

Social Status - How to Grow Using Social Media

How several area businesses use social media to grow and prosper.

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This month, I “met” ten business connections online via social media—that’s as many as I met in the “real world.” Even when I went to a live event and made new contacts, I not only entered them into my database, but also searched for them on LinkedIn and Facebook. No, I’m not a stalker. I’m just one of the many social media users who have discovered that this new range of technological tools, once only the playground of the young and early adopters of technology, has become a broad, deep, and powerful new business enhancer. Note that I use the word “enhancer.” Social media must be a part of your marketing plan, not a substitute for the media that came before it. A digital immigrant (born long before the PC era), I still strongly believe that paper-based communications, the telephone, and face-to-face connections are still critical elements of a sound marketing and public relations strategy.

Over the past year, social media sites have seen phenomenal growth and engagement rates. Facebook has more than 150 million active users, and the fastest growing segment is people over the age of 30. Close to 2 million “tweets” are reported each day on Twitter. More than 77% of active Internet users read blogs. And LinkedIn boasts a highly affluent database of decision-makers.

Social media is any form of online media that enables interaction – two-way communication, collaboration, commentary, and sharing of images like photos and videos. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and wikis are all examples of social media. The reader also has an opportunity to be a participant. The question is, “how can we harness the potential of social media to help our businesses?” Below is a collection of ways “true believers” have used social media.

Networking and Communication

Businesses that rely on “people connections” for their livelihood are discovering the power of social media. “Through my 1,675 LinkedIn connections, I can reach more than 12.8 million people,” says Matt Schwartz, president of MJS Executive Search in Tarrytown, New York. How can you build a network like Schwartz has? “I search for people who I am connected to or indirectly connected to who would be worthwhile to know better,” says Schwartz. Through LinkedIn, he reaches out to people directly, or asks one of his connections to make the introduction. He customizes his note - something few people do, but should to the prospect by including a specific day and time he will call them. Schwartz estimates that social media has saved his company more than \$10,000 per year over more traditional research and networking approaches. Social media is all about leveraging relationships to get in the door with prospects.

Time-pressed professionals have discovered that social media has opened a 24/7 gateway to meeting, greeting, and chatting. Sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter keep you in front of clients and prospects. For example, when someone is your friend on Facebook, your face becomes a regular on his homepage; especially if you update pictures, status, profile, and connections regularly.

Steve Schwartz, a professional LSAT tutor, started the 2009 LSAT Study/Discussion Facebook group. It rapidly became one of his largest traffic sources, with 140 members. The group had searched Facebook to find an online community and automatically came together with a shared affinity for something— preparing for the LSATs. Schwartz used the group to soft-sell its members. He offered free LSAT tips to the group members and hosted the study and discussion group. He established himself as an expert in this community and as the go-to guy for tutoring and LSAT prep classes—his for-fee services.

Social media enables professionals to learn about and target exactly the types of prospects, partners, and colleagues they want to interact with. Contacts can be easily qualified because social media sites can be searched by interest category, by geography, by company, and a host of other variables. No name tags or appetizers are involved and you can even network in your pajamas.

Relationship Cultivation

Social media not only facilitates relationships with people, it also deepens relationships with companies or

brands. Through posts on Twitter, blogs, and YouTube, Andao Tea (a high-end beverage brand based in Long Island) has established a connection with its drinkers through which they can educate consumers on traditional Chinese tea drinking culture. Because of the access customers have to Andao through video and casual communication, the brand is perceived as “having a face,” rather than just being a name on a product. Rob Heinrich, co-founder of Andao stresses, “It’s not about the hard sell, but more about a conversation.” But how does the conversation convert to getting business? The reality is that people who feel passionately about a product will form an affinity for a brand they associate with that product. Andao, for example, talks or tweets about how healing with tea is one of the oldest traditions in the world. They educate and cultivate really good feelings about tea. They bring tea lovers together as a group and make personal connections. Those connections ultimately sell products.

