

## When and how should a business engage in social media marketing?

In its simplest form, social media is engaging in transparent, community-based online conversations. The power of social media, in terms of marketing, is the ability to build a trusted network of relationships through those conversations, and then tap into that network. In and of itself, social media represents nothing new, but rather a new platform for doing the same thing people have done since the dawn of society; communicating.

Social media is not the same as a website, brochure, TV commercial or pay-per-click ad. Instead of simply broadcasting your message, the key is to offer value. This is after all a conversation, and conversations are not one way. The conversation won't last long if all you do is talk about yourself. Be an expert or industry leader. Offer tips and advice, solve problems, make introductions. This is the value of any conversation, and this will lead to building a network of trusted relationships, which is the goal of social media marketing.

Here's a simple roadmap for getting involved in social media marketing:

- Define your goals
- Choose your channels and secure your identity(ies)
- Understand the conversation landscape
- Create your communication plan
- Choose your champions
- Start

When defining your goals, think about the process you'd like your "listeners" or "followers" to go through. Will you direct them through your website or blog, or will you encourage them to contact you directly? Or perhaps your purpose is more branding or reputation related. Either way, you must start by defining what the finish line looks like.

Choosing the channels you use will depend on where your customers, competitors and influencers are. For example, LinkedIn is a place for business professionals averaging about 40 years of age. Facebook and MySpace have younger audiences who are principally engaged in leisure activities. You need to choose the appropriate channels based on what you're offering.

As an aside, something of particular importance nowadays is carving out your online identity across the various social media channels. Whether your plan on using them in the near future or not, securing your brand or identity is important. Just like the domain gold rush of the late 90s, each social media channel has its own fixed set of identities (e.g. Bob's Fish House, Microsoft, etc.). If you're particularly concerned with someone "squatting" on your identity, it would be advisable to create accounts in all the popular channels. Using a paid service like knowem.com can automate this process.

Understanding the conversation landscape means understanding what's currently being said. See how others are offering value and building trusted networks, and take notes.

Your communication plan should focus on the types of topics to discuss, what to avoid, the tone of conversation, etc. This should be designed to present your company's brand appropriately, and keep you focused in on your goals. Defining the frequency of your involvement is also very important. You don't necessarily need to post a tweet every 20 minutes. You may decide that a monthly blog post is sufficient for your goals.

Choosing champions is a critical step that most companies overlook, and is one of the most common reasons why they fail. Champions are the communicators. They do the tweeting and facebooking and blogging. They need to clearly understand the communication plan, and be diligent with their conversations.

And finally, the key takeaway: Start. Don't get paralyzed by over analysis. Take that first step, and get involved. Your customers are already out there, and they're already talking about you. Your competitors are already out there, and they're talking to your customers.

## About the Author

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