

USING SOCIAL MEDIA



Helpful hints and tips on getting started on social media, how it should fit into a marketing plan and how it can be used to engage with customers.

This factsheet is one of a suite of practical guides, written specifically for businesses on key business topics. It looks at ways social media can be used by businesses and contains useful information and tips on:

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Businesses cannot ignore social media. Coming out of its infancy stage, more and more businesses – especially smaller businesses – are using it as an extension of their marketing and customer service activities. Therefore, it is important to understand its potential, watch how others are using it – especially competitors – and be ready to adopt it if and when it feels right for a market.

In the early days of websites, many businesses used to wonder why they needed one. Now, most would look old-fashioned without a website – and be missing a key marketing trick. Social media is currently at the early stage in take-up. While the various social media sites may go in and out of fashion, in a few years it is likely that most customers will expect the businesses they buy from to be using some form of social media and be marked down if they do not.

A note of caution: while a business may decide social media is irrelevant, their customers could be writing about them on Twitter and in their blogs – good things and bad: conversations will happen online. Businesses need to monitor what is being said about them, their products and services and know how to engage with commentators so they can make the most of the good things said – or limit the damage of negative ones.

01 What Social Media Is - and Isn't

Social media is used to describe online conversations between people and is an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio – seen and shared by all.

Social media is immediate and of the moment. Within the space of a minute it is possible for:

- A blog to go live on a website.
- A customer or follower to read it and post a comment.
- At the same time, another person to read and tweet about it.
- Followers to re-tweet and send it out to their followers, who in turn re-tweet and so on. The only limitations are the size of a network of followers and how interesting they find the tweet.

On the one hand this can be a cost effective way to market a product or service – on the other, it creates pressure to handle comments, requests and complaints immediately and well.

Social media is not a cheap route to deliver an aggressive advertising campaign. There is an emerging etiquette on how to use social media, and any business bombarding its contacts with information about products or offers may be banned by social media operators or find they lose support and interest. It is all about meaningful interaction.

With the integration of social media, the marketing landscape is changing rapidly. A shift is being seen from one-way communication to a dialogue between consumer and brand, and between consumer and consumer.

Research shows more and more customers are blocking traditional marketing, psychologically and with the help of technology, with only 14% trusting advertising, compared to 70% trusting “a person like me” more than authority figures or marketing messages from business and media.

(Source: <http://digbig.com/5bcgnt>)

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Customers no longer want to deal with a faceless organisation; they want to know more about the people within a business, what their ethos is and what their employees stand for. Social media allows engagement with target markets that are no longer susceptible to traditional methods and an ongoing dialogue, based on trust, transparency, openness and honesty.

The trick is to find issues and debates that engage existing and potential customers, start following them and join in discussions: find the right debates, get at the heart of these debates and debate well, leading to businesses following back. As interest is sparked, so credibility and standing goes up.

TIP - If you are new to Social Media you may find the following do's and don't's helpful:

DO

- Search the internet to find customers, suppliers and competitors who are using social media.
- Read some of their blogs and blog comments.
- Follow them on Twitter and see who they are following and who is following them. Try and follow the trail of some of their 'conversations.'
- Analyse their Facebook pages and who they have got relationships with.
- Do a search on LinkedIn for their employees. Analyse the groups they belong to.
- Jot down what impressions are forming of them all and why – what is good and bad.
- Learn from this – copy the good things and improve the poor.

DON'T

- Play at social media.
- Set up accounts without having a strategy – inactive blog, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn accounts and pages look old-fashioned or unprofessional.
- Skimp on research before starting.
- Start until time and resources have been committed.

02 The Communications Mix

Social media is just another part of a communications mix or 'route to market'.

Compare it to direct mail. A business when sending out a direct mail to potential customers, will ensure it fits into their marketing strategy. They are clear who they want to target, the desired response and how to measure success.

The same applies to social media. No-one should just open a Twitter account and start tweeting about their day at random or start blogging about what is irritating them on TV. It is important to have a strategy about what topics will be tweeted – and not, and who within the company has corporate responsibility.

