

Getting a Foothold in Social Media

A Get-Started Guide For Small and Medium Businesses



You've heard the buzz.

But you don't have any idea where to start. It starts with a strategy, rooted in a desire to forge better relationships with your customers.

Your time is already crunched, and you're probably wondering where you're going to fit social media into the big picture. But instead of thinking of this as something new, look at social media as an enhanced way of doing the business you're already doing.

Here, we'll outline a few of the strategies and tactics you can employ, and we'll touch on how each fits into the plan you've already got. Links are in red.

1. Get Educated.
2. Listen.
3. Find Your Personality.
4. Define Success.
5. Participate.
6. Measure, Measure, Measure.
7. Don't be Afraid to Fail.
8. Need Help?

<http://altitudebranding.com/getting-a-social-media-foothold/>



1. Get Educated.

There are **thousands of resources** across the web about social media about theory and practice. The best thing you can do to get started in earnest with social media is to educate yourself about what's happening out there.

Why this is important:

The same reason that you need a license before you can drive. You have to learn the rules of the road. Immersing yourself in practical knowledge is important to having real world perspective about what works and what doesn't. It's not about theory. It's about execution.

How it fits into your plan:

You're probably already doing professional development work or research. Dedicate **two hours a week** to learning more about social media within these boundaries.

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BLOGS

Chris Brogan
PR 2.0
PR Squared
Social Media Explorer
Beth's Blog – How Non Profits Can Use Social Media
KD Paine's Measurement Blog
The Buzz Bin
Communication Overtones
Conversation Agent
Marketing Profs Daily Fix
Church of the Customer
Social Media Today

BOOKS

Groundswell *Josh Bernoff and Charlene Li*
The New Rules of Marketing and PR *David Meerman Scott*
Now Is Gone *Geoff Livingston*
Age of Conversation 1 and 2 *Drew McLellan & Gavin Heaton*
The New Influencers *Paul Gillin*
Citizen Marketers *Jackie Huba & Ben McConnell*
Creating Customer Evangelists *Jackie Huba & Ben McConnell*
The Cluetrain Manifesto *Levine/Locke/Searls/Weinberger*

2. Listen.

After getting a sense of the playing field, the critical and often overlooked first step is to listen. Listen to what's being said about you, about your industry, about your competitors across the web.



Why this is important:

Because the conversations are going to happen, with or without you. It is always better to be an informed participant in the dialogue, and to understand the lay of the land before you take your first steps. In the case of building your brand online, ignorance is definitely not bliss. You must be prepared to take a hard, realistic look at your brand through the rest of the world's eyes so you can better understand how to talk with them and be a valued conversation partner.

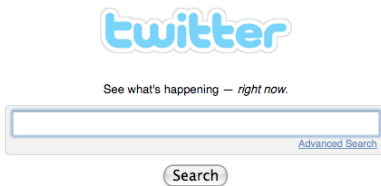
How it fits into your plan:

This is very similar to market research, or even just keeping a pulse on your customer base. Consider this a piece of business development, and **spend 15 minutes a day** perusing your alerts. If people are talking about you, pick five posts a week that you find in your reporting, go out there, and respond.

How to get started:



[Google Alerts](#): Build keyword searches for your company name, your industry terms, and your competitors. Alerts come straight to your inbox, and you can set your preferences for frequency. If you're already using RSS feeds, you can add the feeds for your searches into your reader.



[Twitter Search](#): Search for your brand name, your own name, terms from your industry, or even competitors terms to see what's being said about you on Twitter. You'll be surprised.



[Technorati](#): Although not as powerful as it once was, Technorati is still a useful tool to get a bit of info about the reach a blog has (known as "authority"), at least within the blogosphere itself.

Don't forget to report on your results, and make note of trends over time vs. singular statistics. Share what you learn with others inside your company so you can talk about what it means to you, and how you as a company feel you should respond.



3. Find Your Personality.

Social media will not succeed unless the people behind it are excited about doing it. Find the people in your company who love connecting with your customers, wherever they may be and whatever their job title. Talk to them about your goals, and let them be part of your team. If you're a solopreneur, make sure

that you're participating from the perspective of connecting with people, not selling them.

