

# Use Social Media to Enable Innovation

Social media tools have many important business uses. One of the most powerful is the ability to foster innovation. With social media, businesses can tap into the needs, desires and opinions of a wide audience — and connect with a highly targeted group that is directly relevant to their businesses. These connections can be invaluable sources for new ideas and alternative ways of thinking.

Input gained through these communities can also be used to help improve existing products, refine new product ideas and fine-tune marketing and sales strategies. Moreover, social media provides access to a broader array of voices at little or no cost to your business.

This guide can help you use social media tools to help drive creativity in order to launch new products and services or improve your existing ones. It includes:

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## RAFE NEW YORK

*Rafe Totengco*  
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## USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO FOSTER INNOVATION

Innovation is often inspired by unexpected voices that bring a fresh perspective to solving a particular need. Social media encourages an intimate dialogue with people inside and outside one's normal circle of customers or colleagues. In addition to targeting customers, businesses should seek input from people in other industries and with different perspectives who may approach the challenge in a completely different way.

Until recently, companies seeking insight into customer needs had to rely on focus groups or surveys.

Learn more about social media at [openforum.com/socialmedia](http://openforum.com/socialmedia).



**DAVERO-SONOMA**

*Colleen McGlynn  
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No more. Social media tools like Twitter™, Facebook® and blogs are transforming how businesses develop new products and services or improve their current offerings.

By using social media tools, you can gain feedback from interested parties through an array of channels, find inspiration from a multitude of sources, test new concepts and much more. Businesses now have an unprecedented opportunity to engage potential buyers when they are still developing new products and services. From conceiving product concepts to refining product messaging to conducting beta tests, companies have access to a wide pool of ideas and insights that may well shape the future of the business.

As products progress from development to launch, businesses can continue to glean valuable intelligence by monitoring buyer behavior, gathering competitive data and scanning the marketplace to spark the next new innovation.

Social media tools can provide business owners with answers to questions, including:

- What do my customers like and dislike about my products and services?
- What new offerings would my customers be likely to buy from me?
- What is on my customers' minds?
- What emerging trends can I capitalize on to increase market share?

Here are six ways social media can help you innovate:

### 1. Use Crowdsourcing to Gain Insights

Crowdsourcing is the process of seeking the collective intelligence of the public for a particular purpose. In the words of author Jeff Howe, who coined the phrase crowdsourcing, “Passion existed before, but there was no way to exploit it. Crowdsourcing converts passion into an economic output that can drive progress, drive knowledge and even drive a business.”<sup>1</sup>

Crowdsourcing can be used to tap the latent talent of the crowd. For example, open up research and development beyond your four walls by inviting an array of people to take a shot at solving a particular problem — from overcoming a hurdle in product development to designing an entirely new product. Because your audience has a vested interest in seeing the challenge resolved, they can bring fresh ideas to the table.

Use tools such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn® and blogs while you are in the development stage of a new product or service to bounce ideas off a wider community and gather feedback about the direction of your project. Considering a new product feature? Why not query your Facebook followers — clients, employees, partners and other supporters. They may validate your thinking, set you on a better path or help you come up with something different.

You can use location-based mobile tools, such as Foursquare™ ([foursquare.com](http://foursquare.com)), to take this a step further and reward those who participate through content and promotion partnerships. In a game-like model, Foursquare users receive points for visiting places, adding content and participating in other activities, which increase their online status. It's an engaging way to encourage valuable contributions.

Additionally, tools such as WebStorm ([brightidea.com/webstorm.bix](http://brightidea.com/webstorm.bix)) by BrightIdea™ can facilitate crowdsourcing by gathering and managing ideas from an unlimited number of employees and customers.

Use social media as one source of input, but not the only input. For instance, if you are considering a new product feature, you may find it valuable to ask your audience to weigh in via your company blog, Facebook Fan Page or Twitter account. Use these tools in conjunction with other input tools, such as surveys and customer outreach.

Also, be sure to set expectations appropriately. When you seek feedback via social media, show that you genuinely are interested in what others have to say. You may want to use a special offer to give your followers an incentive to respond. Listen, acknowledge the input and thank those who offer it, even if it's negative or critical. But avoid committing in advance that you will act on all reader suggestions. You may not be prepared to do so.

## 2. Blog to Spark Creativity

Blogging can encourage two-way conversation and customer commenting, which can help foster creativity if you blog about the right topics and ask for reader input. As you read through news stories and other sources for blog topics, you are able to stay on top of market shifts that may present opportunities for new products or services or spark new ideas.