Typical goals for social media campaigns include:

- Increasing brand awareness.
- Becoming a recognised 'expert' in a market.
- Increasing website hits.
- Testing out ideas with customers.
- Developing stronger relationships with customers.
- Improving customer service.
- Monitoring brand reputation.
- Generating new leads.

TIP - As with any marketing activity, the starting place is the business plan and marketing strategy. Identify the target audiences that use social media and which marketing goals it could support. Set goals and timescales for social media activity, and ensure robust evaluation and tracking methods are in place, along with a clear structure of corporate social media responsibility. Above all, make sure your online identity (the way you present yourself, tone of voice, word choice) matches your actual identity.

The benefits of social media marketing



Source: Social Media Marketing Industry Report 2010
www.whitepapersource.com/socialmediamarketing/report

In the research carried out by Social Media Examiner, the longer the marketing respondents had been using social media, the more likely they were to say it was helping them to close business.

A significant number said that their marketing costs dropped when social media marketing was implemented.

TIP - Social media is time consuming. Marketers with the most success are dedicating around 11 hours a week to this activity. Don't start until there is a strategy, measurable goals and someone with dedicated responsibility. Set time aside – at least two hours a week to start with.

TIP - Social media is also a good way of keeping abreast of industry and competitor developments and getting to know 'what people are talking about' in order to spot trends.

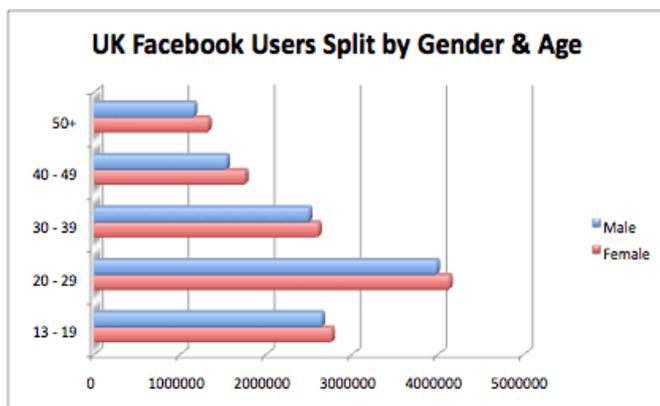
03 Researching Customers

Social media marketing activities can:

- Extend the reach and breadth of existing PR and marketing campaigns.
- Be stand-alone campaigns to engage with customers in new ways.

Either way, the campaigns must dovetail with the other marketing activity – but be different.

There is research available on the use of social media. However, talk to customers and suppliers to understand how they are using social media (if at all), and its current or future relevance to them.



Source: <http://www.clickymedia.co.uk>

The rate of social media usage is increasing rapidly, particularly by business users. The membership on LinkedIn is growing at roughly one new member per second. When LinkedIn launched in 2003, it took well over a year to reach the first million members. By the end of 2009, the last million took only 12 days. Executives from all Fortune 500 companies are LinkedIn members.

04 Driving Traffic to Websites

Many businesses start using social media purely to improve their Google search rankings and drive traffic to their website. This is probably the easiest goal to achieve and measure.

The key is to ensure that the increased traffic delivers business results, which means that dialogue has to be relevant to the business and its followers. To give an extreme example, if a business starts a major controversy they may get thousands more people visiting their website but if the controversy has nothing to do with the business' products or services, visitors may never get to know what the business does - or to buy from them.

Google publishes recommendations on how to improve search rankings:

- Make pages primarily for users, not for search engines.
- Don't deceive users or present different content to search engines than what is being displayed to users.

TIP - A useful test is to ask, "Does this information/feature help my users? Would I do this if search engines didn't exist?"

This way of thinking applies to social media as well. If it is right for users, it will drive traffic and work to the business.

Some of the elements that Google's search engines like include:

- News.
- New and fresh content.
- Authentic content.
- Sites where a lot of people are visiting.
- Keyword rich page copy.
- Links to web pages from authoritative sources.
- Content that attracts links.
- Pictures and video clips.

Social media can be used for all these.