Why this is important:

People can see right through insincerity. Few trust what they see from companies in a commercial sense (some studies say as few as 15%), so it's important that your representation to the online community be human and identifiably so. By making sure that you find people in your company that are excited about forging relationships, you'll ensure that they're more successful at building ones that last.

How it fits into your plan:

If your company is large enough to have departments, this can be part of your interdepartmental meetings. If you're too small to have departments, tap into the one on one time you have with your employees to identify those with the spark and people skills to make connections.

How To Get Started:

This is easy: talk to people. Get up from behind your desk and go talk to your customer service people, your product managers, even your IT staff. If you're a company of just you or just a few, make sure you're tapping into your employees' real desire to get personally connected with customers, not just find more mechanisms to sell them stuff. If you're not dedicated to building the relationships behind the transactions, your social media efforts will flounder.

Oh, and don't forget to trust your team a bit. They want your business to succeed, too. Controlling your message obsessively is so yesterday. Still have concerns? Check out some [online communications policies](#) from companies who are already doing this well.



4. Define Success.

You gotta know what you want out of this game. Write it down, and tie each goal back to your larger business picture. Put it on your wall, and every time you feel misguided about why you're doing this, go back and look at it. Think in terms of both qualitative and quantitative results that will build your brand over time (vs. having a short term, transactional effect).

Why this is important:

If you don't understand what success means to you in terms of social media, there's no way to measure what you've achieved or where you need to improve. And it's awfully hard to prove your success if you don't know what you were aiming for in the first place.

How it fits into your plan:

If you're in business, you're planning already and outlining goals for every aspect of your business – sales and business development, customer service, innovation and product/service improvement, marketing and communications. For each area of your business, be sure that you can map some of those goals back to your social media efforts to be sure that your involvement in the space is in harmony with everything else you're doing.



How To Get Started:

If you have the ability to benchmark your current state of affairs, that's a good thing. A short survey with a tool like **Survey Monkey** can help you take the pulse of your customer base, and combined with your listening posts, can give you a good picture of how involved, engaged, and loyal your customers are.

As KD Paine recommends, 5% of your budget should be spent figuring out whether the other 95% is working. Work with existing information as much as you can. If your business is brand new, try taking the pulse of your competition as well as setting realistic but challenging goals for your business that you can measure against later.

Some samples of goals might include:

- Greater share of voice vs. competitors online
- More repeat customers/increased brand loyalty
- Improved buying cycle: more leads with shorter sales cycle
- More favorable brand sentiment/positive mentions online or in media
- Positive product/service reviews
- Reputation as a thought leader in your space
- Better understanding of your customers' needs/wants
- Improved customer service/customer satisfaction

5. Participate.

You have to be part of the conversation, and that means understanding and embracing the culture of social media. Some of the tenets of social media include being human and personable, having a unique voice, being transparent and open to dialogue, and participating through contribution (vs. merely promotion).

Why this is important:

People forge relationships with other people, not with a brand or a business. Truly. It's the **humans behind the brand that make the connections**, albeit through myriad channels. Social media has opened up a world where dialogue is easier than ever before and therefore, expected. Your customers want to talk to you, and they'll expect you to do so in a human fashion, not by pushing links and promotions and "buy me" stuff at them all the time. Trust is a fragile thing, and it's built on the back of relationships rooted in conversation.

How it fits into your plan:

Think of this as an extension of your other customer outreach channels. Akin to picking up the phone or sending an email, having a meeting, or joining a community organization, it's a touchpoint and a mechanism for conversation. You're hopefully spending time talking to your customers and prospects already, so work this into your everyday efforts to converse with the people that drive your business. **Try two hours a week to start with.** And **don't forget the follow through.**

How To Get Started:



Visit a site like [Alltop](#) or [Technorati](#) to find blogs that are of interest to you (either within your industry or without). Spend 2 hours each week commenting on other blogs, without pitching or promoting your company in any way. Simply add your perspective to the conversation, just like you'd do at a face to face social event.

