

# 10 Best Practices

for Social Media Marketing Success



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## In the evolving world of social media marketing,

it can be hard for a time-starved small business or organization to keep pace and know what to do when it comes to connecting with customers and members on sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Foursquare, Yelp, and other specialty social networks.

While there's no "one-size fits all" approach, we've assembled 10 best practices for social media marketing success that will help your business or organization, whether you're just getting started or trying to take your efforts to the next level.





## 1 Have a Goal

Like most marketing and business efforts, it's good to have a goal in mind as you delve into social media marketing. It doesn't have to be anything audacious like increase sales 30% year over year. Something more along the lines of improving company/brand awareness; adding a new channel to interact with customers, members, and prospects; or improving search engine optimization (SEO) will work just fine.

It's important to keep in mind that the return on investment with social media marketing cannot always be measured in hard dollars. While one can offer deals and make sales, the real power of social media marketing is in building relationships and remaining top of mind with existing customers. Plus, the viral nature of social media can help you find and connect with new customers.

A July 2010 study by Gartner found that 74% of consumers rely on some type of social media network to guide purchasing decisions. That's because people rely on what others have to say about a product or brand before making an investment themselves. The survey points out that marketers should use social media networks to target the people who influence others' purchasing decisions. Doing so may not have a direct ROI attached to it, but can indirectly help influence sales.

If you're new to social media, set achievable goals that will allow you to get your feet wet and start building connections with your existing customer base. As your comfort level and social media savvy grow, so too can your goals.

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## 2 Know Who You Are and Portray Yourself Consistently

Before diving into social media for your business or organization, you should decide what kind of image you want to portray through your various social media outlets.

Some argue that social media should be free and easy going, and marketers should take a casual approach. Others disagree and think users should maintain a more serious, buttoned-down approach. The path you follow is up to you and your business or organization's culture. Either way, be sure to stay consistent with the brand identity you've established.

No matter which way you fall on the casual versus serious choice, make sure your posts sound human. After all, you're connecting with other human beings. Social media marketing gives you a unique opportunity to humanize your brand and to show your customers, members, or prospects that there are real people behind the product or service — people just like them. Use a conversational tone and forget the robot-speak.

This helps people to relate to your business or organization, and that goes a long way toward getting people to know, like, and trust you. When people know, like, and trust you, they are much more likely to share your message with their friends. And it's word-of-mouth (i.e.: the network effect) that makes social media marketing such a powerful marketing strategy.

Additionally, you'll want to portray yourself accurately in your social media profiles. If you're using the company logo as your avatar, make sure it's the most up-to-date



**Social media marketing gives you a unique opportunity to humanize your brand.**





version. If you're using a photo of yourself, try using one that is no more than 18 months old. Chances are good you'll meet some of your social media followers and fans in real life, so you'll want them to be able to recognize you.

### 3 Be Where Your Customers/Members Are

Social media marketing is important because today, customers want choices where they interact with brands. For example, some may like to follow a brand on Twitter but not on Facebook. Social media gives them that choice, so it's important to have a presence where your customers are looking to interact with you and other businesses. How do you know which sites are right for your business or organization? The simple answer is to ask your customers or members. When they come into your place of business or when you see them at an event, ask what networks they use. If they make a purchase, add a social media question to your feedback survey to collect information about what networks they use.

If asking isn't an option, you obviously want to look at the big three first. With 500 million active users, Facebook is probably the first place to start given its sheer size. Twitter, with close to 200 million users, and LinkedIn, with more than 70 million users, round out the top three.

Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn all have features that allow you to search for friends on the respective networks by email address. An organization can use this feature by uploading their email contact list to

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the service to see how many matches come up. You may not want to use this method to instantly follow and/or connect with people, though. Instead, use it as a survey tool to see what network(s) most of your customers are using.

Another way you can identify where your customers and members are engaging is to look at your social sharing data: On which sites are people sharing your content? After all, it's one thing for a customer to belong to a social network, but if he's actually *using* that site, then that's the place you want to be. This information can be an important part of making your decision.

