
“Go fish where the fish
are swimming.”

- a short guide to social media

It doesn't matter if you're on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr or LinkedIn; your online persona must represent your overall brand values whilst ensuring your business reputation remains intact!

In the Social Media world, your persona becomes an interactive version of your business, so be careful of the experience you deliver. Who is the face or voice of your brand and what do they say? It's a very important decision, but unfortunately one that is often glossed over.

Just as you create brand identity guidelines and key messaging guides, so too you need to dedicate time to creating your social media personality.

Social media for business is about engagement. Connect with people, build opportunities through dialogue...

Go fish where the fish are swimming.

It sounds obvious, but too often businesses are seduced by media and market hype; using this to inform their choices as to which social media platforms to engage on. Equally dangerous is to work on assumptions and pre-conceived ideas. For instance assuming that Facebook is the domain of the young or people playing trivial games is likely to cause you to miss some big opportunities.

Define your target audiences (there will probably be more than one) in as much detail as you can. Then research where these audiences are going, when they go there and what they currently do whilst they are there. One of the often-missed advantages of social media is the depth of profiling data available. Possibly more than any other channel, social media enables you to target with rifle like precision.

Be prepared to engage on multiple platforms. Doing so means that you must formulate a content strategy that means you are consistent but not repeating yourself. Nothing looks more amateurish than the businesses that believe they have "automated" social media and simply fire hose the same content across every platform. Your message must remain consistent but the way it is expressed needs to be specific to the culture of each social platform.

Be transparent and authentic. Above all be human.

If you don't want the worst day of your life to be played over and over again, then don't talk, share, Tweet or write about it via social media. That said, no one is happy, or perfect all of the

time. It's good to let people into the every day events that happen in your organizations life. Social media for business is about engagement. Connect with people, build opportunities through dialogue which would not have otherwise occurred, then connect them with your business.

But be appropriate. Think in terms of "idiot driver just cut me up" instead of "just got arrested for being drunk and disorderly". The first example is very personal, human, connects people and encourages dialogue. Who hasn't been irritated by a bad driver? The second example has the potential to make people uncomfortable or turn them off you and therefore your business.

Be authentic, but remember that you are the voice of your business so be appropriate too.

A profile picture is worth a thousand tweets

A major part of your social media personality is your avatar and your profile biography. The first rule for avatars and biographies is to remain consistent across social platforms. Sharing information as a business account means that you need to decide whether you want your avatar to be your company logo or the face of the business owner or leader. Each sends a completely different message.

Deciding to use your logo may raise additional problems. Most avatar images are forced to be relatively small and many logos will be completely unrecognizable at such small dimensions. You are going to use your avatar a lot, and it needs to be created with the same care and attention put into the rest of your identity. Your avatar may only be small, but it is worth investing in having it properly produced, as a new element in your brand identity.

You are making history

Your social media footprints become part of your businesses legacy. This is serious stuff. What you post stays around for a long time and the information (good and bad) isn't too hard to find. Your social media posts offer vast archives of information about you and your company. A poorly thought out message has a tendency to surface at the most inconvenient times.

This means, what you share, post or tweet today should reinforce your business tomorrow. Think about each message you send via social media as an email which has gone public to your entire organization and all of your competitors as well as customers. Now, imagine they are reading this email and RESPONDING to it publicly.

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Every cloud has a silver lining

But it's not just the bad and embarrassing content that hangs around and is easy to find, positive information is equally attractive to search engines! Whilst Social Media is principally about customer engagement, it also should play a key role in your businesses SEO plan.

Social sites like Facebook and LinkedIn rank highly in search engines. Giving both your profile and the content you generate a good chance of being easily found via old-fashioned search. Therefore it is worth considering keywords within the content you share, tweet or blog as well as the judicious use of links back to your site. Try to use terminology consistently and of paramount importance make sure you adopt the vocabulary your customers use. Social bookmarking sites like Digg, StumbledUpon and Delicious can also be another way to drive traffic to your website.

When setting up your blog be aware of SEO value and make sure that your blog is physically located on your companies web domain

A word of caution though, focusing your social media efforts around SEO and placing Google ranking above engagement is likely to cause you to alienate your customers.

By their very nature blogs are typically based around a particular topic, grow organically with new content and act as a sign-post to other related subject matter. For these reasons blogs are simply adored by search engines. When setting up your blog be aware of SEO value and make sure that your blog is physically located on your companies web domain and not hosted by one of the free providers such as Blogger or WordPress.

