

## **Is Social Media on Your Radar? Starting Points for Retailers**

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"Are you on Facebook?" This, coming from a colleague I bumped into in the street. I had asked for his contact information, to set a date to talk business over coffee.

I admit this particular social networking website has yet to draw me in, even though I get one or two emails a week saying I've been added as a 'friend'. That said, I do recognize the value in this form of communication (which sits under the umbrella of 'social media'). A quick search of Facebook produces a number of well-known retailers who have caught the bug -- Target, Martha Stewart, and Starbucks all have pages on the site. This clearly indicates that there are, at the least, branding opportunities to be had there.

But what if you're a smaller retailer? Are social media applications like Facebook relevant to your business? The experts believe that social media is here to stay. And, eMarketer reports that online buyers use it to research and make decisions about their purchases. In fact, in a recent study, six in 10 online buyers said that consumer reviews on various social networks were their most trusted information source prior to making a purchase.

And, in case you're thinking bricks and mortar retailers don't need to consider the application of social media to their businesses, the other day I consulted one or two consumer review websites to research air purification systems before I hoofed out to the store to buy myself a unit...

Okay, so the public is using the Internet to share information, influencing how, when and where consumers buy. But maybe you're still not even sure what social media is. So, let's start at the beginning with an introduction to the term and the Internet-related tools and platforms that make it work.

According to wikipedia.org, social media is simply "an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words and pictures."

As opposed to broadcast media (TV, newspapers, print etc.) which simply pushes information out to an audience, social media relies on audience participation as a driver, allowing colleagues, friends, family and even strangers with common interests to quickly and easily use technology to interact and share information in the electronic world.

Examples of social media have been around for a while -- think user-driven websites such as consumer review sites, email and instant messaging, forums and message boards, blogs, wikis, podcasts, music photo and video sharing sites, shared bookmarking and annotated link sharing, sites which allow for group creation of content and even virtual worlds where users create online personas, interact with others and create and trade items for sale.

The goal of the social media phenomenon is to democratize information online, as wikipedia puts it, "transforming people from content readers into content publishers."

For marketing purposes, think of social media as a tool-kit that can allow a business to tap into the growing trend towards peer-to-peer recommendations and referrals.

It's your opportunity to establish credibility in an informal online environment and grow your reputation, your products and your business.

And, if you're a retailer looking to tap into computer savvy markets (think Generation X, Y and beyond) social media should be on your radar. These groups are big in number, technologically adept and their buying power is growing. For example, according to Profit Magazine, Generation Y (born from 1977 to 1994), will number 9.2 million in Canada by 2011. Gen Y is so at home with technology that they rely on social media to help them make decisions about everything from where to live, work and play to -- you guessed it -- what to buy.

So, how to tap in? At the outset, keep in mind that social media is not something that can guarantee sales and it certainly isn't a short-term fix for a failing marketing strategy. Instead, look at social media as another funnel which can allow your business to attract a wider audience. Then, it's your job to use whatever social media tool you've chosen to gain your audience's trust. Here's how.

Example #1: I have a friend who manufactures customized positive affirmation t-shirts which he retails online. Instead of simply relying on Internet search engine traffic, he's begun using YouTube (video sharing) to grow word of mouth about the product. He began by developing branded videos that didn't directly sell his product, but rather allowed 'converts' to share their affirmations with the world. Users searching YouTube watch the videos and find his website address. They click through to the site to learn more and (hopefully) buy a t-shirt of their own. On the site, users are encouraged to make their own videos using their shirt and affirmation and post it on YouTube. And, the cycle continues.

Example #2: I have a friend who is a hairdresser in Vancouver. She uses local, highly optimized consumer review sites such as Discover Vancouver to promote her services. Or rather, she uses her friend network to recommend her services to others using these social networks. Search 'best hair colorist Vancouver' in Google, click on the first link, and you'll find a string of Discover Vancouver conversations naming local hair colorists and where they work. This is the power of social media.

For those starting out, it's best to begin with small steps to avoid eroding credibility built off-line. Start by learning the language. Investigate social media applications to determine what might fit your marketing mix. Watch how users participate using these tools and then join in the conversation.

Try an Internet search or check out these examples for different genres:

- [www.google.ca](http://www.google.ca) (reference, social networking)
- [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) (reference)
- [www.movabletype.org](http://www.movabletype.org) and [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) (publishing/blogging tools)
- [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com) (business networking)
- [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) (social networking)
- [www.last.fm](http://www.last.fm) (personal music),
- [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (social networking and video sharing)
- [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com) (virtual reality)
- [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com) and [www.zoomr.com](http://www.zoomr.com) (photo sharing).
- [www.upcoming.org](http://www.upcoming.org) (events)
- [www.justin.tv](http://www.justin.tv) (livecasting)

Look for local groups and forums that may be relevant to your business and read what people are saying. If you're an expert on a specific topic, share your knowledge, and don't forget to include an identifier (website or email address) -- it's ultimately about marketing after all.

If you don't have a dedicated website for your business, try building an online presence using social media platforms. Use Facebook, MySpace or a blogging platform to promote yourself and what you do. Register and forward your domain name to your newly created profile page or blog.

And, lastly, be patient. Look at social media marketing as an indirect way to increase your customer base, not a one-size-fits-all panacea. Keep experimenting and you'll learn what works for you.

Now, all this talk about the benefits of social media makes me think I'm ready to take my own advice. Facebook here I come!

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