But don't just stick to the social networks. People these days are checking in using services like Foursquare and Gowalla, and posting reviews on sites like Yelp and Angie's List. It's a good idea to make it as easy for them to do so as possible. Search for your business on sites like Yelp, Foursquare, Citysearch, and Gowalla and claim your page so the information about your business is correct. (GetListed.org is a great resource for learning more about these sites.)

## 4 Tell Your Customers and Members Where You Are

Unless you have a famous name (like LeBron James, Ashton Kutcher, or Bill Gates) or brand, your customers, members, and fans need to be told where they can connect with you through social media. Put links to your social media pages on your website, in your email newsletters, and in your personal email signature. For stores, restaurants, and other businesses where people



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congregate in person, put out signs telling people where they can connect with you on social media.

Start with your loyal customer base: the people who are already signed up for your email newsletter. It's your loyal customers who are most likely to find you on Facebook and follow you on Twitter; these are also the folks who will share your posts and help you connect with their friends and connections. Think about it: If you stumble upon an organization's Page on Facebook and it has numerous fans, including a few of your own friends, you're likely going to become a fan of it yourself, right? Seed your social media connections with your existing list to give yourself a head start on growing the number of fans and followers.

In short: Any place you connect with customers and members is a good place to mention that they can connect and interact with you online.

## 5 Don't Just Join Conversations, Add Value to Them

Social media is just that: Social. It's about having conversations and engaging with people. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn excel at making conversations easy to start and easy to join.

What you don't want to do is jump into the middle of a conversation just for the sake of doing so or to make an obvious sales pitch. What you should do is add value to the conversation at hand by sharing your expertise and knowledge as it applies to the situation.



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With Twitter, this applies to “retweeting” other people’s comments. If you do retweet something and there’s room under the 140-character cap, add a comment of your own to the forwarded tweet. There are many user timelines that are made up entirely of retweets and no original thought. Would you want to follow someone like that? Probably not. Make sure to add some value and original thought to your tweets and other social network posts to differentiate yourself from the pack and demonstrate your expertise (and personality).

You can (and should) reuse content from other sites though. It’s highly recommended to share on social media:

- > New blog entries
- > Email newsletter archives
- > News and feature articles that relate to your area of business
- > New features on your website

The key is to share content (even at 140 characters) that provides value to your followers and keeps them engaged. Otherwise, they could tune you out or stop following you all together.

## 6 Be Relevant

Relevancy is one of the gray areas of social media. Given the casual atmosphere, it’s easy to post everything and anything, but do your customers and members really want to hear about your bad day? As a business or organization participating in social media, you want to stay relevant to your business and, where appropriate, locale.



Anything **you can do** to be a part of **social media conversations** helps increase your **exposure**.







This does not mean you need to write only about your business or organization. For instance, a restaurant might post about food topics in general, including business trends, tips for preparing food, etc. The key is to not litter your wall, tweets, or status updates with just sales pitches.

As a local business or organization, you can post about happenings in the greater community. Did the Little League team you sponsor win the championship? Post a note of congratulations. A member of the community do something noteworthy? Congratulate them. Or, is there a big national event going on or a trending topic, like the Super Bowl or an election? Write a tweet that relates to that, and if it's appropriate, use the related hashtag (e.g., #superbowl). After all, it's what everyone is talking about; anything you can do to be a part of social media conversations helps increase your exposure. Keep in mind the human element and what connects us to each other as people.

## 7 Be Engaging

Social media networks — and by extension, social media marketing as a whole — tend to be more casual and conversational in tone and approach. People gather on sites like Facebook and Twitter because they have common interests, because they want to be part of a larger conversation, or because they want to be in the know. It's not formal communication, like a press release would be. Accordingly, messages are shorter, friendlier, and in many cases (but not all), more fun.

If you really want to derive value from social media, you need to engage with people. Like any conversational interaction, listening is the key to being effective. You

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need to listen to what people are saying to you and about you. When appropriate be sure to respond.

But social media marketing is also about sharing your expertise, news, and even promotions. You can show your followers that you know your business and industry by posting links to related articles, notes about other complementary businesses, and by interacting with others on the networks in which you participate. Don't just post information; ask people what they think of the article you're posting. Ask thought-provoking questions that will encourage a dialogue. Post photos or videos that show what's going on with your business or organization, and encourage your friends, followers, and fans to do the same.