Don't be a social schizophrenic

Multiple personality disorders do not work well in social media, and yet seem to be remarkably common. If you are a business expert one day, an agony aunt the next and a political commentator after that, people will ultimately stop connecting with you and your business. You will confuse them, they will no longer know what to expect from you. Therefore they don't understand why they should engage with you in social space.

A very simple approach is to make a short list of what your company might talk about via social media and then stick to this agenda.

For instance, when someone thinks about a legal issue, they will think of you because you will have consistently positioned yourself as the approachable solicitor of choice. Remember, even when you are posting on subjects not directly associated with your expertise, make sure the message re-enforces the "legal expert" persona.

The same concept applies when you join multiple networks. Keep the same persona for each and always refer back to your outline topic list.

Yes social media is "social" and has an informal feel, but always remember that you are in public and speaking for your business. Act accordingly.

Social climbing makes you unpopular

As you build your social media persona, don't only connect with people who have a lot of "followers," "friends," "connections," etc. It makes sense to engage these people, but it is more important to connect with a quality

audience. In fact the one you defined right at the start, when you decided to go social media fishing. Spending too much time focusing on highly connected people may be totally counterproductive. Being highly focused on connecting with relevant people will lead to a much higher quality social graph for your new persona.

You should test the quality of your “friends”, “followers” or “connections” on a regular basis and use this index as part of your key performance indicators for social media. Obviously, the size of your following or number of friends IS important. Your business needs “reach” in social media. However of equal importance is the quality of your reach. Your quality index will give you a strong view on the level of engagement you are achieving.

Make sure you can deliver

Social Media is by its nature a personal experience for the majority of users. Therefore the promises your business makes in terms of service or values through social media must be delivered on! This is of course the case with all channels, but because of the personal nature of social media, a broken promise can have a disproportionate impact. Consumers / customers are quite likely to take it personally.

One of the most appealing attributes of social media is the rapidity with which it works. This of course is not only true for good news but bad too. The old adage of bad news travels fast could have been created for social media. At sometime you will inevitably have to deal with an unhappy customer who is being vocal online. But you can certainly make your life much more pleasurable by making sure you don't create unhappy customers through over promising and under delivering.

Manage your reputation

It is inevitable, despite your attention to service and ability to deliver, that at some point some customers will be unhappy with your business. By tuning in to social media and listening out for the relevant conversations, you can significantly improve your chances of addressing negative customers before they cause your reputation long-term damage.

When you discover a negative review or comment it is important to avoid a hasty response. For a small business it can be easy to feel hurt by negative comments and take them personally. For larger businesses it is vitally important to ensure that customer service procedures are updated to encompass social media.

A timely well thought out response can stop an issue from escalating and often leads to an even more loyal customer for the future.

Big or small, your business needs to address negative comments and complaints in the same way it would if the customer was in your shop or office. This means responding in a gracious and courteous manner. A timely well thought out response can stop an issue from escalating and often leads to an even more loyal customer for the future.

Never mislead your social media audience. Posting fake reviews that either glorify your business or are negative about your competition must always be avoided. Despite how obviously wrong this is, there are examples of both large and small businesses that have fallen foul.

Return on Investment

It's all about ROI – return on investment. Is your social media strategy working and delivering value to your business? Spend can either be an overhead cost (no tangible measurable return but necessary to keep the business running) or an investment that clearly delivers a measurable and valuable return. You will be investing a lot of time and effort as well as probably incurring direct costs in order to implement your social media persona. Unless you measure ROI how do you know that it is worthwhile? Maybe you should triple your social media investment in order to grow your business ten fold? Unless you measure ROI you will never know!

Your ROI model will be very specific to your business, but here are a few ways to start quantifying the value of your social engagement:

- Track traffic from links
- Count subscribers to RSS feeds
- Count social media connections and then calculate your leverage index
- Count trackbacks and comments to blog posts
- Track additional sales and general inquiries from social media
- Track internal cost reductions. Is social media allowing you to reduce support costs or visit customers face to face less often?

Then, armed with you knowledge of visitor value website conversion ratio and industry values, you are able to fairly easily start calculating ROI from social media.

Don't listen to anyone else's advice!

You know your business and you understand your brand promise more clearly than anyone else. Certainly learn some of the social media fundamentals from others, there is no point re-inventing the wheel. Absolutely observe and learn what has and is working for other businesses, take inspiration but don't feel you have to replicate. The success or failure of your business is your responsibility, take input experts and then find a way to apply it in a novel and creative fashion that is right for your business.