

# SOCIAL

Using social media to grow your business isn't just social—it's strategy

The term social media is a misnomer. Although it's great for staying in touch with friends and colleagues, social networks like Facebook and Twitter aren't only for vacation photos, selfies, and status updates about children, pets, and politics. Used by businesses for marketing and customer service, they're also ideal for finding new customers and retaining existing ones.

"What social media is to businesses is a way to listen to consumers, and listening is one of the best marketing tools you can find," says Starr Hall, author of *The Social Wave: Why Your Business Is Wiping Out with Social Media and How to Fix It*. "Most traditional marketing, like radio, TV, and billboards, is one-way messaging; social media is really a two-way conversation."

It's a conversation that many business owners are having, according to the social network LinkedIn, which early this year surveyed nearly 1,000 small and medium-sized businesses and found that 81 percent are currently using social media.

Just because they're using social media, however, doesn't mean businesses are using it well. In fact, Manta, an online community for small business, conducted a survey of more than 1,200 small business owners in 2013 and found that 61 percent see no ROI from their social media activities.

The problem isn't that social media doesn't bear fruit; it's that most businesses don't know how to help the fruit grow. Whether your goal is attracting prospects or engaging current customers, what follows are four tips to ensure that your social media efforts enable your business to prosper.

## 1. Leverage a social intelligence platform.

There are dozens of social networks vying for

your time. Because there aren't enough hours in the day to be on all of them all of the time, your first step with social media is to decide where to invest your limited resources. A social intelligence platform can help, according to Hall, who recommends solutions like NUVI, Tracx, or Meltwater, which one can use to research social media usage by customers and competitors.

"You can see what your competitors are doing and look for gaps and opportunities," Hall explains. "If I'm an office supply reseller, for example, I can plug my two biggest competitors into my social intelligence platform and learn things such as how many people are buying from them online and what channels their audience is on. Once you see where your competitors are—where they're gaining traction and where they're not—you can decide where you should be."

You can use the same social intelligence platform to monitor online conversations for lead opportunities. If you want to sell more toner, for instance, you could set up a keyword search for "printer ink expensive," at which point the platform will look for relevant conversations on social networks. When someone complains about ink prices, you can reach out and engage them, turning a total stranger into a qualified business lead.

## 2. Be helpful.

What you post to social networks is just as important as where you post, according to business owner Marcus Sheridan, who used social media to save his failing swimming pool dealership during the economic downturn. He did it, he says, by following a four-part formula—listen, communicate, teach, and help—that has continuously generated enough sales leads to help his company not only survive, but thrive.

"Social media is just a means for being more helpful," says Sheridan, who in addition to his pool business now runs a content marketing consultancy, The Sales Lion, based on his social media experience. "If you can be more helpful than anybody else at engaging your prospects—in solving their problems whatever they are—you're probably going to earn their business."

In Sheridan's case, every time he received a question from a customer about pools, he turned that question into a blog post or a YouTube video; to date, the company's YouTube videos have garnered more than 1 million views. The same principle can work for office supply dealers.

"If you pull up conversations on your social intelligence platform and notice that people are upset with a specific brand of printer, that's your first topic," Hall says. "It's a no-brainer: Write a post about the '5 Best Printers on the Market,' or 'How to Improve the Performance of Your Brand X Printer.'"

Post content (e.g., articles, white papers, case studies, photos, polls, etc.) first on your website, then share this content on social networks, suggests Kate Lee, director of research and strategy at Fronetics Strategic Advisor, a management consultancy that provides demand generation and social media services to the supply chain and logistics industries. This creates a virtual breadcrumb trail that prospects can follow to your sales channels and when they're ready to buy.

If you share information, sales will follow, says Sheridan, as search engines appreciate great answers to consumers' questions—a strategy that search engines attract viable prospects.

"A recent study by Demand Gen asked buyers to rank where they turn to find new solutions. Forty-six percent of respondents



## E-SOLUTIONS

listed a Google search as their first source of information,” Lee says. “When you consider that 75 percent of people only look at the first page of a Google search, you have to rank high or customers won't find you.”

### 3. Post regularly, consistently.

Social media requires patience and persistence, according to Lee, who says many businesses give up too early. “It takes 60 to 90 days to reach a tipping point,” she says. Posting should be constant, continuous, and consistent.

“You get what you put into it,” Hall says. “If you only spend one hour a week on social media, you may only get one lead a week. But if you spend five hours to 20 hours a week, you might get 25 to 200 leads.”

### 4. Show your love.

Public displays of affection are encouraged

on social networks—especially when your goal is engaging existing customers. In that case, you should provide not only information, but also customer service.

“A lot of businesses are now turning to Twitter to answer different questions customers have,” Lee says. “Rather than picking up the phone and waiting on hold to talk to someone in customer service, your customers may send you a tweet.”

If you're going to use social networks for customer service, you should be prepared to respond in a timely manner—typically within an hour—Lee says, as social media users usually expect instant gratification.










If you lack the resources to provide adequate customer service via social channels, you can still use them to engender customer loyalty. “A great way to increase customers' engagement and loyalty is to write about them,” Lee continues. “If you work with

really great customers, write case studies that show what an incredible job they're doing, or quote them in a post or article. It shows your customers they're important to you.”

Another idea is brand advocacy, according to Hall: You can increase customer loyalty by rewarding it. For example, if a customer mentions your company in a social media post, you might offer them a discount on their next order. When they claim the discount, you can invite them to submit a testimonial or write an online review of your business, which you then promote on social channels. “Next, if you write a review, you might invite them to join your VIP club, and include certain benefits as part of it,” Hall says.

Ultimately, it's all about building relationships. “It won't happen overnight,” Lee says “but over time many of those relationships turn into customers.” **OL**

## + SOCIAL NETWORKS 101

Social Network	In Short	Media	Users	URL
 Facebook	A social network used primarily to share status updates with family and friends.	Text, photos, video, links	1.23 billion	www.facebook.com
 Twitter	A microblogging platform for sharing short text messages called “tweets.”	Text, photos, links	243 million	www.twitter.com
 LinkedIn	A social network that facilitates virtual networking among business professionals.	Text, links	277 million	www.linkedin.com
 Google+	A social network designed for discovering and sharing digital content with family, friends, and coworkers.	Text, photos, video, links	300 million	plus.google.com
 YouTube	A social network where users can upload, view, and share videos.	Video	1 billion	www.youtube.com
 Pinterest	A virtual scrapbooking site where users can “pin” their favorite digital content for the purpose of collecting and sharing it.	Photos, video	70 million	www.pinterest.com
 Reddit	A social news and entertainment website where users can submit content in the form of text or links.	Text, links	112 million	www.reddit.com
 Instagram	A social network designed for sharing and stylizing photos from your mobile device.	Photos	150 million	www.instagram.com
 Tumblr	A microblogging platform where you can share multimedia and other content.	Text, photos, video, links	216.3 million	www.tumblr.com