### BLU DOT

*John Christakos, Maurice Blanks, Charlie Lazor*  
*Members Since: 1997*

## 3. Follow the Competition

Watching the competition, as well as innovation occurring at other companies in other industries, can inspire creative thinking. With social media, it's easy to track your competitors. Use these social media tools to help stay apprised of their activities:

- **Track competitors.** Use sites like TweetBeep ([tweetbeep.com](http://tweetbeep.com)) and Google™ Alerts ([google.com/alerts](http://google.com/alerts)) to receive auto alerts each time your competitors are mentioned online. You can also subscribe to their Twitter feeds.
- **Become a Facebook fan of your competitors.** Sign up as a fan on your competitors' Facebook pages so you can read the conversations they have with their clients, partners and customers.
- **Subscribe to competitors' blogs.** This can help keep you stay up on their news, as well as the direction they're headed.

- **Check your competitors' LinkedIn profiles.** By looking at their LinkedIn ([linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com)) accounts, you may discover information about their upcoming plans. For example, new hires in a particular area of expertise may indicate a shift in business strategy or focus.

#### 4. Track Technological Changes

Use social media to track new technology innovations that you can use:

- **Subscribe to blogs.** Read technology blogs to receive the latest news about solutions that foster collaboration and innovation. You can choose to receive blog updates via email or through RSS feeds, which consolidate the content you want and deliver it to you on a regular basis in an easily consumable format. Seek new ideas both within and outside your industry. Subscribe to industry blogs as well as entrepreneurial blogs.
- **Follow creative thinkers.** Follow people on Twitter whom you admire and find interesting. You never know what may spark your next great product idea or business venture. Connecting with other innovators can help you advance new ideas and learn how to make the most of emerging technology.
- **Be an active participant in business forums.** Many small businesses face common challenges and roadblocks. Forums provide an opportunity to gather input and collective intelligence from a supportive group. This could be a regional networking organization or a larger forum, such as OPEN Forum® ([openforum.com](https://openforum.com)). You can also keep in touch with other small business via Twitter on OPEN Forum Pulse<sup>SM</sup> ([pulse.openforum.com](https://pulse.openforum.com)).

#### 5. Foster Teamwork

Use these social media tools to help foster teamwork and productivity at your company:

- **Create Facebook and LinkedIn groups.** In addition to your general Facebook and LinkedIn pages, you may want to create special pages that focus on a particular area of interest. For example, if a subset of your clients or employees has similar challenges, you might consider creating a group where they can actively engage in conversations with you, your employees and other like-minded businesses to share ideas and tackle problems together.
- **Seek input through Twitter.** Whether you are looking to overcome a product development bottleneck or are undecided on what direction to take your next service offering, you can gather ideas from a vast audience by searching for specific keywords or by following thought leaders on Twitter.
- **Ensure collaboration.** The more your employees feel like they're part of the product/service development process, the more they will want to contribute. If any employee's idea does lead to a new company innovation, be sure to give that employee credit publicly. They will appreciate how much you value their input.

#### 6. Integrate to Gain Insights

Encourage innovation by staying in touch with your customers, partners and market influencers in real time. By bringing together the voices of many who have a common interest, you gain unprecedented insights that can help drive creativity and strengthen your competitive advantage. These methods should be woven into the fabric of your business, keeping you ahead of the game as new advances and trends emerge.

You can tap a variety of social media tools to research your market and create more desirable new products and services. If you use these tools properly, the results can be invaluable in your efforts to innovate and grow your business. ■

<sup>1</sup> From the OPEN Forum video, *Exploring a New Business Model: Crowdsourcing* [openforum.com/crowdsourcing](https://openforum.com/crowdsourcing).

# Executing Your Social Media Plan to Aid Innovation

By Anita Campbell



Social media should be tied to achieving key business strategies and goals. Decide what those are. For instance, do you want to use social media to gather ideas to refresh your product and service offerings? Learn/share industry best practices? Stay abreast of what your competitors are doing? Open a dialogue with customers and gain greater customer intimacy? Start with a few key goals. Doing this will help establish a framework and purpose for your social media activities.

Here are ways to help execute your social media plan.