TIP - Improve Google rankings through social media:

- Add new content frequently – a blog is ideal.
- Use copy that contains words and short phrases for search engine optimisation.
- Add pictures and video clips.
- Use social media to direct people towards blogs, videos and news items via web link, if you think they might find these useful.

05 Starting Online Conversations

Social media is all about building relationships, whether the aim is to increase awareness or engage new customers.

This will not be achieved by signing up to a social network and pushing out marketing messages: this is only one-way traffic. Social media is just an online version of meeting people. Good networkers don't start talking about themselves and their business when they meet someone new at an event. Instead, they are genuinely interested in the people they are meeting, they ask questions about their business, how they are doing - and then offer help.

The most successful way is to let a new contact get to know, understand and trust the business – let them make the move to buy in their own time. Customers nowadays want more than just a company name; they want to engage with people with a personality, not faceless companies.

Just posting a comment on Twitter or posting a blog does not mean it will be read, and even less likely generate a response. Most businesses have to work extremely hard to get people commenting on their blog posts. Even a site like Mashable, the world's most popular blog with 2.7 million followers, might only get four comments on a blog post. Time, thought and effort is needed to get people commenting on posts and following them. To start, this has to be done manually. Some ideas on how to get started are listed below:

- Follow the blogs of people in an industry who are respected – journalists, policymakers, industry bodies, customers, suppliers. Look for posts where there is a view and post a comment. The chances are they will look to see who has posted a comment and may follow back. This has to be done appropriately over a period of time – with interesting comments that add value, not a sales pitch.
- Post a blog that will be of interest to customers, send an email to alert them with a link to the blog and ask them to post a comment.
- Follow people on Twitter who are important to the business. They may look up new followers and follow back.
- Businesses need to look out for who is following them on Twitter – if it is a key customer, they may want to thank them and follow back. There is an unwritten expectation that if a new follower is known to the business, they will probably be expected to follow back.
- There should be balance in online activities to ensure an individuals (professional) personality and the company's culture shine through. A good mix is the following: 1/3 of activities should focus on the company, 1/3 on demonstrating knowledge and expertise (helping others) and the remaining 1/3 on social chitchat (the person/ company behind the activity).

TIP - Some good phrases to use in social media include:

- Can anyone help us on....?
- Can I ask for your help to ...?
- Thanks for your help on ...
- Thought this might be useful
- What do you think of ...?
- Want to share this with you ...

06 Creating a Social Media Plan

Social media strategies should include a timetable of activities with a broad outline for the year and a specific plan for three months.

There needs to be a schedule for blogging and tweeting, and checking Facebook and Twitter accounts. This helps to stay committed and focused.

Review periods are also needed to see what is, and isn't, working and then revise activities based on this. Social media is not a quick fix, so time needs to be allowed. The longer it is done – over years – the more successful it will be. It is about building relationships and relationships take time.

07 Most Used Social Media

The four most used social media in the UK are **Twitter**, **Facebook**, **LinkedIn** and **blogging**.

Twitter

The starting point to take part in Twitter is to set up an account – it's free. A decision needs to be made about whether this is a business' or an individual's account. The account should reflect the business' marketing strategy, using a photo and completing the bio section, to give a succinct description of the business and what it does or how it can help others.

Twitter is about microblogs – users can send and read messages known as tweets from their mobile phones or computers. These are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as followers. These can be restricted just to people known or by allowing open access.

Direct messages (DM) go to an individual's account and can only be read by them.

If a tweet looks as if it will be helpful or interesting to followers, it can be re-tweeted (RT). If a business is keen for re-tweets, it needs to be short enough to allow others to pass it on and still keep within the 140 characters.

The key issue for anyone starting to tweet is what to tweet about. Each business needs to decide about the style and content but in order for it to work they need a distinctive 'voice'.

A good place to start for topics is to look at what information or activities could be interesting or helpful to customers or journalists looking for expert views. Some examples include:

- Industry reports.
- Events with interesting speaker comments or announcements.
- Product testing.
- Buying trips.
- Graduate recruitment.
- Trends in the business or market sector.

Some businesses use Twitter purely to send out offers – it's immediate. For example, a hotel with four spare rooms could tweet at 6am 'Four rooms available for £10 today. Please RT'.

