



Social Networking for Small Business

What is Social Networking?

A **social network service** focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others.

The Top Social Networking Sites in North America

- ✓ www.facebook.com
Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.
- ✓ www.myspace.com
A place for friends.
- ✓ twitter.com
Twitter asks one question, "What are you doing?" Answers must be under 140 characters in length and can be sent via mobile texting, instant message, or the web.
- ✓ www.twibs.com
A business directory that aims to be the Yellow Pages of Twitter
- ✓ www.linkedin.com
People. Jobs. Answers. Companies
- ✓ www.youtube.com
Broadcast Yourself

More Examples of Social Networking (a tragically incomplete list)

- ✓ www.bebo.com
You can gather feeds from all your online accounts in one place here
- ✓ www.sixdegrees.org
SixDegrees.org is about using this idea to accomplish something good. It's social networking with a social conscience. Through this web site, you can support your favorite charities by donating or creating fundraising badges — as well as check out the favorite causes of other people, including celebrities.
- ✓ www.networkforgood.com
We make it as easy to donate and volunteer online as it is to shop online
- ✓ www.delicious.com
Keep, share, and discover the best of the Web- a social bookmarking service.
- ✓ www.digg.com
Digg is a place for people to discover and share content from anywhere on the web. From the biggest online destinations to the most obscure blog, Digg surfaces the best stuff as voted on by our users.
- ✓ www.epinions.com
Read unbiased reviews by others and contribute your own – any topic
- ✓ www.tripadvisor.com
Unbiased hotel reviews, photos and travel advice for hotels and vacations - Compare prices with just one click.
- ✓ www.360.yahoo.com
Create your Place on Yahoo! 360°– A place that's all about you to share with friends and family.
- ✓ www.gurgle.com
Baby stuff, made simple.

Why would you use social networking for business?

✓ Build Customer Loyalty

Today's customers really do expect some level of online **interaction** with your company. They're looking for a company website that is more than a brochure. They want to know you through your tweets, your blog and your reviews. They report an increase in satisfaction as a result of **interacting** with businesses in this way.

✓ Increase Visits to Your Web Site

It's a numbers game. The more you interact on the social networking sites, the more opportunities you'll have to expose customers and potential customers to your business. Do make sure you create links to specific pages that are relevant to your social networking visitors; don't just send them to your home page.

✓ Build Inbound Links

Building organic inbound links to your web site is the most effective way to improve your rankings in the search engines, especially in Google. In addition, the nature of social networking is to build additional content that is linked back to your site. Content is King! You can create blog posts, text, photos, video, podcasts, networking profiles—lots and lots of content.

✓ Keep Mindshare

Social networking is a no-to-low-cost method of keeping your name in front of customers and potential customers.

Convinced?

Before you dive in, remember the "Cocktail Party" Rule

There's no such thing as anonymity today. People and brands must conduct themselves in the online social world with the expectation that their words will live indefinitely. Think of it as mixed company at a cocktail party—you never know who's listening and who knows whom. So behave yourself.

Start by lurking.

Notice what your competitors are doing online. Notice what's working and what's not. Pay attention to what 'the big kids' are doing. They have budgets and staff to do comprehensive research.

Follow tweeters who are successful. Befriend them; they might help you spread your own message down the road.

Use Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts) to monitor how your business is being presented and talked about on the web.

Listening can help avoid surprises while staying attuned to trends. The CEOs of Dominoes and KFC can attest to the importance of knowing what is out in the blogosphere about a company. You can't actually see these on YouTube anymore, but these folks have captured them for your perusal:

- ✓ www.goodasyou.org/good_as_you/2009/04/video-let-the-dominoes-appall.html
- ✓ bigfatmarketingblog.com/2009/04/16/dominos-and-the-nose-cheese-dilemma/

Then what?

Open an account.

This takes just minutes and you should do so right away, to secure your business name. But then whoa, cowboy! Before you start filling out online profiles and adding to the blogosphere, you've got to...

Have a Plan.

The first question we always hear is around resources; specifically fear of not having enough time, talent or both. Honestly, the resource issue is probably minimal, at first. The questions you need to be asking yourself are why and how?

Answer: Why are you doing this?