## Identify Your Social Media Outposts

Decide where to establish a social media presence. A company blog is often a good starting point. Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are chosen by many small businesses. Once you decide the key places where you plan to establish and maintain a presence, observe those communities. Identify those who use that particular service effectively and watch what they do. Pick up ideas. Don't be afraid to try new things on your own. The book has not been closed on social media, and exciting new approaches are being tried all the time.

## Assign Team Responsibilities

Social media, like any function, needs to be "owned." Some department or some employee should be responsible. If you leave the responsibilities vague, chances are no one will feel responsible and you will be disappointed. Social media lends itself to team approaches, i.e., two or three staff members working in shifts or dividing up the duties according to the type of social media. A team approach helps keep individual workloads manageable.

## Create Your Update Schedule

It's wise to have an "editorial calendar" or a "social media calendar" specifying when you will update various social sites. This gives you a structure for daily activities and helps you manage the workload. An example calendar might consist of one blog post per week, two or three Twitter updates per business day, three Facebook updates per week and so on.

## Monitor Places Discussing Your Brand

Today it's possible that your brand may be discussed at literally thousands of places across the Web — whether you like it or not. Plan to monitor online mentions of your business, your executives, your products and services. Monitor search engine results periodically. This way you can identify discussions taking place across the Web. Retail or consumer businesses should consider monitoring Yelp® ([yelp.com](http://yelp.com)) and other sites that attract customer reviews. Take prompt action in the case of customer complaints or negative issues.

## Be Prepared for Follow-up

A large part of being effective with social media is "listening" and "conversing," rather than broadcasting one way. Social media should be approached with the idea of talking with others and taking in what they say. For instance, on Twitter, if someone sends you a direct message or sends you an @ message, then you should respond.

## Collect Data and Analyze

Collect data and information about your daily interactions on social media. Jot down anecdotes.

Keep track of examples you've seen of others using social media inventively. If you collect any kind of statistics, such as the number of retweets noted on TweetMeme ([tweetmeme.com](http://tweetmeme.com)) keep track of them, too.

### Incorporate Social Media Input Internally

Go over what you have learned through social media channels internally in team meetings. Include relevant points in internal reports. Incorporate ideas and suggestions into your product development process, if you decide to adopt the suggestions. Use observations about competitors and industry leaders to improve your

own processes: product development, marketing, sales and customer support.

By creating a social media schedule, sticking to it and monitoring the results, you can be on your way to building a successful social media plan that can help you achieve your business strategies and goals. ■

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### *Toolbox: Put Social Media to Work for Innovation*



Interested in using social media to help create new products and services for your business? The key to putting these tools to work is to apply the best tool for a given situation. Use the following guidelines as a springboard to help deploy social media in your company's efforts to innovate.

#### Twitter

By reaching many — and receiving feedback from several sources — you gain the most widespread perspective possible. Use a filter for those ideas that don't fit your objectives, and leverage the input of followers to tap into out-of-the-box thinking. Some ways to use Twitter for innovation include:

- **Tweet a link to a short online questionnaire** in which you ask respondents for feedback on new products, services or other innovations, packaging designs, etc.
- **Tap into the quick and energetic nature** of tweets to brainstorm ideas related to product, management and marketing innovation. Reach out with an idea and ask others to respond.
- **Leverage the local potential of tweeting** by reaching out to those in a particular area to ask specific questions regarding the opening of a new retail location, events in local markets or other local issues.
- **Search for tweets from fellow tweeters** in your area to track innovation and competition. Use Twitter to research the market for your new product idea.
- **Follow thought leaders and business groups** to find out about local events, a key activity to help foster ideas and lead to innovative thinking.



### *Toolbox: Put Social Media to Work for Innovation, cont'd.*

#### Facebook

The strength of Facebook is that it enables you to tap into your social network to build on ideas. You never know where the next great idea will come from; those who have a personal connection with you will often work the hardest to provide creative input. They may also know you in a way that sparks an idea on how you can use your personal strengths for innovation. Some ways to use Facebook for innovation include:

- **Add a company page on Facebook** and pose a question to your fans. Without giving away your innovation plans, ask for product development guidance, marketing tactic feedback or other guidance. The responses may vary in their relevance since your fans aren't necessarily knowledgeable about your industry, but some nuggets of valuable information may emerge.
- **Use Facebook to add personal connections** to your advisory board or board of directors to inject some diversity of input into your innovation efforts. Creating advisory boards will help to sustain your innovation, and your fans are one of the pools of people to pull from when assembling these important company resources.

