



White Paper

Harnessing Social Media for Business

Get Social

Social media isn't going anywhere so here's how you can get further in your commitment

Social media sounds like a whimsical way to waste time but for the public relations value of a company, whether large or just a one-person operation, the value is vast. But if you're going to succeed, you actually may have to ignore some of the very traits which made you successful. Such as self-promotion. Your social media world grows when you share what's helpful to other people, not just what you're trying to sell. "Wait," you say, "My product can help them." That may be but they will still feel like they've signed on to a commercial, not a partnership. When someone links to you or adds you, they're allowing you into their world and all the people who inhabit it. That's a trust.

Where To Start

Understanding this, where exactly do you begin when you have so many choices? Do you Twitter, get LinkedIn, Facebook or some other form that is so common that we can actually use it as a verb? At the start, you have to ask what your business plans on being and how much of an effort are you willing to give. Take Facebook. Even though it's recommended that comments by the company are made regularly, you can get away with only occasionally posting and your fans may very well fill your wall anyway, with comments, pictures and their own musings. But do you want to try and "get away with something." You may not even have to, slowly rolling out content you've already created and package in a form that might feel like a value-add to the reader. There may be aspects of your company newsletter or other forms of custom publishing you could share. Proctor and Gamble, for example, has its blog also through Facebook so if it updates one, in a sense, it's an update to the other. Pictures are another way to really bring your brand to life, provided it has a natural feel to it. A weakness of Proctor's page actually is its photos for this reason and its lack of volume, considering the size of the company. Moving pictures—even better, if it truly relates. Nothing is more transparent than an embed that adds little to no value—especially if you're speaking to a high tech audience, which has seen every bell and whistle (and may have even invented a few).

But if that sounds like a lot of work then you may have been born to Tweet. Have just 140 characters of thought? You could become a Twitter superstar. Just ask Jeanne Bowerman, who gained 5000 followers by just being a part of a screenwriting online get-together and averaging 80 tweets a week. Though you may not have to go that tweet-happy, Bowerman says you can't exactly just check in once a week and expect to keep readers happy. Not so daunting when

you realize that the shortest comment mixed in or a simple “look at this” isn’t seen as lazy since brevity is the whole point of the Twittersphere.

But what about LinkedIn. This form of social media is very clear—for the majority, keep it work related. While you may have been clever in mixing in business with pleasure on the other forums, here you can’t be so subtle and might even lose points for trying. LinkedIn has two leading schools of thought—one is to gain as many followers as possible while another says be incredibly exclusive. If you want to simply start a business community, go with the first. However, because others may be of the second mind, be prepared to try and convince them to join you by a little bit of an individual note in your invite. One of the biggest mistakes LinkedIn participants make is the assumption that others remember them from technically having been at the same company or whatever connection and they can just ask for an add and get it. Don’t be afraid to specify where you met the person and/or why it would be good for them to link to you.

If you want to be exclusive yourself, ask where the limits are. If you have just five members after a year, clearly you’ve taken it too far but ask yourself what the value of a potential extra link is to yourself and others. It can serve you when you give someone a connection and they find you only have 50 members, all of whom they would benefit from. It gives off an aura of you being the kind of person who understands their needs and doesn’t waste their time with your niece who’s in school and thought it would be neat to connect with their uncle.

Next, join organizations on LinkedIn as you will also be defined this way to others in your profile. Again, keep them mostly to your profession and vet them out—some are clearly just trying to sell you something and your linkers won’t appreciate trusting your judgment and then finding out the organizations you linked to are not worth their time. Feel free to add in one that expresses your interests outside of business as that will humanize you. But choose 10 of those out of 11 organizations you’re a part of and you’ve muddled your profile.

Finally, make a regular habit of checking who your connections have added themselves. Choose the top two that would really create value to your own list. Don’t be afraid to ask them for an introduction because, ya know, you just might get it! Ask them for 10 intros and you might get ignored forever!

The next area of social networking feels like it has been around since ice cream socials: blogging. This can be a particularly daunting branch of the social tree since not all bloggers have equal writing skills. You may have had the staying power for Twitter’s 140 but now you may have to show some real chops.

A blog is still the standout feature to social media and must be intelligently personalized, according to Joe Mazzarella, president of Travel Sciences, a

Hartford, CT-based travel technology company. "The content needs to project you as an expert and also your personal experiences," he offers. "You also need to contribute your thoughts to the comments side so people know you're willing to read their ideas and have a dialogue with them."

