

Social media much?

Are you ready to take the social media plunge?

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Ever been told that if you want to succeed nowadays, you've just got to get your company on Facebook? That sending out a few tweets each day can make a world of difference to your bottom line? Or that you absolutely must launch a social media marketing campaign if you hope to be taken seriously.

Those voices have a point, but the instant gratification appeal of an effective social media requires planning and dedication. In fact, social media requires just as much initiative, planning and foresight as 'traditional' marketing methods.

Social media is a viable, though not necessarily critical, piece of the marketing puzzle. It's another front from which your marketing team—be it internal or outsourced—reaches your audience. But simply reaching the audience via the popular, web-based tool of your choice (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube Channels, blogs, etc.) isn't enough. It's as much about listening as it is about getting your point across. Social media campaigns, orchestrated properly, subvert traditional marketing for their ability to interact with audiences in what's essentially real time.

So is a social media campaign right for you? Well, that depends on a few factors. First, let's establish a few key points.

What it is.

I'll be cute for a second and define social media with a social media resource. The Wikipedia entry begins: "The term social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialog." This entry, one of 19 million on the world's most popular user-generated encyclopedia, cites a 2011 study, "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media," by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein. The authors argue that "social media introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals," enabled by ubiquitously accessible and scalable communication techniques.

Think of it this way: social media is a single tool in your marketing arsenal. Social media marketing, in practice, is the utilization of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—any online social network that primarily features user-generated content and connects registered users—to maintain an official brand presence. At its best, it's a responsive, interactive, personable voice that reflects your company's sensibilities—one that stays in tune with your customer's needs. Functionally, you stand to gain a personalized barometer of public opinion.

At its worst, social media marketing reminds us that spam filters were invented for a reason. Depending on the popularity of the initiative—which hinges upon how interested users are in what you're posting—social media marketing can produce feedback in ample supply. This is the Internet, the place where dissent and criticism are akin to oxygen and water.

Social media is:

- A direct line to your audience.
- An outlet for creativity; a chance to show off your unique voice.
- A way for customers to associate a personality with a brand.
- A chance to make news.

- A science that, believe it or not, demands a disciplined approach.
- The social media marketing qualifiers listed above should all be marked with an asterisk. The footnote attached to that would read “*when managed properly.”

What it isn't.

This list is a bit shorter:

- First and foremost, social media is not your all-purpose, 21st century marketing solution. To reiterate—it is but one tool in the marketer's toolbox. It can prove incredibly valuable for building brand character, but probably won't improve your bottom line in a matter of weeks. It's a chance to light the fuse of interest.
- A megaphone. If you don't listen, you aren't really socializing.
- Free. Sure Facebook accounts may be free, but populating a page with useful content—one that draws users back over and over again—takes thoughtful planning and resources.

So I need to make a Facebook account for my business?

It's a good idea to have some semblance of a social media presence, if not a full-blown marketing campaign. Manufacturers who make their bread and butter on branded products and services may (and should) want to carry on daily conversations with consumers.

But what if you're a B2B whose service is slightly more nebulous? What if you consider a public forum to be the antithesis to your business? Should you have a Facebook page then? Yes. Yes, you should—if only because it serves as another placard for your mission statement and phone number. It's your official presence on the network. Why not have a search result when your name is typed in?

How deep you go is best left to a social media expert.

Social media expert?

Colette Bennett, a tech and culture freelancer whose bibliography includes CNN and a host of tech-savvy blogs, in a piece written for Search Influence, a SEO company based in New Orleans, La., “a social media expert is merely a new form of PR rep, whose playing field is the Internet and whose toolbox is made up of key sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Sure, one can pour effort into posting on those sites and trying to get the name of your business out there, but unless you have the knowledge and experience needed to approach these sites appropriately, it's just more spam that no one will read.”

Social media experts should have an intimate knowledge of their client's brand. After all, with the viral nature of the Internet what they do with that brand can make just as many waves as a national advertising campaign. There's a tactfulness to the proper execution of a Social media campaign.

Corporate taxonomy would go something like this: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and social marketing are both examples of online marketing. And online marketing is just another marketing medium. The adaptability required places it in the orbit of public relations.

The social media marketing “expert” is an animal all its own—one that combines the following are five popular examples of options to use as your social media outlet, but keep in mind piggybacking the same content across multiple outlets isn't a bad idea either.