It is a good idea to set some principles about what will or won't be tweeted about and how frequently. It is also important to analyse who is tweeting in a particular market, what they are covering, where the gaps are and what would fit within that market and the company's marketing objectives.

Some people tweet several times a day, others a few times a month. There are no hard and fast rules about how often to tweet – talking to a few customers and others the business wants to engage with will help to see what they like. Tweeting once a week is usually an absolute minimum.

Businesses should follow people they want to engage with – industry spokespeople, key customers, journalists and suppliers.

Businesses then need to monitor the tweets from people they are following – Tweetdeck is a useful tool for this – and then respond, re-tweet, offer views and help.

Twitter can be helpful in getting people to read a blog by posting a link on Twitter (the blog URL address can be shortened for Twitter by using the bit.ly website) – and posing a relevant question or controversial comment.

@reply is a great feature in Twitter. It can be used to draw the attention of a specific Twitter user to a message, but let the Twitterverse (the cyberspace area of Twitter) in on it as well, as opposed to direct messages, which are private but can only be sent to followers.

Most people use @reply to send a message to a specific user, like this:

@pkirkham Could you please send me that report you talked about?

TIP -A useful feature is the hashtag (#) added to an event or a topic, eg #leadership. This groups all tweets on that subject – people in a conference can tweet views and feedback to each other.

Facebook

Organisations and companies are increasingly looking at the benefits of Facebook to market their products. The success of having a presence on Facebook is about interactivity and keeping content fresh and interesting. Photos, videos and links help to increase engagement.

Pages and groups are for businesses – they serve different purposes but have overlapping features, which can be confusing. The features and benefits of both are set out here:

Pages

- Facebook doesn't let businesses set up personal profiles – that's for individuals. Instead a company or organisation can set up a page where people who 'like' a page can gather, rather than having 'friends'.
- Facebook pages are like profiles for brands, public figures, bands and movies with the ability to have friends, add pictures, and walls where fans can post comments.
- People are encouraged to interact with pages and to post their 'like' status on their own Facebook profile.
- Pages communicate by 'updates' which are shown on the update tab or a person's wall if they 'like' a page.
- Only authorised administrators can manage a page (which can have more than one administrator) – names are not visible.
- Pages are good for long term relationships.
- Pages are indexed by search engines such as Google whereas groups are not.

Groups

- Groups are dedicated to a common interest or subject and allow a community to build around them – they are popular with clubs, societies and alumni groups.
- They offer far more control over who can participate and if there are fewer than 5,000 members, administrators are allowed to email members directly to their inboxes.
- They are good for quick, active discussions and for publicising events – there's an RSVP facility.
- Groups have administrators that manage the group, approve applicants or invite others to join - the administrators' names will be visible.

TIP - For a personal profile:

- Keep a separate personal profile for private life and create a professional profile to promote a business (see 'Pages' above).
- Best practice is to limit access and information to a personal Facebook profile to known contacts i.e. 'friends', so settings on a profile should be checked to restrict visibility to unknown users.
- Check personal information in a profile to ensure it is not giving away answers to personal security questions to online bank accounts.
- Facebook and other social networking sites are used as information resources by people (social purposes, recruitment, etc) so consideration is needed for what is posted and said and who has access to this information.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a social networking site for business people. It is much more than an alternative address book. It can be used for joining special interest groups, setting up special groups, carrying out informal research and promoting events.

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It is important to complete profiles 100% in order to be found on search engines and maximise the benefits of LinkedIn

TIP - When setting up a personal profile:

- Include all past jobs, company names and education.
- Claim the public URL when signing up to LinkedIn – this can be customized to be personal, www.linkedin.com/in/johnsmith.
- Add a photo – use the same one for all public profiles to build a brand.
- Fill in the specialties box with keywords that will help your business.
- Update the status regularly – this can be done with latest blog posts, tweets, conference speaking, articles, reports.
- Include links to the company's website and blog.
- Go through your business cards and find relevant and interesting business contacts to connect with.
- Get at least three recommendations.

