



Social Networking: About People, not Technology

Abstract

This article gives an overview of social media, including Facebook and Twitter and examines how these tools can be successfully used for business. **Keywords:** sharing, adding value, engaging, communicating, word of mouth advertising.

Social Networking - Why?

Social networking is people using the Internet to share opinions, insights, comments as well as links to articles websites. They do this by using social networking media such as Facebook or Twitter, which have been specifically designed to allow people to connect with others who share their interests or activities, with no cost to the user. While 'social media' is the term used for these types of shared media, it is also common for people to refer to them as social networking tools or simply social networking. While the original intent of social media was to facilitate individuals making connections with other individuals, businesses globally are now embracing the concept of social networking to engage and communicate with clients and customers and therefore market their brand or products. According to marketing consultant Clare Lancaster (Nett Magazine 2009), 'the old fashioned brochure-ware approach to websites' is no longer appropriate for people's expectations of today's Internet. At its most powerful, social networking can be a way of marketing a product or service in ways that money cannot buy. KFC has a staggering 86,127 fans on its Facebook page (26/10/09)—which means this many people have voluntarily chosen to receive information and engage with KFC. A recent 2009 study by media research firm Nielsen reported that that two-thirds of the global internet population visit social networks—Facebook alone has a user base of around 80 million people, so when done right, there is enormous opportunity for viral or word of mouth advertising.

Organisations and individuals use social networking media to showcase their expertise, share knowledge, market your products and connect with customers, colleagues and prospects. Social media experts say an organisation thinking of doing this needs has to rethink communication with customers in terms of dialogue instead of monologue. This means looking at your existing communications through a social lens instead of viewing them from a corporate perspective, and investigating ways that the organisation can take an existing outbound communication, and create a cycle that brings customers back to talk to it. Having begun its social media push last year, Dell Computer now has a dedicated team of around 40 people that interacts with consumers through its blogs, community forums and third-party sites,. According to a Reuters report, Dell recently used Twitter to sell \$500,000 worth of refurbished PCs. Dell has a number of Facebook pages, including one set up just to advise fans on how to work with social media and this page alone has 34,429 fans as at 25/10/09 – and remember this is voluntary and deliberate on behalf of fans.

Over 70% of Australian Internet users visited a social networking site in June 2009 (Nett Magazine Oct 2009). Why should your business care? Because the web is a two way conversation. The social web is not about the tools themselves (Twitter, Facebook etc), it is about customer engagement. Once you have determined how you want your brand to engage with an audience and what personality you should present then you work out what tools are right for you. The latest Nielsen report says that much like friendship, marketing on social network requires continual investment—in terms of time and effort as opposed to money—to be of benefit to both parties. And at the end of the day, people want to buy from people, so the more personal contact the better.

What does it cost?

To date these services nothing. The investment is in creating new and fresh input and providing the resources to continually update and maintain whatever social networking tool you have chosen. So for example, if it is Twitter, who writes the copy for Twitter, who posts it, who replies to customers and who monitors it on a daily basis.

What do these tools have in common?

When used for business they facilitate an organisation communicating, sharing and engaging with the people that interact with their business. They cannot be used just as another way of advertising or marketing, as people who use social media value engagement and do not like too much obvious advertising.

Drawbacks

There's been a realization over the last several years that your customers are going to talk about you online and you have a choice to join that conversation (spokeswoman Caroline Dietz Dell Computer).

People (i.e. customers) are free to create content in the form of comments and posts and therefore in the process of communicating with you and with each other will make recommendations or pass comment on service or products—which may also be negative. However even if a business does not actively participate in social networking, the rest of Australia does, and will use it to pass comment, judgement and make recommendations about various brands, businesses and services. If a business is actively involved in social media it more likely to be in a position to instigate damage control directly with anyone making negative comments as well as being constantly aware of the current online climate in relation to its business and industry.

THE TOOLS IN DETAIL

Blogs

Blogs are a bit like the keynote speech, where the speaker (blogger) is in control of the discussion, but allows questions and comments from the audience. Blogs are journals generally authored by one individual, but sometimes by teams. In the context of business communication, these are often used to talk to the marketplace as well as joining and contributing to existing conversations that are going in your industry. Many businesses run a page marked 'blog' as a website tab. Comments posted by visitors can be moderated by the blog owner, so that nothing is published prior to the organisation reviewing it. Blog posts should occur between 3- 4 times a week and should be informative and add some type of value to the readership.

