

Social Media: Is it for You?

Social media is everywhere: Pinterest, Foursquare, Yelp, Twitter, Facebook, Ning, Zanby, Hulu... funny-sounding names with a big business impact.

In fact, according to Nielson NetView (July 2012) and the 2012 Nielson Social Media Report, Facebook users spent 27 billion minutes on the social networking site in 2012; a 61% year over year increase from 2011. And according to the same report, Twitter users clocked 3.6 billion minutes in 2012; a 48% year over year climb.

With all the hoopla over social media, is it time for your business to dive in?

Maybe.

Frankly, it's better *not* to start with social media, than to start and let it drop flat. Social media *could* be for you, however, as a great way to grow your business. But there are a few caveats, which we'll explore in this article.

The top three criteria making social media a good fit for your business?

- There's a business reason for your social marketing, and you're willing to spend an hour or two defining it.
- Customers have a common interest (whether cost savings, or local pride, convenience or other)
- You've got an hour a week to keep your social media up-to-date and relevant

Let's take them one by one:

1. Business Reason for Social Media.

Ever walked into your favorite restaurant, and seen the door sign "Like us on Facebook!" or "Follow us on Twitter!"? If you're like me, your reaction ranges from bewildered ("*Why would I want to do that?*") to outright annoyed ("*No thanks. I've got enough on my plate without having to follow your business on top of my own.*").

These businesses have broken the golden rule of social marketing: they've asked for attention without giving me a reason to care.

Everyone we know is busy. Some people are insanely busy, and others are just plain busy. Very few people have time to spare for no good reason. It's up to you to offer that good reason for your customers to enter into a relationship with your business through social media.

But first, let's talk about you. What are *you* hoping to get from social media? New customers? More loyal customers? Credibility with a social presence? Lower staff turnover? All of the above?

Getting business results from social media begins with understanding where you are today. Begin by deciding what you want from social media. Then collect baseline numbers so you'll know you're making progress.

2. Customers have a Common Interest.

Whether you're a pumper, c-store with a convenience food focus, you've got (a) car wash(es) and/or service bays – chances are there are three common customer needs and wants that social media can help you with:

- a. Price – In this economy, there are very few consumers who ignore a bargain. Let your customers know you've got their backs when it comes to price sensitivity. Consider e-Blasts and/or Twitter alerts when there's a car wash special, a location-specific coupon or promotion, or a fuel price drop of > \$.02/gallon.

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- b. Quality & Service – People are “less likely to buy from a company with an employee they perceive as rude, even if the rudeness isn’t directed at them.”¹ Coupled with the fact that “50% of social media users are using social media to express concerns/complaints about brands/services”² and you’ve got a listening opportunity with social media.

Brand monitoring (doing periodic online searches for your company name) can help you learn about – and address – customer complaints. No, you can’t control what people say about your business. But you can publicly invite a complaining customer to contact you, and show that you care enough to fix the problem. It’s also a great way to learn about (and address) recurring quality or service issues.

You can also offer extra service through social media by posting weather-related maintenance tips and hints. Have a C-store in Minnesota? Alert customers when the car wash is closed due to freezing temps (but be sure to invite them to the store for some piping hot coffee), or let customers know to adjust their tire pressure for best gas mileage. Or maybe you’re in Miami in August. How about a reminder to service the car’s a/c? Regardless of your location or service offering, customers will give you their time and attention if you make it worth their while.

- c. Local Focus – Not *one* of the independent BP operators caused the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and yet many of them suffered the resulting consumer backlash and boycotts. Social media can help you ‘humanize’ your c-store and show local pride. A few ideas include ‘giving’ away Twitter space (for example, allowing Pee Wee ball teams to alert your customers of upcoming car wash fundraisers), using social media to congratulate student employees (or employees’ kids) on good grades, alerting customers of locally-based promotions (such as showing a student ID or local drivers license for a chance to win a case of soda pop)

Regardless of your consumers’ specific needs, chances are that social media can work for you. But before you dive in, it’s essential to understand *how* social media can work for you.

Take a few moments to really drill down, and outline what your customers have in common, and how those needs line up with your business goals from #1. Then select the social media tactics to match both.

And once you’ve launched, it’s time to take on the third critical element of successful social media: keeping it going.

3. Keeping it Going

Relationships take a little work. And launching a social media campaign without keeping it going is like making new friends and then never calling them back.

If you’ve decided to launch a social media presence, be sure you’ve planned for the time and effort required to keep it going. That means you’ve got (or can pay someone for) an hour a week to keep your social media up-to-date and relevant.

It all starts with a content calendar. Depending on your social media purpose (#2, above), your content calendar will include periodic updates that interest your customers. Product promotions, local news, coupons...whatever you’ve decided is important.

It’s unlikely that you’ll know all of your December promotions in April, so just start by sketching out rough topics, which you’ll fill in two to six weeks ahead of actual publication. Once you’ve got the broad topics by month and week, fill in with late-breaking news, specials and interests. For example, if you’ve got stock that’s about to expire, consider

¹ “*The Price of Incivility: Lack of Respect Hurts Morale – and the Bottom Line*” by Christina Porath and Christine Pearson, Harvard Business Review, January – February 2013, page117.

² “*State of the Media: The Social Media Report 2012:*” Nielson, July 2012.

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letting your customers know that the first 20 in-store respondents get a buck off that two-pack of chips.

Don't feel pressure to Tweet or post daily. Respect your target audience's time: they'll thank you for it. But post often enough to keep things interesting, and keep timing relevant. If you're offering ten cents off a cup of hot, fresh coffee, let your customers know first thing in the morning. (Believe it or not, a national coffee chain has sent hot coffee special promotions at 8pm the night before. They might be the first ones to notify me, but their promotion will be as tepid in my mind by tomorrow morning as that carafe of left-over java.)

It's impossible to cover all the in's and out's of social media marketing in one quick article: social media marketing is as unique and varied as your business locations. But hopefully this article offers food for thought as you consider diving in.

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