It is good practice to join relevant groups. A good place to find these is to look at the profiles of contacts – customers and target customers – and see which groups they belong to. If relevant, ask to join the groups they belong to. It is normal to be vetted and accepted into groups, so it is important only to join groups that appear appropriate. No business wants a reputation for their managers being rejected.

Tempting though it may be to invite lots of contacts that a business would like to know – but doesn't – people are likely to reject unknown requests. LinkedIn will ban anyone who gets too many rejections. A good way to make new contacts is to look for shared contacts and ask for introductions through known contacts to others.

Some of the benefits of LinkedIn are highlighted below:

- Tenders – an advanced search to identify people who have worked for the pitch company can provide useful background information to that business. It can even identify colleagues who have previously worked there. Ask contacts for background information about the company and the individuals on the tender panel.
- Market research – post questions to relevant member groups. To kickstart the discussion, it helps to ask one or two people known in the group to make the first comments and after that the debate should get going – if it is an interesting question.
- Recruitment – a great way to find or get extra information on candidates for senior roles.

TIP - Who to invite to join a LinkedIn network? A good rule of thumb is to select someone who:

- You would have a drink with after work or a meeting.
- You would recommend to your contacts.
- You would do business with.

Blogging

A blog can either be a stand-alone website or part of a business website. In business it is generally best to make it part of a main website to help drive traffic to it and increase Google rankings, otherwise include the business website URL in the blog as a weblink.

Blogs – abbreviated from web logs – need a clear identity and labelling as to what they are about and why people should follow. They need a snappy title and description so anyone landing on the blog for the first time is drawn in, wants to read and follow it.

The key ingredients of a good blog are:

- Clarity.
- Quality and useful information.
- Passion and integrity.
- Personality.
- Relevant content and key words to support search engine optimisation.
- Controversy, questions and debate – to encourage people to post comments.

Each published blog is called a post.

Writing a blog is harder than it seems for many people – even for regular writers and journalists. It can take a month or two to find what is called a 'voice'. A good blog is chatty, not an essay or a feature piece in a magazine. It needs to be written as the writer would speak so it feels like a conversation.

It is a good idea to write a dozen or more posts before they go live. That way there is time to practice and feel comfortable with a theme, check that the content is useful to the target audience and that it is consistent. An archive of posts also means that when the blog goes live it looks immediately full and interesting – one blog post looks very lonely!

When the blog is set up, it needs an RSS button (a software device that allows people to request new content from the site) so people can subscribe to the blog. Buttons to link to any other social media accounts set up by the business such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube will also be needed.

TIP - If you've got blog writer's block don't worry about posting your blogs at first. Just write. Try doing something every day to start with – even one or two paragraphs.

If you are stuck for topics, try these to get you going:

- When you spot something in your industry paper that makes you want to respond, don't rant at the coffee machine, write it down.
- Have you been on a buying trip that might interest your customers? A wine merchant might talk about this year's trip to France – how the weather is going to affect this year's production or a trend they have spotted.
- You could be impressed with new innovations at a trade show or have visited two or three suppliers and want to compare the good and bad (probably without naming individual businesses).
- Are you about to speak at a conference or a meeting of local business people? Are you preparing a presentation with some key points?

But don't forget – this has to fit in with your marketing strategy. Always consider the benefit to your target audience and business. reports.

08 Evaluating Social Media

Google Analytics is a free analytics tool for anyone who opens a Google account. It is a key way to measure traffic to a website. It can identify the number of people viewing which pages; where they are based; how long they stay on which pages etc. However, before analysing statistics, it is important to be clear about what the business is seeking to achieve from website visits.

Goals should be set for social media. For the first few months, it may be enough of an achievement just to post blogs and tweets on a regular basis. Later this could move to generating two or three comments to blogs and tweet responses as well as measuring the number of people – and the quality of the people – who are following your accounts.

Once up and running, this can be refined to get debates and new relationships forming and eventually move into campaigns that lead to business.

The key is to have clear goals, monitor what is happening on social media, and change and refine activities as regularly as needed to achieve them.