Social media is a two-way dialog, not just a one-way communication. Make the most of that whenever and however you can.

Don't just post information; **ask people what they think** of the article you're posting.

## 8 Be Active

How often to post is another gray area in social media marketing. Do it too little and followers may not notice. Post too often and they may get annoyed.

When posting something to Twitter, such as a link to a new blog post or special deal, you may want to post the same information more than once in a given day. Twitter feeds can be a fast moving stream, so if a customer doesn't see your original tweet, he may miss out. That said, while it's alright to post something a couple times a day, it's important to change up the wording a bit each time to freshen up the content. Otherwise, you'll look like a spammer and people may unfollow you.





For Facebook, a single link to a blog post or deal of the day is enough since those posts tend to have a little more stickiness in a user's news feed. The same goes for LinkedIn updates.

Generally, you can post multiple updates to Twitter, one or two to Facebook, and one to LinkedIn over the course of a given day without the risk of annoying the followers on each site. There are even ways to link your Twitter feed to Facebook and LinkedIn, which can help you populate all three sites with a single update. Just keep in mind: If you're updating Twitter quite a bit, you may inundate your followers on the other networks with all your tweets.

Like with email marketing, knowing your audience will help you determine how often to post.

## 9 Respond in a Timely Manner

The frequency advice only refers to original posts. You can and should reply to people's questions and posts as often and as quickly as possible, particularly when they mention a problem with your business, organization, product, or service.

Twitter in particular is used to lodge complaints all the time. Often, people are just venting and not expecting a response from the company they're complaining about. But, if you're tracking your company name, Twitter handle, and/or key product terms via Twitter Search, you can easily spot these complaints and respond. (NutshellMail from Constant Contact is a great tool for monitoring Twitter Search results without having to constantly sit at the computer.) We recommend



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responding within a single business day if possible. Any longer and your response could fall on deaf ears.

When you respond, it's recommended that you nicely ask how you can help the person, then attempt to take the conversation offline, or to another channel like email or an instant messaging client. (meaning not in a public social media conversation) to deal with the nuts and bolts of the issue. You don't want a he said/ she said debate littered across Twitter, where it can be picked up by search engines and read by anyone, or posted on your Facebook wall, where it could have a longer shelf life.

Two things to keep in mind when it comes to using social media for customer service issues:

1. Keep a thick skin: You're going to run into negative comments. Don't take them personally and try to turn that unhappy customer into a happy one.
2. Respond to the positive comments as well. If someone gives you a glowing review, respond with a thank you. It shows that you're paying attention to all of your customers, not just the squeaky wheels.

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## 10 Give Credit Where Credit Is Due

It's a best practice to share links to relevant articles, blog posts, and other content with your audience. Social media networks make this an easy thing to do. One thing to remember, though, is to cite the source of the link if it's not your own content. This is particularly important with Twitter, where shortened URLs can obscure the site being linked to.





The best practice here is to add the person or source's Twitter handle (if known) when linking to third-party content. Doing so offers two benefits: One, you're not pulling a bait-and-switch by passing someone else's content off as your own (yes, the person clicking the link will realize it soon enough, but that doesn't make it right). Two, the person you're crediting will see that you're sharing his content with your own customers/members/followers since the tweet will show up in his "Mentions" timeline.

This is not as much of an issue with Facebook since it automatically includes headline, description, and even image thumbnails from the target page when one shares a link, making it more obvious who the shared content is from.

## Do What's Right for You

When it comes to social media marketing, it's good to remember that it's just another — but very powerful — tool in your marketing arsenal and not a cure-all or replacement for other strategies that are already working for you. These best practices will help you improve your social media marketing, but ultimately it's about doing what's right for you and your business or organization. You know your customers best and what they expect from you. Delivering the content they want and engaging with them, no matter what the channel, is the most important thing. Over time you will learn from your fans and followers what works and what doesn't. So get out there, experiment, and learn by doing!

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