – including higher profits and shorter sales cycles.

EMPLOY BEST PRACTICES

So how do you start reaching out and engaging? The following are my recommendations for three of the most popular social networking sites.

Facebook is interesting because it has so many users and has built some very nice engagement tools.

Build a Fan Page —

Any business on Facebook can create a fan page for the business and start optimizing additional content there. Add applications, newsletter sign-up pages and events, and promote them to your “friends” on Facebook. When someone becomes a fan of your page, your updates on the page show up on his or her wall, providing additional exposure.

Take Advantage of the Apps —

Promote events, upload or record video, hold contests and polls. All this extra engagement is so easy to do using pre-built tools. And don't forget to integrate your Facebook activity back to your website and blog using a Facebook Fan Box.

Use Facebook Ads for Awareness —

You can target ads to Facebook members on all kinds of criteria and run pretty low-cost ad

campaigns. Generate awareness of your content, and you will get the chance to earn the trust it takes to actually sell something to someone.

LinkedIn has a reputation as a solid place to network, find prospects and even get hired.

Take Advantage of Your Profile —

This is a great brand asset; don't waste it. Make your profile informative, and make sure to add a photo, create a branded URL, link to your blog, products, workshops, etc.

Give First —

One of the top features on LinkedIn is something called Recommendations. You should acquire some recommendations, and I find the best way to get them is to give them. Choose people in your network whom you've worked with and write an honest statement of recommendation.

Demonstrate Your Expertise —

An often-overlooked feature, in my opinion, is the Question and Answer function. By answering questions thoughtfully, you can demonstrate expertise while potentially engaging contacts that are drawn to your knowledge.

Twitter is probably the hottest and least-understood social networking tool, but with a few consistent practices, you can derive plenty of value from Twitter.

Tweet Great Content —

Find inspiration by following people who always tweet interesting stuff, subscribe to blogs that feature great links and reviews, scan weekly and daily email news digests, cruise over to the del.icio.us popular page and read print publications of interest. All these sources (most of which can be scanned in a 15-minute sitting once you have them set up) are rich with content that your followers will want to read.

Get Familiar with Twitter Search —

For many power users, search is the most important feature of Twitter. You can use the Twitter advanced search tool to create elaborate searches that filter out only the tweets that address your specific industry in your specific geography. I would also include the use of the #hashtag as a search tool. Get in the habit of using it to promote your events and promotions.

Remind People You're on Twitter —

Use tools like the Tweetmeme plugin to make your content easy to tweet. Add your “follow me on Twitter” button to Web pages, email newsletters and email signature. Add your @name to your business cards, stationery and invoices.

MONITORING AND ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

It takes a powerful set of digital ears to monitor and engage in the millions of conversations going on simultaneously. By setting up filters, aggregators and alert services, you can find, monitor and even join real-time conversations about:

- Your customers' ongoing experience
- Any brand/product/CEO mentions
- Complaints about competing services
- Inaccurate information about your organization
- Thoughts and needs of journalists in your industry

YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLBOX SHOULD INCLUDE:

Google Alerts —

Google Alerts allows you to set up customer searches for any phrase and receive email or RSS alerts anytime your phrase shows up in online media, blogs, Web pages and news.

Search Twitter —

For now, monitoring Twitter is a separate stream – using the advanced search function allows you to set up very specific searches, even including geographic details. These searches produce RSS feeds and can then be subscribed to.

Tweetbeep.com —

Similar to Google Alerts, but for Twitter. Set up search phrases and receive notifications anytime your selected phrases show up in Twitter conversations.

Backtype.com —

Backtype is a search engine of sorts that focuses on blog comments. Blog comments don't often make it into the mainstream search results, so this is a way to listen in on this set of content.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS —

The rise of social media is introducing new concepts, terms and players into the mainstream. Here are a few (from this article) you may meet as you get started:

Aggregator —

Software that collects content through feeds from websites, blogs, tweets and any other online publication. Can be used to help you monitor references to your company, competitors and your business sector across the Internet.

del.icio.us —

Bookmarks are a reliable way to keep what's interesting to you on the Web within easy reach. Bookmark sharing is an important part of social media, and enables users to share topics of interest. In doing so they attract attention to popular references, often resulting in spikes of traffic to websites that carry relevant content.

RSS —

Really Simple Syndication – a venerable ancestor of social media and still one of the best ways to publish all kinds of content to subscribers, independently of your website or any other online destination.

@name —

A part of your online identity that may become as important as your email or Web address: this is how you can be accessed and followed on Twitter. It's worth registering your @name now, before someone else does.

#hashtag —

A way to add context to your Twitter posting – and make it easier to find as part of a shared group of messages tagged in the same way. Simply prefix the term with a “#” in the body of your tweet.

Tweetmeme —

An aggregation service for Twitter, providing categorized links to popular topics and enabling you to amplify their popularity by retweeting them to your Twitter network.