

Social Media and Business

If you're in business today, chances are you've heard a whole lot about social media. If you're not sure what "Facebook Likes" mean, or how to effectively "Tweet" to your target audience - this article is for you!

Although many have been skeptical in the past, it would be hard to imagine business today without the omnipresent internet. As a consultant, I tell clients and prospects alike, "if you want to compete effectively in this digital age, an online marketing strategy is an absolute must." Still, some business owners will protest, "an online presence isn't necessary for my business or industry or market." The real 'aha!' moment usually comes when business owners switch hats and put themselves in the shoes of the customer. "When you're looking for a product or service – from pizza to a carpet cleaner – how do you (or anyone for that matter) find it?" With 2.3M searches conducted on Google every minute, it's no wonder that more than 80% of U.S. consumers will reach in their pocket, pull out their smartphone, and go right to Google. In fact, over the past 10 years, online search engines have evolved into hyper-competitive virtual markets where businesses from around the globe compete for customers through Search Engine Optimization ("SEO") efforts. Armed with this knowledge, it's not difficult to conclude that if you're not on Google, you're nowhere - but rest assured your competitors are.

More specifically, as it relates to the subject of this article, **Social Media** is a staple of SEO and should be a key component of every online marketing strategy. In effect, social media acts to create a 'digital footprint' for your business – creating interaction and digital chatter around your website, products, and services. There are several key benefits to maintaining an active social media portfolio, such as: engaging with customers no matter where they are, receiving and responding to feedback (be it positive or negative), increasing website traffic, boosting SEO results, generating new leads, and building your client base.

There is no single social media portfolio or approach that will work *best* for every situation – the ideal social media strategy for your business will depend on your particular offering, customer demographics, and overall marketing plan. Below is a high-level summary of the most common social media platforms, as well as some insight into how these can be used to drive more customers to your business.

Facebook.

With 1.23 billion active users each month, Facebook is by far King of the social media networking sites and, for this reason, a great place to begin your social networking journey. Since its major debut in 2004, Facebook has evolved beyond simply connecting old friends across great distances - today it serves the needs of governments, schools, special interest groups, and businesses by connecting those organizations to their respective target audiences. Because it's free and easy to use, Facebook has become a great forum to share company updates, industry news, and other content, such as pictures, videos, and news articles. Additionally, you can now even sell products, post a job opening, and create paid promotions: all that target the exact individuals your business wants to connect with.

For businesses, it's important to know that there is a difference between a 'personal' page and a 'business' page. It is generally advisable to establish your personal page first – this will allow you to learn the basics and how to navigate around the platform. With the basic concepts of *profile pages, posts, friends and followers* under your belt, you will be better equipped to set-up and manage your company page. Facebook's Business Page feature offers many advantages, such as: advertising your business using the 'Boost' feature, building a network of customers to rate and review your business, and providing customers with valuable business information.

Twitter.

While Twitter has been around since 2006, using Twitter for business is a fairly new concept that allows users to share short 140-character messages (called “Tweets”) with an established subscriber base referred to as “Followers.” Tweeting provides a great bi-directional outlet to connect with customers, share company updates and other useful information, and see what people are saying about your business. For these reasons, many companies have come to rely on Twitter as a source of feedback, market information, and emerging trends.

A key goal of effectively deploying Twitter for business is developing a large follower count. In addition to simply allowing your message to be heard, a large following can also create a sense of legitimacy with potential customers. Like other platforms, the content itself will be key to a successful strategy – you’ll want to create and share interesting and dynamic content, such as: important updates, compelling polls, informative videos and images, and useful links. Further, engaging with other users and sharing their content (called “Retweeting”) will go a long way toward building your follower base. Yet another tool available to connect businesses to their target audience is the “hashtag”, which is represented by the pound symbol (#). Hashtags may be thought of as the central subject of the message and serves to group all messages of that subject together.

