

Planning for Social Media

Have you boarded the social media bandwagon yet? If not, you may actually be smarter than most business owners.

Don't get me wrong—there's no denying the huge marketing potential offered by the social networking sites that have become all the rage. After all, they're free, fun, and generally pretty easy to use. And I'm certainly not saying you shouldn't make social media a component of your marketing plan. But without a solid, well-planned strategy in place, you could very well end up squandering one of your most valuable resources—your time—in exchange for little to no measurable reward.

Casually using Facebook or Twitter to re-connect with old college buddies is one thing. But if you're a marketing professional or entrepreneur with the goal of using these forums to create a presence for your business, you'll need to map out a plan before you hop on and start haphazardly creating accounts.

Establish a consistent presence.

If you sell energy drinks, you don't want to have your username set as Energy123 on Facebook and NRGDrinx on Twitter. Pick one clear identity and use it for all your social networking accounts. Whenever possible, include the name of your business or product within your username to secure your online brand. **Tip:** There are online services, such as www.namechk.com and www.knowem.com, that allow you to search hundreds of social media sites to determine if your username is still available and/or create your accounts and profiles for you.

Set your goals and choose your metrics.

Before starting the social media race, you need to determine what you want to find at the finish line. Are you looking to build your branding presence? Boost conversions and revenue? Drive traffic to a brick-and-mortar store? All of the above? Once you've defined these goals, figure out what metrics you'll use—such as weekly revenue, number of blog comments, etc.—to measure whether you've reached them. This step is absolutely crucial to determining whether your efforts are resulting in business growth or simply wasting your time.

Know who you're talking to.

You can talk all day, but if your audience isn't within your target market, your words will equate more to hot air than dollars. You should already know who your customers are—now you need to determine how and where they're positioned in the landscape of social

media. Are they addicted to Facebook? Tweeting their likes and dislikes every hour? Or are they in a demographic that's more likely to reach for the Yellow Pages than a laptop? Do some research to find the answers, and you'll be much better equipped to reach them. Once you find them, don't jump into the online community right away—take some time to identify who the “leaders” are, what style of communication they use, how open they are to newcomers, and what they seem to be looking for (i.e. content, bargains, quality, etc.).

Set some ground rules.

Before you begin interacting, you'll need to decide who will be your voice. Will you nominate one person to enter all commentary? Will the entire marketing team have access to the branded account? Also, prepare yourself for the fact that you're not going to like what everyone has to say. Mom's good old rule, “If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all”, doesn't apply in the social networking world. Create a game plan for how you and your employees will deal with the haters, naysayers, and the downright nasty. Also, it's a good idea to designate a certain amount of time to be invested in social media functions each day (or week, or month) to prevent it from becoming a massive time-sucker.

Be a good listener.

Once you've begun engaging in social media, you should do more listening than talking. Although it's a great idea to share helpful information and resources to build customer loyalty and brand identity, don't lose sight of why you're here: to find out what your customers want, what they don't want, and what you can do to make them happy. Any self-promotional dialogue should be secondary, given in small and infrequent doses.

Is it working?

If you defined your metrics for success before sticking your toe into the social media pool, this should be a relatively easy step. After a couple of months, start looking at whether your community members are visiting and/or buying from your site, whether your Search Engine Ranking Positions (SERPs) have increased, and whether specific products you've talked up have seen a boost in sales.

Keep all your eggs in one basket.

If you've got accounts on multiple social networking sites, it can quickly become overwhelming and time-consuming to monitor and interact with each one. Fortunately, there are some paid services (such as www.gist.com) that can funnel all of your social media sources into one easily scannable interface. This prevents you from favoring one site over another, ensuring that your presence is spread evenly across all communities and saving you precious time.

The advent of social media is a new dawn for businesses, giving them an unprecedented insight into their customers' heads and hearts. But before you begin devoting your time and energy to hundreds of clicks and comments, make sure you have a solid, measurable plan for your online networking initiative.