Do you look to actively engage prospects or do you simply hang out your shingle to let folks know you are available? It depends on what you're looking to accomplish.

Clarify your target audience's social media habits and interests before building a strategy. Then your work will play to their current interests. Don't spend hours building a social media machine and then feeding it ... only to find that no one is interested in it.

Your goals might range from simply listening to the dialog to supporting a particular promotion to guiding customers. But you need to have goals and build in measurements so you can course-correct. Otherwise, you'll be spending a lot of time, time you don't have, be-bopping around the blogosphere without a strong return on that investment.

How do you do this?

This part isn't about social networks. This is basic good marketing that is magnified in the world of social networking:

- ✓ Be true to who you are.
- ✓ Stay relevant to your business' brand (keep your eye on the ball and don't let yourself get distracted!) Think 'hedgehog'!
- ✓ Be transparent in how you communicate.
- ✓ Respect your customers.
- ✓ Don't make promises you can't keep.

Goals you might make—and how to meet them.

Goal: Reach customers directly.

Encourage customers to tweet their experiences with your product/services. Use 'bad' tweets to advantage by tweeting back with stellar customer service. You're not only pleasing one customer, you're showing potential customers what they can expect.

Goal: Push your brand.

Do provide an open discussion forum around your brand culture, with recipes, promotions, tips, and the like. Don't directly self-promote. Social networking is a conversation, not a platform. If you're a boring conversationalist, an egoist, or otherwise a poor companion, your friends won't be coming back for more. If you really ARE those things, be wise enough to hire someone to do this part of your marketing on your behalf!

Goal: Online Public Relations.

Done right, you are more likely to appear like a person to be trusted in a social networking situation than on your own corporate web site. You can drop in 'advertorial' if you do it carefully so as to not appear as self-promotion.

Goal: Market Research.

There your customers are, following you, becoming your fans. Ask them!

Goal: Event Marketing.

Event organizers are having great success using Twitter, MySpace and FaceBook to promote their events. A couple to watch (start @ Twitter) are @tfma event and @w2e (7,000 followers!).

Goal: Retail Sales Promotions.

Retailers have limited success in terms of direct sales. But don't underestimate the value for customer service, customer feedback or discounted promotions.

Goal: Recruit Quality Staff.

You may not be hiring right now, but think this one through. If you've done a good job of selling your brand ideals, culture, standards and expectations, why would this NOT be a good place to recruit new talent to join your team? In times of high unemployment, the pick of the litter is out there, unemployed for all the right reasons. NOW is the time to court them and train them so that you are well-poised to become a greater company and take advantage of the inevitable upswing on the horizon.

Goal: Publishing.

Publishing is where web 2.0 excels so if your business remotely relates to this industry, get out of your chair right now and GET STARTED!

If your business is publishing tech info, stop reading. I'm serious. Get online and start sharing tips and asking questions!

So, should your business be engaged in social networking?

As always, the answer is "it depends". But the short answer is "probably". The real question is, "How *involved* should your business become in this technology?"

Pretty much everyone should...

- ✓ Convert their company website to a web 2.0-driven site such as a blog. That doesn't mean you have to blog; it's having this technology running your site that makes the difference.
- ✓ Automatically syndicate your blog postings. In other words, you post to your web site and let the technology push the same information to your Twitter, FaceBook and other sites.
- ✓ Don't just push stories – remember to elicit feedback and participate. It's about **interacting**.
- ✓ Use social media to let consumers voice their preferences so you can learn from the consumer data. Do NOT try to push an agenda.
- ✓ Control staff costs if you have staff doing social networking on your behalf since some will get distracted from their main job.
- ✓ Get to know big-time users of the media tools and ask them for help in pushing big stories, tips and announcements. They're well-connected already!
- ✓ Remember your goals and stay focused. Know when you're engaged for business and when you're engaged for pleasure. How do I follow all this stuff at once?

Browsers dedicated to following social networking:

www.flock.com

Flock is the social web browser. The people at Flock (powered by Mozilla, the FireFox and Thunderbird folks) are committed to building a browser unlike anything you've ever experienced before.

www.tweetdeck.com

TweetDeck is your personal browser for staying in touch with what's happening now, connecting you with your contacts across Twitter, Facebook and more.