If you're enthusiastic about it, start a blog. Focus one level up from your business. Rather than blogging about specific products or services, write about the experiences that drive your

consumers. For instance, if you're a bakery, write about planning special occasions. If you're an accountant, talk about financial challenges and best practices in business. Read blogs you like to get a sense of tone, post length, and content that feels comfortable for you. As a bonus, blogs help you rank more organically in Google and other search engines, too.

[more...]

How To Get Started:

Build profiles on key sites, using a real picture (not a logo) and using your real name. (It's ok to profile your business in your bio).

- **LinkedIn:** A network for professionals to connect with each other. Check out the Q&A section and lend your expert .02!
- **Facebook:** A popular social network for personal and professional connections.
- **Twitter:** A microblogging platform where users share updates with each other in 140 characters or less. Best way to learn how to use it? Jump in and start conversing with others.
- **Flickr:** Photo and image sharing at its best. Join groups with similar interests, too.

Spend **30 minutes each day** checking in on these sites, and interacting with others. Go deep rather than broad; find a couple of sites that feel most comfortable for you and learn about how your community uses that site. Don't worry about doing something else just because someone else is. It's quality over quantity. You don't have to be everywhere. And if you don't find your customers on one site, try another one until you find something that fits.

6. Measure, Measure, Measure.

There's a great deal of discussion on the web right now about measurement of ROI in social media. Rather than trying to find elusive metrics on how to measure your interactions on these sites, focus on ways to measure the effects that the relationships you build have on your business.

Why this is important:

You can't know if you're succeeding unless you measure against the **goals you set**. If you're in the position of having to justify or qualify your social media endeavors to a boss or a board, measurement is the way that you can outline - in concrete terms - how that time is being spent and why it's valuable to your business.

How it fits into your plan:

It's likely that you're already doing some kind of measurement and analysis of sales, website metrics, trends, or marketing efforts. You can track measurement for social media right alongside. In fact, there are probably measurements you're already taking that can and will reflect the results of your social media initiatives.



How To Get Started:

Put a monthly or quarterly reminder in your calendar to do some reporting and analysis of your social media efforts along with your other endeavors.

Over time, consider these elements to measure:

- Quantity of brand mentions over time (via your **listening posts**)
- Sentiment/tone/quality of those brand mentions
- Website Statistics (try **Google Analytics** - it's free and powerful)
- Blog subscribers and comments
- Inbound links to your site or blog (**Google Alerts** and **Technorati** help here)
- Likelihood of a recommendation/referral (via customer survey)
- Overall customer satisfaction
- Increase in number of leads/quality of leads
- Mentions in the media, whether online or off
- Repeat customers
- Bottles of wine you get during the holidays. (I kid. Seeing if you're still with me.)

There are plenty of other qualitative and quantitative measures you can take. You're trying to gauge the quality of the relationships with your customers, so focus on metrics that will help you do that. For a wealth of information on the subject, try **KD Paine's website**.

7. Don't Be Afraid to Fail.

Failure is a teacher. It guides us about what we need to adjust in order to succeed. Human communication and interaction is not an exact science, nor is stewarding a brand to its fullest potential. It takes time, dedication, practice, and the willingness to take risks in order to explore possibilities.

If you screw up, say you're sorry. Fix it if you can. Then dust yourself off and move on. What you learn will make you smarter, more efficient, and more savvy than ever before.

If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward.

- Thomas Edison

Need Help?



That's what I'm here for.

Stepping into social media is an exciting but very important step for your business. Bridging brands between their offline and online existence is more important than ever before. Hopefully this guide will get you started and give you practical food for thought about how social media can work for you.

Your time is limited, but relationships are always a good investment. I can help you figure out where to dedicate your time and how to make the most of your efforts.

If you're ready to take things to the next level and need a helping hand, I'm eager to be your guide. If you're interested in a hosting a companion workshop on this topic, let me know. Here's how to reach me:

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