



GOING GLOBAL:

Social Media Marketing for Small Businesses

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Introduction

Social media is revolutionizing the world of small business marketing, creating new avenues for merchants to promote their companies at a low cost. By creating free profiles on popular social-networking websites, small businesses are able to forge deeper connections with potential customers in their target demographics.

Before MySpace's 2003 launch, marketing options available to small business owners consisted primarily of taking out print advertisements in local phone books or newspapers. Ten years later, social media marketing has gone mainstream. Sixty-one percent of small business owners use at least one social media channel,¹ and 10 percent spend at least 10 hours a week on social media activities.²

For many businesses, the decision to switch from paid offline advertising to social media marketing has been easy. Social media platforms are often available with no upfront costs aside from the time it takes a business owner to create a profile. What's more, small businesses can use the platforms to reach out directly to a receptive audience.

Small Businesses Spend More Time Online

Two-thirds of small businesses are spending more time on social media than they were a year ago, and 43 percent report spending six or more hours a week working on social media marketing.³ Much of this time is spent creating content, reaching out to customers and analyzing results of online campaigns. However, small businesses also use social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to learn about their competitors and post exclusive deals.

Social media has become a valuable resource for small businesses looking to drive sales, increase brand awareness and reach new customers. Thirty-six percent of small businesses surveyed by Manta, a small business directory, say their primary goal in using social media is to acquire and engage with new customers, 19 percent say they use it to generate leads and referrals and 17 percent use it to drive awareness.⁴ In a separate survey, 60 percent of small businesses and nonprofits say social media marketing is well-suited to attracting new customers and engaging existing ones.⁵

To uncover the true value of social media marketing, small businesses have to be strategic in the way they use the most popular networking channels.

¹ [Small Business Social Media Survey, Staples](#), May 2013

² [Report: SMBs focused on social media](#), BizReport, April 2013

³ [Small business loves Facebook and Twitter, ignores LinkedIn, Google+, and Pinterest](#), VentureBeat, October 2012

⁴ [Manta's Q1 SMB Wellness Index Reveals Small Businesses find ROI in Social Media but Struggle with Facebook](#), Manta, April 2013

⁵ [Small Businesses Favor Tactics That Balance Customer Attraction, Retention](#), eMarketer, April 2013

How Small Businesses Use Social Media

When it comes to social media, small businesses have a wide array of options to choose from, from the more business-oriented pages of LinkedIn to photo-heavy platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram. How a small business approaches social media and the platforms selected will depend largely on goals and the amount of money available.

Before deciding which tools to use, small businesses need a firm understanding of what they want from a social media marketing campaign. For example, business owners who are interested primarily in finding new customers will often run contests or post coupons on sites such as Facebook or Twitter. On the other hand, small businesses that want to promote specific products are more likely to upload photos on image-sharing sites such as Pinterest and Instagram.

Three in five business owners expect to spend the same or more time on social advertising in the coming year. However, only 8.7 percent plan to use more paid tools such as promoted Facebook posts and sponsored tweets.⁶ For the vast majority, free social media tools are enough to capture potential customers' attention.



⁶ [Small Businesses Devote More Resources to Websites, Social](#), eMarketer, March 2013

For Small Business, Social Isn't Just Facebook

Facebook is the most popular social media platform among small businesses, with 35 percent using it compared with 33 percent on LinkedIn and 19 percent on Twitter.⁷ However, Facebook hasn't been the most reliable tool for driving online leads. For that, small businesses have largely flocked to Twitter.

Twitter accounts for 82 percent of all social media leads for small businesses, while Facebook accounts for just 9 percent.⁸ Still, when it comes to finding new customers, it's hard to beat Facebook's overwhelming reach. Eighty-three percent of Internet users now have a Facebook page or some other presence on the site. Small businesses that cater to mothers and families are more likely to be successful on Facebook, as 72 percent of American moms have a profile page on the social network.⁹

Aside from demographics, business owners need to consider what content they're sharing and why. Businesses that sell physical products — bakeries, retail stores, restaurants, photography studios and the like — are in the best position to take advantage of image-heavy networks such as Instagram and Pinterest. A restaurant might upload photos of nightly dinner specials to Instagram, and a retail store might pin an image to a Pinterest board of customers wearing its shirts or jeans. On the other hand, businesses that sell directly to others are more likely to find success on text-heavy platforms such as LinkedIn or Twitter, where they can post links to industry articles and connect with other companies in the community.

The payoff from a well-executed social media strategy can be great. When customers click "Like" on Facebook or "Follow" on Twitter, they are inviting a business into their lives and agreeing to receive product news and other updates. More than 70 percent of consumers say they are more likely to buy from a small business after following the company on Twitter, and 73 percent say they enjoy receiving updates on products from the companies they follow.¹⁰ Taking the next step and converting an online follower into a paying customer should be easy, at least for companies willing to make regular updates to their social media accounts.