09 Managing Online Reputations

Online and social media are channels of communications in the same way as newspapers, TV and radio. However, they are faster, can reach more relevant people and provide a platform for anyone to write or comment.

Even if a business has decided not to blog, tweet or use social media sites, other people can be out there writing and commenting on their business. It is better to be active and engage with them online.

TIP

- Keep online content fresh and up to date. Stale blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages make a business look unprofessional.
- Social media accounts need to have designated people with corporate responsibility for updating content and comments.

Social media crises need to be anticipated and managed, just the same as with offline PR and communications. A social media crisis plan should include procedures to be followed, chain of command (who needs to know), spokespeople and their contact details.

Social media can be used to advantage with an offline crisis where people need to know what is happening and quickly. Bad news travels very fast thanks to the internet but social media – Twitter, YouTube, Facebook – can put businesses in charge of their news agenda. This provides opportunities to communicate very effectively in a crisis and to publish apologies, clarify the facts and issue statements to a wide audience.

Set out below are some good practice guidelines to help to avoid and, if necessary, manage crises:

- Have a social media policy for employees so that they understand and have guidelines for any online communication which may relate to or have implications for a business. There are many great examples available for download on how to keep employees safe online. Allow for creativity: if done well, employees can become great ambassadors of the company, adding relevance and credibility to the brand.
- Ensure that if those employees designated to manage online content and social media are absent, someone else has the password and user names to act as administrator for the social network accounts.
- Company blogs need more than one person who knows how to upload the blogs and access the 'backroom' functions.
- Businesses should set up a daily audit of what is being said about them online. Google alerts can search on a company name and any product names (more sophisticated systems such as Technorati are needed for large corporates).

- Ensure the person monitoring online comments has the authority, processes and contacts to know how to deal with any crisis, or potential crisis, they spot.
- Be prepared for negative and even critical comments. While it is acceptable to correct factually incorrect information, businesses should not get involved in an online fight.
- If a business does not like what is being said, change the conversation.

10 Global Differences

Social media started in America and they have had several years start on the UK – although sites are not necessarily used in the same way as in the UK. The UK and the rest of the world are catching up fast – in 2010, China overtook both countries. Nearly half of Chinese social media users log on to their favourite sites while at work, compared with a quarter in the UK and only one in five in the US.

Different social media are more popular in different countries – each country should be researched individually if social media is part of an exporting strategy.

11 Glossary

Blog (shortened from weblog) - a type of website in the form of an ongoing journal.

Facebook - Facebook is a free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues.

LinkedIn - LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking site mainly used for professional networking

Twitter - Twitter is an online service that allows individuals and businesses to share updates with other users

DM or Direct Messaging – a way of sending a message to someone so that only they can see it.

Lists – a feature that allows users to create a group of tweeters that have something in common.

Call: 08456 048 048

Email: info@businesslinkyorkshire.co.uk

Visit: www.businesslink.gov.uk

Text: THINK to 88802

Tweet – a message posted on Twitter (limited to 140 characters)

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) – a web publishing technology that allows end users to automatically receive new digital content from providers

#Hashtags – keywords used to put tweets in a certain topic

RT or ReTweet - to pass along a Twitter message that someone else posted originally.

Follower – someone who is reading your tweets.

URL shorteners – Bit.ly is one of the most popular URL shorteners. It allows users to shorten, share, and track links.

12 Where to Go for Further help

The **Business Link** website is an excellent source of further information on some of the topics mentioned in this factsheet.

Visit: www.businesslinkyorkshire.co.uk

Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) is the trade association for online media

Visit: www.iabuk.net or call 0207 050 6969

Top 40 UK blogs - www.logjam.com

New Media Age - magazine covering the digital arena
www.nma.co.uk

Twitter - www.twitter.com

Facebook - www.facebook.com

Mashable - the world's largest blog focused exclusively on Web 2.0 and Social Media news.
www.mashable.com

This factsheet has been produced in conjunction with Northern Lights PR www.northernlightspr.com or call 01423 562400

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This information is intended to be a brief introduction to the subject. Legal information is provided for guidance only and should not be regarded as an authoritative statement of the law.