Social media communities like Facebook encourage users to share personal facts, pictures, likes, and affinities. Starting conversations becomes easier when contacts have common interests or can use a Status Update as the basis for further discussion (for example: Nancy A. Shenker just sent out March newsletter. Anyone have any great ideas for the April one?). Blogging enables business owners to share philosophies and values, experiences, and insights, which also builds credibility and helps potential prospects get a better sense of who they are dealing with.

Trend Watching and Eye Opening

Social media can also enhance your process of learning about a new category or industry when researching new prospects. Subject matter experts often congregate within online “membership groups.” David Adler, CEO of Bizbash, hosts Event Planners Gather on LinkedIn. The group now has close to 5,000 members. Herd mentality does not change online. The more members a group has, the more credibility the group has. By having a group of 5,000 members, Adler has established BizBash as a guru. Green business is another category that has rapidly attracted an online community of like-minded people seeking information and contacts. One green Facebook group has close to 2,000 members from around the world. For businesses looking for resources, guidance, or alliance partners in fragmented or new industries, social media has become a great place to find and speak with likeminded professionals.

Awareness Building and Commerce

Small businesses also use social media as traffic builders for their websites and establishments. Beekman1802.com, an online natural products business, is driving 10,000 visitors a month and \$50,000 in sales via Twitter and blog campaigns announcing sales and new products. Aroma Thyme Bistro, a small restaurant in Ellenville, New York, compels New Yorkers to drive north to their establishment through invitations to beer groups via Facebook events. Marcus Guiliano, the owner, says he has rounded up 20 people within an hour of sending a Facebook invitation. He posts drink specials and other special events and invites his base of friends (who, in turn, invite their friends).

Paid advertising on social media sites like Facebook is highly targeted and very affordable. Matthew Weiss of 888 Red Light (New York Traffic Lawyers) gets about 3,500 impressions for every \$1 he spends. “Even if I get no click-throughs, users are exposed to my brand and, if they later see it as a result of a Google search, the familiarity makes them more apt to contact us,” says Weiss. “By serving ads to only those who are demographically compatible, I save money by limiting my exposure to only those who pre-qualify for my service.”

How Do You Get Started?

As with any brand building, marketing, or PR initiative, professionals need to begin with a plan. What is your objective in using social media? Who do you want to reach? How do you want to be perceived online? Decide, too, how your social media efforts will integrate with other aspects of your marketing plan. Social media and “traditional media” can complement each other. For example, if your business was just mentioned in the press or other media, Twitter about it and “brag” about it in your Facebook status update. Post non-proprietary presentations via SlideShare on your LinkedIn page so prospective customers can see examples of your work. Use e-newsletter platforms to poll your customers about some aspect of your business and then “publish” the results via other media.

Track and measure the results of your programs. And remember, building a fan base, cultivating Facebook friends, and attracting commenters on your blog or subscribers to an e-newsletter can all take time and constant attention.

Make the time to keep your social media pages up-to-date. If adding social media activities to your marketing plan seems impossible due to resource constraints, consider outsourcing the function—much the way you would

hire a PR or marketing firm to represent your brand. But be careful. Your online persona should accurately reflect your company's personality and beliefs and be considered "genuine" rather than strictly commercial.

Most Importantly... Be Socially Responsible!

In the process of discovering exactly how to integrate social media into a networking and marketing campaign, many professionals and brands (especially those of the digital immigrant generation) have been heavy-handed and inadvertently "anti-social," turning off prospects and customers rather than attracting them. The medium is designed for socializing, not for selling. For example, if your Facebook status updates all relate to special offers for your business, your friends will feel they are constantly being sold to. Apply the rules of face-to-face interaction when you're communicating via social networks. Sharing details of your personal life can be fine, but don't overdo it. Learn how to use privacy controls on information you want to keep private. Be subtle, be friendly, be open, and be polite—the same behaviors you would exhibit in any social situation. You don't want to wind up as a social media pariah!

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