Before business owners decide which social media platforms to use for marketing, they need to know more about available options and why they should choose one social media channel over another. Here's a look at some of the most popular options

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⁷ [Small businesses turning to Facebook and LinkedIn for social media branding](#), PCWorld, July 2013

⁸ [For B2B SMBs, Twitter Gets the Best Social Leads](#), eMarketer, February 2013

⁹ [Moms and Media 2013, Edison Research](#), May 2013

Facebook

Facebook is the world's largest social network, with 1.15 billion active monthly users.¹¹ Members tend to be older and wealthier than users of competing networks. Since the end of 2012, the number of Facebook users ages 45 to 54 increased 45 percent. Facebook members include 73 percent of users in the U.S. whose annual incomes are more than \$75,000.¹² Small businesses looking to target high earning, older customers would be smart to focus on this established social network.

How business owners use Facebook depends not just on their goals but also on how much time and money they're willing to invest. A Facebook business page is free, and setting one up takes less than 30 minutes. Business owners can invite people to "Like" their pages and post updates about upcoming events.

According to Facebook, the most successful posts — measured by the number of "Likes" and comments they get — contain 100 to 250 characters. Users also respond to posts that include visual elements such as photos and videos. Businesses with money to spend

on the platform can buy ads, which appear in the news feeds of Facebook users who fall within targeted demographics.

For one Fayetteville, N.C., restaurant, the key to success on Facebook has been consistency. Posting daily updates about specials, upcoming events and coupons has allowed the owner to generate attention in her community without spending on advertising.



Tips for Using Facebook

- Upload behind-the-scenes photos and videos of employees in action to your company's Facebook page.
- Post coupons for discounts that are available only through your Facebook page.
- Schedule posts to appear at the same time each day.
- Use the "Pin to Top" feature to keep important posts at the top of your Facebook page for up to seven days.
- Use paid [Facebook Ads](#) to get more people to "Like" your page.

¹¹ [Key Facts](#), Facebook, June 2013

¹² [The Demographics of Users of Social Media, Summarized](#), NPQ, September 2013

Twitter

With its succinct messages and simple interface, Twitter is known more for its short, 140-character posts than its visual imagery. More than 200 million people use the networking platform, with millennials making up the largest user group.¹³ In all, 27 percent of U.S. Internet users 18 to 29 have a Twitter account, compared with 16 percent of Internet users in their 30s and 40s.¹⁴ Twitter users are more likely to be male, well educated and higher paid than members of other social networks.¹⁵

Businesses are most likely to use Twitter to drive conversations among customers in their geographic and virtual communities. Twitter offers businesses an easy way to engage with customers in real time to answer questions, resolve disputes and share specials or other news. Twitter is also useful for listening. Companies can follow loyal customers, or track hashtags related to their business to gather market intelligence or find out what people think of their offerings. These insights can serve as a compass to guide overarching marketing strategy.

Twitter followers are an especially loyal bunch, eagerly spreading the word about the businesses they follow in the form of “retweets” and “replies.” Seventy percent of Twitter users say they have retweeted a small business’s post because they “liked the content,” and 64 percent have mentioned a small business when sharing a positive experience online.¹⁶

Although Twitter doesn’t cost anything, businesses can pay for Promoted Tweets to get posts in the timelines of users who don’t follow their accounts. Businesses can use Promoted Tweets to target users by interest, gender, geography, device, keyword or with characteristics similar to existing followers.



Tips for Using Twitter

- To stand out from competitors, share information that’s unique to your company.
- Use the @reply feature to respond to customers who’ve mentioned your business.
- Host a contest or sweepstakes to boost engagement levels and gain followers.
- Search for users who complain about your competitors, and offer them an incentive to try your company’s products or services.
- Use Promoted Tweets to get noticed by potential customers who aren’t already following your account.

¹³ [Experiments @ Twitter, Twitter Blogs](#), September 2013

¹⁴ [The Demographics of Users of Social Media, Summarized](#), NPQ, September 2013

¹⁵ [72% of Online Adults are Social Networking Site Users](#), Pew Research, August 2013

¹⁶ [SMB Twitter Followers Show Devotion](#), eMarketer, September 2013

LinkedIn

Business owners interested in courting a professional demographic almost universally turn to LinkedIn. Since its debut in 2003, LinkedIn has amassed a network of more than 238 million members in 200 countries. Thirty percent of U.S. business owners report using LinkedIn regularly, and 41 percent say the network is the “most valuable agent for growth” among social media platforms.¹⁷ One in five online adults is on the platform,¹⁸ and students and recent college graduates make up LinkedIn’s fastest growing demographic.¹⁹ LinkedIn visitors skew heavily male, 61 percent to 39 percent female.²⁰

More than three million small businesses worldwide have created free LinkedIn company pages, which can be valuable tools for establishing a company’s credibility and connecting with industry leaders.