Truthfully, a blog can be a blessing and a curse---it's an opportunity to regularly reach an audience, but it's also a commitment that can take away from other business responsibilities. It can even grow stale if you don't truly have enough fresh content to justify the amount of posts. So how do you find the right balance of frequency?

Jeffrey Eisenberg, online marketing expert and co-author of *New York Times* Bestseller *Waiting for Your Cat To Bark?*, says at a minimum you should blog every other week. "I don't believe a blog has to be constantly fed," Eisenberg says. "Though readers have to know if they check in every once in a while they're going to get something new---and something they'll like." But he also says it comes down to the number of staffers who contribute: "If you're one person, you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself when you update several times a day."

That would seem to jive well with Michael Hyatt, one of the more successful bloggers in publishing. As CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers, he writes on his blog that his "frequency sweet spot" is four to five times a week, but doesn't like to post more than once a day. The result: He regularly gets more than 50 comments per post.

Beyond just the setup, you can go one step further and even have a company run most of your social media for you. Jeff Cohen, president of Las Vegas-based JWCE Travel, a travel technology and services company, says his offering can take care of the majority of content so the agent doesn't have to invest anything more than they want to.

"We can capture a profile on new sign-ups and make it a lead source for travel agents without needing them to be personally responsible," he says. "We can also solve the problem of transportability. If you want to switch from Facebook to MySpace, you have to do your whole social media from scratch, but we have the ability to change over seamlessly."

They also have moderators available for chat rooms, so if you're not there the conversation can still be kept going. "The cost can be as little as in the hundreds of dollars a month to something more complex," Cohen says. The *2011 Social Media Marketing Industry Report* by Michael Stelzner says that outsourcing is, in his words, underutilized, sharing that only 28% are doing this for social media. But that's actually double the percentage of the previous year. Whether it

doubles again in the next year is anyone's guess, but it's clear that the CEO for your competitor isn't necessarily writing their own blog (you knew it, didn't you!)

Stelzner has the top three areas for outsourcing as design/development, content creation and analytics. Bottom line, any outsourcing opportunities like JWCE Travel exist, regardless of the field you're in, so your time must be considered when deciding who, if anyone, you bring in.

Deeper Into The Numbers

But let's look at Stelzner's numbers a little further. If you think social media is something for you to get to later, his tabulations say 90% of marketers agree that social is important to their business. A major question is always how much time to put in—the simple answer is however much is bringing you back results. But Stelzner's numbers see a direct correlation between social media experience and the amount of the work week that a marketer focuses on it. 63% of people with at least 3 years of experience put in over 10 hours a week while only 41% of those with less experience do the same. This may be another reason to look at outsourcing, because being a newbie may be hurting how much revenue social media can bring in and, by the time you get experience, you may already be way behind. Think about it? How long ago did Twitter really get into the fold? Can you afford just to wait years to decide social media may not be a passing fad?

An undervalued aspect of social media is its effect on search engine optimization but Stelzner has almost two-thirds as saying their search ranking rose after getting involved.

And, for those who think getting involved in social will cost more, Stelzner's numbers say half saw a decrease in overall spending by getting involved. The effect on direct mail may be a major reason since it had been such a major part of marketing budgets for decades and social media allows you to save the stamp. In fact, Stelzner says only 8% of large businesses with 1000 or more employees will be increasing their direct mail while 28% will *decrease*. A trend that's sure to be a joy to ink companies!

The Fear Factor

Hopefully you're starting to look in the mirror from this and realize that social media isn't going away—it only grows. Ask yourself what you thought of Twitter when it first came out? Who's going to want to limit their comments to 140 characters? Answer: everyone. Experiment with it, like any other new variable you add to the fold. And don't be afraid to make mistakes. Tweets are practically their own language and it will take you a bit to get the hang of it, you blog may

just not be updated daily as you first intended, but, the key, is to be sincere in this social world. If you're participating just for the sake of it, this will come through. Just remember to ask yourself at least one question: is this engaging? Or am I? Just your willingness to talk to your audience about their comments can do a world of good.

Bottom line, use a little time to take inventory of the resources you have and what kind of commitment you can give to this while not letting it overtake the rest of your business. Believe it or not, many a company has been hurt by that employee who spent all day thinking of their 400-word blog entry when other business needed to be tended to.

Or if you're afraid of even getting started, find the employee who isn't or consider hiring one who isn't. Who knows? You may even one day find social media fun. Strange as it sounds, the majority of it is supposed to be!