#### Blogging

Writing a blog is still one of the most powerful means of establishing and maintaining credibility. Sharing what you know can prove the depth of your expertise and encourage others to respond to you, thereby helping to foster innovation. Some ways to use blogging for innovation include:

- **Post an article that states your opinion** and then ask for input to build on your ideas, stretch your thinking or challenge your assumptions. All of this input has the potential to spark fresh ideas.
- **Blog to establish your expertise** with peers to start the process of gaining entry to peer groups that can help you continually innovate. Networking and participating in peer-related activities is key to innovation. A blog can establish your expertise or serve as an ongoing reminder to others that you are an important resource.
- **Post a survey on your blog** that asks questions important to your innovations efforts.
- **Engage in a back-and-forth dialogue** that helps facilitates the refinement of your innovative ideas. This process is likely to improve your thinking.

#### LinkedIn

LinkedIn brings together groups of people with common business interests and, therefore, has the potential to offer input from an informed community of peers. Some ways to use LinkedIn for innovation include:

- **Build a community** and reach out with opinions that will prompt valuable feedback from those who understand your type of business and industry.
- **Join communities to keep up to date** on developments that can prompt “connective thinking” — ideas that build on the resources or strengths of more than one person to innovate.
- **Post a link to a survey** that asks question related to your innovation plans.

# Cardmember Profile: Julie Goldman, The Original Runner Company

## Online Retailer Finds Social Media a Match for Innovation

The Original Runner Company ([originalrunners.com](http://originalrunners.com)), a company that designs hand-painted fabric aisle runners, has adopted social media wholeheartedly to support innovation and create a sense of community across the event-planning industry. Here's how company founder Julie Goldman developed the company's social media strategy to launch a new product and more.

### Promote Innovation

When Goldman and her team of five employees wanted to launch a new runner color, they turned to their 2,000 followers on Twitter (@WeddingRunners). Ten percent of their followers got engaged and supported development of a hot pink runner. This input pushed the company's creative power in a direction it might not have gone otherwise. "Two hundred people asked us for runners in Eva Hot Pink, so we took their advice. It quickly became one of our top sellers," says Goldman.

The company has also found Facebook useful in building a connection with customers. This friendly dialogue has helped make the company's products even more memorable.

### Continual Streaming of Input

By establishing habits that enable the company to stay connected to customer input The Original Runner Company maintains a "slow drip" of input that impacts its growth and development. These mechanisms for continually tracking customer feedback ensure that the company's innovation tracks to customer interests and preferences. As the company makes decisions, this input is key to determining its direction.

Goldman uses free tools such as TweetBeep and Google Alerts to track what consumers say about her company and her competitors. She also seeks collective knowledge from beyond their target market and gains new ideas by participating in business forums, such as Make Mine a Million, the collaboration among American Express OPEN®, Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence and Women's Leadership Exchange.



### Continual "Refreshing" of Followers

Continually expanding and building its online community is central to ensuring that the ideas flowing into the company remain fresh. The company devotes time and energy into expanding the universe of people it is connected to through social media.

Goldman and one other employee spend about 15 hours a week on their social media activities, including writing blog posts, sharing news on Twitter and Facebook and encouraging more people to join their network.

"Once a month, I go to LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook to add more followers and fans. If I see that a wedding planner and I have many friends in common, I know they're a good person to connect to, so I 'friend' them," Goldman says. "Each month, I send an invitation to my new friends, asking them to become a fan. Because we know people in common, they're more likely to connect with me."

## Listen to Peers

The Original Runner Company has built a loyal following among event planners. Its blog ([originalrunners.com/blog](http://originalrunners.com/blog)) is a source for event ideas and press opportunities for florists, wedding planners and others who use runners. “I also use Twitter to share ideas and promote our media coverage,” Goldman says. “Many bridal bloggers retweet my posts, which further validates what we’re saying.”

By participating in social media outlets such as The Knot ([theknot.com](http://theknot.com)) and online review sites such as WeddingWire ([weddingwire.com](http://weddingwire.com)), The Original Runner Company’s clients have helped spread the word about its offerings. The company has also received more than 20 positive reviews on WeddingWire — further driving new business. ■

View *The Original Runner Company’s business profile on OPEN Forum* at [openforum.com/originalrunnercompany](http://openforum.com/originalrunnercompany).

