

# Effective social media

How to use online tools to connect with your market and enhance your brand

**S**ocial media may seem a simple concept. But the question, "What is social media?" has become increasingly difficult to answer.

"On the most basic level, social media relies on interactions between people via technology, for example, using Web-based technologies to disseminate media to an audience through social interaction," says Courtney Stoll, director, operations and administration at Arke Systems. "Oftentimes, when someone hears the term 'social media,' they think of Facebook or Twitter. But not only does social media include social networking sites like Facebook and microblogging applications like Twitter, it also includes wikis, social bookmarking, news, photo and video sharing, instant messaging, blogs and forums."

*Smart Business* spoke with Stoll about what to consider before your company jumps into social media and how to develop a strategy.

## What do you need to consider before jumping into social media?

First, you need to determine your intended audience. Knowing whom you want to reach will help you decide which social media outlets will work best for your company.

After you establish whom you are targeting, determine where they seek information online. If your target audience is not on Facebook or YouTube, then those outlets are not right for your company.

Then you need to investigate what your competition is doing. What outlets are working for those companies? If they are having social media success via a particular application and you are nowhere to be seen, that poses a competitive threat. You also need to look at whether there are social media outlets that your competition is not engaging in but that you believe could be a competitive opportunity for you.

Finally, you have to have something relevant to say. Before you put information out there, make sure your message has value and that it's useful to your audience without being overly self-promotional. In addition, depending on your application of choice, you may need to update your message frequently.

## How do you develop a social media strategy?

After you consider the above factors, determine what you hope to achieve. Too



**Courtney Stoll**

Director of operations and administration  
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many companies give a lot of thought to what they are going to say but not to where that message takes them.

Sometimes this can be as simple as brand awareness. Having a Web site is a great first step, but tying your brand or message across multiple and appropriate social media outlets can bring a lot of eyes to you that traditional marketing might have missed.

Other times, your goal may be to collect feedback about your product or service or to establish yourself as a thought leader in your industry. Or your goal may simply be to drive traffic to your Web site to acquire leads and, as a result, ultimately make sales. You need to start with the desired end in mind and work backward to determine the best steps to take to achieve your desired result.

## Who should be involved in your company's social media efforts?

Your business development and marketing teams can work together to develop a social media strategy. Ideally, the person implementing your strategy is someone internal who not only has an in-depth understanding of your organization's service or product and its marketing goals, but also someone who has time to devote to the project. All

too often, company leaders think of social media as 'free.' But while it may be free to set up a social networking account or post blogs, it does take time, and time is money.

Some companies are turning to outside writers to post blogs for them, and some agencies have pay-per-Tweet programs. If you do decide to outsource these tasks, however, you need to set parameters so that your message is not overly self-promotional or interpreted as spam.

## How can you monitor what is being said about your company in social media outlets?

You need to do online reputation management. Customers are posting reviews, opinions and comments about services and products via any number of social media sites and applications. And if you provide a service or product, you should monitor the Web to see what people are saying about you. If you search for 'social media monitoring' online, you will find tools to help you monitor your brand's reputation.

If you provide a means for customer feedback on your own site, blog or social networking page, be prepared for negative opinions. And when a negative comment is posted, address it immediately, not days later, in an attempt to diffuse the situation. These instances should be handled as customer service calls, and the resolution should take place through a private channel.

## What is the biggest mistake companies make when getting involved in social media?

There are several: Not knowing who your audience is. Putting out a message that no one cares about. Putting out good information but then making no effort to update the content. Not knowing what is being said online about your brand by your customers. Some of the biggest mistakes are often the simplest to overcome.

It's also important to continue traditional marketing techniques in tandem with your social media efforts. Social media is a fantastic tool to enhance and complement your traditional marketing initiatives, not replace them. Finally, don't discount the effectiveness of social media too quickly. It can take months to see a return on your investment. <<

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