The Outlets:

Facebook: Connects friends, families, businesses and organizations. Users maintain individual profiles rife with whatever personal information they choose to make public, making it easier than ever to find and make like-minded friends. Businesses create pages, which can be Liked by fans. Once that happens, your updates appear in users' newsfeeds. That's where your original content (photos, videos, text—literally anything that can be digitized) either hooks them or bores them into Unlike-ing you.

Countless (smart) third-party websites have integrated Facebook's "Like" button into their site design, making it easier than ever for Facebook users to instantly share page-specific content to their profile. Facebook also offers a paid ad system that can target specific sets of users that meet specific sets of criteria. For example, if I post a status update about puppies in October, it wouldn't surprise me to see a Facebook ad, off to the right of my screen, pointing me to pet Halloween costumes. Facebook caters to short attention spans and is designed to be addictive. Content posted to it, as such, should be pertinent, interesting, funny, tragic—whatever you and your marketing team deem effective messaging for whatever you're selling.

LinkedIn: If Facebook is for pleasure, LinkedIn leans toward business. When your company has an official LinkedIn presence, employees (current and former) can more easily link back to you from their respective profiles. If, when creating a profile, you fill in the blanks (your business' bio, principals, number of employees, etc.) it becomes, in essence, an accurate search result for automated networking. LinkedIn is the place to see what other businesses are up to. LinkedIn probably isn't the place to go to talk to customers unless you're considering hiring one of them.

Twitter: The concept behind Twitter is so simple that it often comes across as baffling. Consider it one, giant, ongoing, interconnected conversation. How much of that conversation you're privy to depends on how many people you're "Following." Twitter is a massive party line. Individuals and businesses post updates that are 140 text characters max. Other users can either reply to posts or "Retweet" them to share instantly with all of their followers. Twitter is for companies that have a lot to say—and for marketers who are very active, vocal and confident in their messaging.

An example of how active you can get: On Aug. 17, a Twitter user named Peter Shankman decided to try his luck by directing a tweet toward Morton's Steakhouse's official profile. "Hey @Mortons – can you meet me at Newark airport with a porterhouse when I land in two hours? K, thanks." A few hours later, he sent the following: "Oh. My. God. I don't believe it. @mortons showed up at EWR WITH A PORTERHOUSE! lockerz.com/s/130578715" (Copy and paste that URL to see a picture of the happy camper holding his steak.)

YouTube: If your business has produced a video of any type—one that you want to make public, of course—there is no reason not to house it on YouTube's servers. YouTube was made for sharing. The simple nature with which YouTube's streaming videos can be shared makes it the preferred media player for countless blogs, online business journals, etc. If you want your video to be seen, put it on YouTube.

Good Ol' Blogging: Remember, blogging networks are considered Social media too. Platforms often integrate sharing mechanisms into their systems, making it easy to spread your original content across platforms and directly to Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Everyone keeps telling me to get on Facebook and Twitter. Am I ready?

That's a question that varies from business to business, audience to audience. The question isn't "do I belong" so much as "how much energy should I put into this?" Remember, a presence is a good thing. But an active campaign is the way to reap true benefits. In all honesty, it all relates to confidence in your own brand and how much you have to say. Try asking yourself the following questions:

- Am I willing to devote time and energy (or resources if you aren't a marketing expert yourself) to engaging in conversations with customers?
- Do I (or my marketers) have the capacity to engage in an honest, open discussion about my company, its products and services on a daily basis?
- Are the content generators able to come up with creative, "fun" content that remains relevant to your company? Are they web-savvy? Do they know what it takes for something to go viral?
- Is the "voice" of my company one that customers will be interested in hearing from on a regular basis?
- Am I ready to see brutally honest feedback from complete strangers? Privacy settings can be adjusted and rogue inflammatory comments can easily be flagged/removed. But how seriously will you be taken if you're policing legitimate criticism of a product you offer?
- This one is important: Is your marketing team good at generating marketing messages that don't quite sound like marketing messages? Can they interact with real people as real people?

The future.

Sure, MySpace is on its way out the door. And Friendster has become the butt of every web-savvy hipster's joke. Heck, the same can be said for Orkut and Classmates.com. But consider the companies that got it right. Consider how much of an impact Facebook has had on culture in the past few years.

If none of this has piqued your interest, I'll close on a few facts published by the Nielsen Corporation to its blog earlier this year:

- Three of the world's most popular brands are social-media related (Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia).
- The world now spends over 110 billion minutes on social networks and blog sites.
- This equates to 22 percent of all time online, or one in every four-and-a-half minutes.
- For the first time ever, social network or blog sites are visited by three quarters of global consumers who go online, after the numbers of people visiting these sites increased by 24 percent over the last year.