## Social Media Resources

The highly collaborative nature of social media makes it a great source of new ideas. These resources can help you understand how to use social media to help encourage innovation and teamwork.

### OPEN Forum

[openforum.com/socialmedia](http://openforum.com/socialmedia)

OPEN Forum’s social media page can help you learn from industry experts, as well as Cardmembers who use social media tools to drive business growth. Also download the OPEN Book: Social Media and watch videos explaining how to take advantage of the power of social media.

### Alltop®

[alltop.com](http://alltop.com)

OPEN Forum blogger Guy Kawasaki has built a hand-picked news aggregator service called Alltop. Alltop can help keep you updated on any topic in an easy-to-scan format.

### Digg™

[digg.com](http://digg.com)

Through the process of sharing and discovery, Digg promotes conversations within its highly participatory community.

### Facebook for Business Superguide

[interactiveinsightsgroup.com/blog1/facebook-for-business-superguide](http://interactiveinsightsgroup.com/blog1/facebook-for-business-superguide)

This page from Interactive Insights Group provides pointers and links so you can help sharpen your Facebook skills to innovate and promote your business.

### Reddit

[reddit.com](http://reddit.com)

Much like Digg, Reddit is a social news web site that allows users to share links to Internet content. Users submit articles, vote on them and engage in discussions.

### Sphinn

[sphinn.com](http://sphinn.com)

Sphinn is an Internet marketing news aggregator. Like other social news sites, Sphinn shows the most popular marketing articles as voted by the Sphinn community.





### *Glossary of Social Media Terms*

To use social media effectively for your business, it's important to understand the terminology.

**Aggregator:** A software or online service that collects news headlines or other content in one place to help users easily follow the latest news, tweets or blogs from their favorite sources.

**Beta Test:** The first public test of a new product or service, usually released to a limited number of users. Users then provide feedback on how well the product or service works to help accelerate innovation.

**Blog:** A web site with frequently updated entries, typically consisting of news and commentary, graphics and video focused on a particular subject area. Blogs typically enable readers to post responses.

**Community:** A large group of people who share common interests and interact by communicating via an online site. Individuals share their opinions online to create an online community and become a valuable place to create a business presence.

**Crowdsourcing:** A way to conduct research or gain insight through an open call to a large group of people — a crowd — and soliciting their contributions.

**Facebook Fan:** An individual who has signed up to receive regular feeds from an organization's Facebook page.

**Facebook Group:** A Facebook page based on a topic that creates a community of people to promote, share and discuss items of interest.

**Follower:** A person who follows someone else's Twitter updates, also called tweets. A large group of followers designates your organization's popularity on the site and can help generate even more followers.

**Location-Based Mobile Tool:** A tool or service that takes advantage of the global positioning system in mobile phones to deliver personalized information to the user about what services — such as shops, restaurants or entertainment — are in their current location.

**Retweet:** To repeat someone else's tweet and give them credit for it. This is generally a vote of confidence for the original author. Retweets can help improve a Twitter account's exposure and the number of followers.

**Social Bookmarking:** A method employed by Internet users to share, organize, search and manage content. Some social bookmarking sites have a system that allows users to vote on the bookmarks they find interesting.

**Tweets:** Short messages of up to 140 characters that are sent via Twitter.

**Web Feed:** A web feed (or news feed) is a format used to provide users with frequently updated content. Content distributors syndicate a web feed, allowing users to subscribe to it. A web feed is also called a syndicated feed.

## VISIT OPEN FORUM

For more OPEN Insight Guides on Social Media, like this, visit [openforum.com/socialmedia](http://openforum.com/socialmedia). You can find articles on a broad range of other business topics on [openforum.com](http://openforum.com), the online community from American Express OPEN designed to give business owners information and insights that can help them build their businesses. There are articles by business experts such as:

- Guy Kawasaki of Alltop®
- John Jantsch of DuctTape Marketing
- Anita Campbell of Small Business Trends
- Henry Blodget of Business Insider
- Adam Ostrow of Mashable
- And more ...

In addition to these articles and discussions, Cardmembers can create a profile and connect with other business owners in the Connectodex<sup>SM</sup>, giving them an opportunity to build exposure for their companies.

Twitter users are invited to follow @openforum for the latest headlines from OPEN Forum. You can also nominate yourself for OPEN Forum Pulse, which brings together the Twitter feeds of some of the most-followed business owners and industry leaders, by visiting [pulse.openforum.com](http://pulse.openforum.com).

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