



Should My Business be More Social Online?

The media buzz surrounding the rise and popularity of social media channels is impressive. You don't have to go far these days without hearing about everyone's stampede to join sites like Facebook, Ning, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter.

Reports of stunning economic successes through cost-efficient social media channels are making businesses pay attention. But it is not all good - the depth of coverage has many business owners feeling overwhelmed and unsure of their best plan.

While some businesses are scrambling to create accounts everywhere, others are frustrated by their slow or nonexistent results. The remaining businesses are feeling overwhelmed by the media coverage, and become reluctant to get involved.

So how do you avoid the hype and still make sure your web marketing is appropriately "socialized?"

Should You Connect?

The decision of whether or not to participate in social media is synonymous with answering the needs of your business and its customers. Don't be intimidated by the term and the excitement around "social media" - think of it as internet marketing and get to work.

Customer expectations, business resources and social media appetites vary. Much like any other aspect of business, when a customer has a need, the business best answering the need will make the sale. Social media participation is no different.

If your customers would expect to see your business blogging or active in social media sites, you should be there, or you'll miss an opportunity to connect with your customers in a meaningful way. Miss it too long, and your customer will find someone else to fill the need. In this regard, it is simple marketing at its best.

- Competitive analysis helps you focus: look within your vertical to see what, if anything, your competitors are doing. Visit their websites and see how others in your industry are successfully making connections. Search the potential social network sites, entering in your most valuable keywords as search terms to get an idea of how active and competitive each platform (site) might be.

Another important consideration is that social media channels might work differently for different business types. A local pizza parlor is usually going to approach engagement much differently than a big box retailer, while both may reap benefits using social media channels.

The key to understanding just how "socially-focused" your web marketing should be is to understand the habits and expectations of your customers. A quick poll, customer satisfaction card or anonymous survey might be another good way to gain insight about what level of interaction your customers expect from your business.



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Answering the following questions through a poll or survey will point you in the right direction:

- Is your target market one that is typically active online, and is there an expectation to find your business in the same places?
- Are you more likely to reach your best customers on Facebook, through Twitter, in related forums, on blogs or involved in other social media activities? Which combination of these would be the most potent mix?
- Are there other potential customers you might reach by using a specific channel?
- How does time spent socially translate into bottom-line profits? Is there a solid business case (or enough potential and resources) to support spending the time and effort to develop the relationships and maintain the effort?
- Is yours a time-critical business? Can you capitalize on the added distribution gained from being first-in-market? Is yours a business with time-sensitive offers or do you want to leverage the power of coupons?

While these questions may differ from typical marketing queries, the business who answers them clearly can map-out a stronger social media action plan.

How Do You Measure Your Social Media Success?

Once your business has decided to put forth the effort in social media, it is your responsibility to set up realistic goals and the methods to track and measure your goals.

As with any other form of marketing, if you cannot justify the investment with a return, don't do it. At a minimum, social media will require investments in time, creativity, application (writing/posting), sometimes a moderate level of IT involvement, and analysis. However, unlike other marketing efforts, in social media there are not always clear-cut methods to measure success rates.

For more thoughts and suggestions on Measuring Social Media:

- <http://mashable.com/2008/07/31/measuring-social-media-roi-for-business/>
- <http://mashable.com/2009/10/27/social-media-roi/>
- <http://econsultancy.com/blog/3407-10-ways-to-measure-social-media-success>

(Additional links provided at article's end.)

Proceed With Caution

Aaron Wall, a leading expert on organic Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Pay-Per click (PPC) advertising, offers simple advice to those businesses seeking success by reaching out into social media: "be unique."

He states: "Zero times 10,000 percent still equals zero. Most businesses that are not remarkable will not become remarkable just because they are using social media."

Wall continues, "Social media should be thought of as an amplification tool which helps further spread good ideas and original, helpful, useful content. It is important to spend time to develop the core strategy on your website and make sure it is remarkable, then use these tools as a way to network and boost the exposure of your best content."

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He concludes with a warning, "Too many businesses which have boring 'me-too' offerings will end up using social media as yet one more way to distract themselves, waste resources, and water down their business."

One way to ensure your efforts are not wasted is to properly consider the goals you have for social media.

While increased traffic and sales are easy to recognize as common goals, some of the deeper goals are less obvious but might be the true measures of social media success. Realistic goals might include deeper branding, number of online mentions of the business, meaningful/personal discussions with customers, more focused market perception, and a larger, more productive net being cast for prospective leads.

While the following list is by no means comprehensive, it should start you thinking in terms of goals and measurement that could be applied to your social media efforts. In each of the following examples, you would look to establish a baseline and grow:

- Measure the number of online mentions and conversations about your business, comparing it to those of your competitors.
 - You can do this manually using search engines like Google or Bing, or you can also set up alerts (<http://www.google.com/alerts>) that email you for each new online mention.
- Measure new, unique visits to your site, and the sites that refer them
 - Use your analytics and tracking data
- Measure actions: clicked links, suggested follow-up, phone calls, etc.
 - Blend website analytics data with other sales tracking methods, such as phone logs or sales reports
- Track new subscribers to RSS feeds, new Facebook/Linked-In fans or new Twitter Followers
 - Most of these will be handled on a per-use basis. Most often, you can adjust your setting to send an email each time an account is updated.
- Measure and increase the number of relative keywords associated with your domain
 - Refer again to web analytics to see this effect. It is always best to have a baseline set prior to new efforts being launched, therefore giving you a clear picture of the power of your effort.
- Measure and improve your average ticket size
- Measure and improve the lifetime value of a customer

How you specifically measure your success in social media will depend on the goals you set for your business. It may make sense to have one larger goal with many different points of measure to track its success rate. Ensure that tracking is clean and consistent, and the data collected gives you an accurate picture of the details you are measuring.

As Aaron Wall suggests, don't think of social media as the means to make your business remarkable. Rather, consider social media a valuable and effective means to communicate your remarkable business to a larger and more focused audience.

He continues, "Do try bigger changes, too. While there will be a winner established in a test of two similar headlines, testing larger, more dramatic changes will yield results much more quickly. Don't be afraid to see the conversion rate drop, you can learn as much from a decrease in the rate about your visitors as you can from an increase. Just ensure that each change and its results are analyzed and acted upon."

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For more information:

Measuring social media:

<http://www.searchenginejournal.com/measuring-social-media-marketing-its-easier-than-you-think/5397/>

Metrics of social media:

<http://www.interactiveinsightsgroup.com/blog1/social-media-metrics-superlist-measurement-roi-key-statistics-resources/>

6 Social Media platforms at a glance:

<http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/24165.asp>

Aaron Wall's SEOBook site (with free SEO tools):

<http://www.seobook.com>

Aaron Wall's informational blog on Pay-Per-Click advertising:

<http://ppcblog.com>