Businesses add connections by asking clients to “connect” on LinkedIn or by joining LinkedIn groups that pertain to their industries. Once they have built up a base of connections, business owners can draw attention to their companies by using LinkedIn to share blog posts with those connections and groups. Business owners can also reach out directly to potential customers and ask for referrals through shared connections. LinkedIn’s tight focus on business networking ensures that messages a business sends are reaching the right people.



Tips for Using LinkedIn

- Join a LinkedIn group for business leaders in your community and start discussions about topics in which you have experience or expertise.
- Ask for endorsements or recommendations from customers or past business partners, anything that would lend credibility to you or what you do.
- Post frequent updates about the business, including favorable performance reports, recent hires and acquisitions.
- Place ads on prominent LinkedIn pages using the company’s self-service advertising portal, [LinkedIn Ads](#)

¹⁷ [Small Firms Say LinkedIn Works, Twitter Doesn't](#), The Wall Street Journal, January 2013

¹⁸ [The Demographics of Social Media Users – 2012](#), Pew Research, February 2013

¹⁹ [About LinkedIn](#), LinkedIn, Retrieved October 2013

²⁰ [LinkedIn.com Traffic and Demographic Statistics](#), Quantcast, October 2013

Pinterest

Since Pinterest debuted in March 2010, the pinboard-style discovery platform has grown to become a leading referral traffic generator for retailers and brands. More than 70 million users worldwide²¹ “pin” favorite images onto inspirational “boards” dedicated to subjects on everything from interior decorating to healthy recipes.

Fifteen percent of Internet users regularly visit Pinterest, with well-educated, high-earning women between 18 and 49 making up the bulk of the virtual scrapbooking site’s dedicated users. Twenty percent of college-educated Internet users use Pinterest, compared with 15 percent on Twitter and 12 percent on Instagram.²² Eight of 10 users are female, according to Internet stats keeper comScore, and Pinterest fans are more likely to live in rural areas than members of competing social networks.²³

Small businesses use Pinterest to spread the word about new products and engage customers in visual conversations. Owners can set up free business accounts and verify their websites, [adding “Pin It” buttons](#) to their sites to make it easier for customers to share their favorite products.

For a Seattle bakery, Pinterest has become a place to share photographs of recent confections, which followers are encouraged to “repin” to their own boards. Retail stores and other local businesses have also found success by posting graphic coupons to spread the word about upcoming sales and events. Some businesses link Pinterest coupons to their Facebook pages to promote cross-platform synergy.



Tips for Using Pinterest

- Add a “Pin It” button on your business website and blog.
- Use [Pinterest’s web analytics tool](#) to see which products from your website people are pinning on the social network.
- Encourage Pinterest users to visit your website by posting coupons and special offers.
- Update your website with meta-tags to create rich pins with integrated details such as pricing and availability.

²¹ [Semiocast: Pinterest now has 70 million users and is steadily gaining momentum outside the US](#), The Next Web, July 2013

²² [The Demographics of Social Media Users – 2012](#), Pew Research, February 2013

²³ [Pinterest Market Research: Growth Rate, Demographics and Referral Data](#), BrandonGaille.com, May 2013

Instagram

Instagram's stylized images and quirky filters let business owners put a human face on their companies. More than 150 million active monthly users congregate on the network to share photos and videos from mobile devices. The network is most popular among people ages 18 to 29.²⁴

Businesses can use Instagram to post their own content or encourage customers to share images of themselves interacting with products or services. When companies share behind-the-scenes photos of their employees, office or other aspects of the business, customers can become more personally engaged with their brand. By posting images, companies also have an opportunity to attract new customers.

Most businesses use Instagram in conjunction with other social channels, automatically pushing Instagram photos onto Twitter and Facebook. The integration makes it possible to run contests and reward customers for sharing Instagram photos with their friends on other social sites. Restaurants, cafes, retailers and other businesses can also promote brand loyalty by commenting on or "liking" photos that their customers tag as being taken inside their shops.



Tips for Using Instagram

- Share photos of customers using your products.
- Include hashtags to ensure photos show up when Instagram users search on Facebook, Twitter or Google for specific categories or topics.
- Interact with other Instagram users, including frequent customers and other merchants in your community, to gain more followers.

²⁴ [The Demographics of Social Media Users - 2012](#), Pew Research, February 2013

Conclusion

Social media is a low-cost, high-value option for small business owners looking to increase their exposure to existing and potential customers within targeted demographics.

Rather than wait for customers to come to them, savvy business owners can use social channels to reach customers who are also on the networks and forge deeper connections with people in their own communities.

Lasting connections are a major reason social media plays such an integral role in the world of small business marketing.

While some social sites are better choices for business owners looking to reach specific customer segments, other networks provide a more general platform for reaching large groups of potential customers on their own home turf.

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