Finally, for those who wish to gain additional rapid exposure, Twitter can also be a great way to advertise your company. Recently introduced, Twitter’s “Promoted Ad Campaigns” allow you to advertise your Twitter page on the timelines of ideal customers for increased visibility.

Google+.

While Google+ (pronounced “Google Plus”) has yet to achieve the notoriety of Facebook and Twitter (some argue the platform may soon become obsolete), maintaining an active Google+ profile can have its perks. First and foremost, Google loves Google and maintaining an active Google+ profile may help your company rank higher on major search engines. Second, while Google+ has yet to define a clear direction for business use, it is commonly used to review products and services, post pictures of goods or facilities, and leave feedback for a company. Having an established account will ensure that you’re prepared to respond to those reviews accordingly.

As noted above, the Google+ platform lacks the crystal-clear purpose of other platforms - it is primarily used to share company and industry updates, photos and videos, as well as to sell goods and services. Despite these similarities to other platforms, a common complaint is its less-than-user-friendly interface. For this reason, it is not surprising that few small businesses are investing their time and marketing dollars here. With that said, for the IT savvy who demand maximum exposure, a key item to keep in mind is that Google+ is managed through “Google My Business.” This recent update cross-indexes Google Search, Google Maps, and Google+ to give your brand more visibility across the various outlets.

LinkedIn.

Launched in 2002, LinkedIn’s key purpose is more akin to a networking site for its 450 million business professionals rather than a traditional social media platform. Despite this perceived limit, LinkedIn provides an established and well-respected outlet to expand your digital footprint. Additionally, LinkedIn includes some unique features that can help strengthen your company’s brand, such as: publishing full-length articles, posting job openings and recruiting employees, attracting followers and potential leads, and showcasing your products. Like Facebook, LinkedIn allows you to register both a personal page and a business page. Business pages are managed directly from your personal page making managing your LinkedIn business profile very time-efficient.

Instagram.

Instagram is a mobile social networking app that revolves around pictures and videos. Since its inception in 2010, this niche platform has grown very popular with younger demographics under the age of 29. While Instagram has yet to gain wide-spread support from the broader business community, it can be an ideal outlet for companies that sell a product as it allows you to showcase your products in a visually appealing way. For service-oriented businesses such as an auto-detailer or dentist, you may choose to visually represent your work through before-and-after photos or pictures of satisfied clients. Aside from the primary focus on visual communication, another key difference is that Instagram is designed as a mobile app and may only be managed via a mobile device – for these reasons Instagram may not work for every business.

Pinterest.

Also started in 2010, Pinterest has a visual focus that is similar to Instagram. Pinterest describes itself as the world's largest catalogue of ideas - a social media outlet where millions come to look for ideas to try, buy, and do. While the website's categories range from art to technology and all things between, Pinterest is known as an epicenter for DIY enthusiasts, craft projects, recipes, fashion, décor, and health- and fitness-related information. The site has approximately 100 million active users with 71% of them being female. In the event your target market overlaps with Pinterest's, you may opt to take advantage of Pinterest Advertising which allows you to select an audience, create goals, and track how your ads are performing.

Miscellaneous / Summary.

A few additional tips on Social Media Management:

- ✓ Even if you decide not to pursue a particular platform at this time, you may still wish to create an account in order to reserve your business name, just in case you decide to pursue it at a future date.
- ✓ Take advantage of free time-saving tools to help you manage your social media. Hootsuite is one of the most popular today and has free packages available that allow you to post to multiple platforms from a single website and schedule future posts in as little as one hour a week.
- ✓ Keep your brand and messaging consistent across all of your platforms - this means making sure all pages have the same profile picture, cover picture, and matching descriptions. This will also help customers recognize your sites.
- ✓ Steer clear of controversial topics, such as politics, religion, or anything that can be easily misinterpreted. There have been many examples of companies coming under heavy fire and even going out of business for posting controversial ideas!
- ✓ Make sure your website includes easy-to-find links to all of your social media networking sites and consider including social media icons and account handles on your marketing collateral.

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