Wikis

A wiki is like an online version of a reference book, like your dictionary or encyclopaedia. Since it is in web form you use a search box rather than a table of contents and from any single article, you might be able to jump to several new subjects. So, instead of flipping back and forth in a book to get the whole story, you can just follow the links. What differentiates a wiki from a blog is the fact that multiple people can—and usually do—work on a single piece of content. This means that a single article could have as few as a single author or as many as tens or even hundreds of authors. This might be used in a large organisations in specific departments to collate, write and share information.

Social Book Marking

Social bookmarking refers to Internet users bookmarking their favourite websites with a bookmarking service. The concept is the same as saving a website to 'favourites' in Internet explorer, but the links are available for the Internet community at large to also use. People sign up with a service such as Delicious or Stumbledon and then they can store as many links as they want and access them from any computer. Many websites now have a 'share this' or 'book mark this' link on their webpages so that interested users can simply click a button and add the page to their list. Millions of people around the world use these sites to share their bookmarks. If a website is tagged or bookmarked by many people and if people leave comments or vote on it because the content is good, then this can result in more traffic to the site.

A link like below is provided on the website, visitors click it and choose where to bookmark your website. These type of link buttons allow the visitor to share the website with a range of social bookmarking sites (there are many of these services, a popular one is del.icio.us), as well as Twitter or with Facebook. These link buttons are easy addition to any website.



YouTube

Owned by Google, YouTube is a very popular video hosting and sharing service, which lets users view and upload video files. Basically anyone with a webcam and Internet connection can create a YouTube video and upload it at no cost. One of the reasons YouTube has become so popular is because it fosters a sense of community, as people are not only able to view videos, but they can also discuss, rate and comment on them. Experts say that by producing videos that are engaging and interesting, business has the opportunity to not only build rapport with its market by offering valuable information, but is able to drive traffic to its website. Tracking the effectiveness of the videos can be done with the YouTube Insights tool (YouTube's reporting function which helps users understand views, viewer demographics, popularity, and community.).

Most major businesses can be found on YouTube, using it as a way of marketing new advertisements or products. Clinque's channel for example (as the YouTube sites are known), has had 97,807 views and has 1587 subscribers, which means each time there is a new video it appears on these people's pages (known as channels). Microsoft has 134 videos on its channel and there have been 2,509,753 views at time of writing.

Forums

An Internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site on company's website where users can interact through a series of written posts with the organisation and other visitors. Organisations that use them generally require the users to sign up in some way with the website before contributing. They can then start new discussions or comment on previous posts. It is considered 'social' as people participating may develop relationships or bonds as a result of the interaction.

Facebook Page for Business

Social network sites such as Facebook give people the ability to maintain a page online for keeping in touch with their network of friends, family or customers and sharing information, video and photos. Facebook is the dominant social networking tool in Australia and the second most visited website in the world. Facebook's statistics page quotes more than 300 million users, with the fastest growing demographic the 35-plus group. There are also slightly more female than male users. Facebook was originally created for American college students to keep in touch with each other, and while most Facebook users maintain personal pages, businesses are now staking claim to Facebook as a less formal way of keeping in touch with clients and customers. Facebook is based on connecting not entertainment or selling, so business must be careful to take those aspects into account and not use the Facebook page as just another page of advertising.

The Facebook page has what is known as a wall. This is the space where people can write comments or messages and where your own communications appear. Your Facebook page needs to be active and engaging and provide something of value to those who visit it. This could be posting newsletters, hosting discussions providing links to articles, videos and websites or writing tips relevant to your industry or business. Ideally, your page will work on the principle of a two-way conversation between yourself and your fans or followers and must be based on interaction and not just pushing out your message. As well, the Facebook page must be regularly updated. If you only add news or updates sporadically, there's nothing to keep readers engaged—and worse, it makes it look like you are not that invested or interested in your business or product.

The Facebook page looks like this:

Click here to become a KFC Fan



People who follow or join a profile page are known as friends, while those who follow a business page are known as fans. People voluntarily click a button on the Facebook page to make themselves a fan. Once this has been done, the content from that businesses page is automatically fed to the individual's own Facebook page.

Without fans the search engines such as Google will not rank your page very highly and neither will Facebook's business page directory. You can only invite existing friends of a profile page to become fans, so in order to attract more fans to your Facebook page you need to think of other ways to promote it; such as using the free Facebook badge link, which you can include on your website or in your emails.

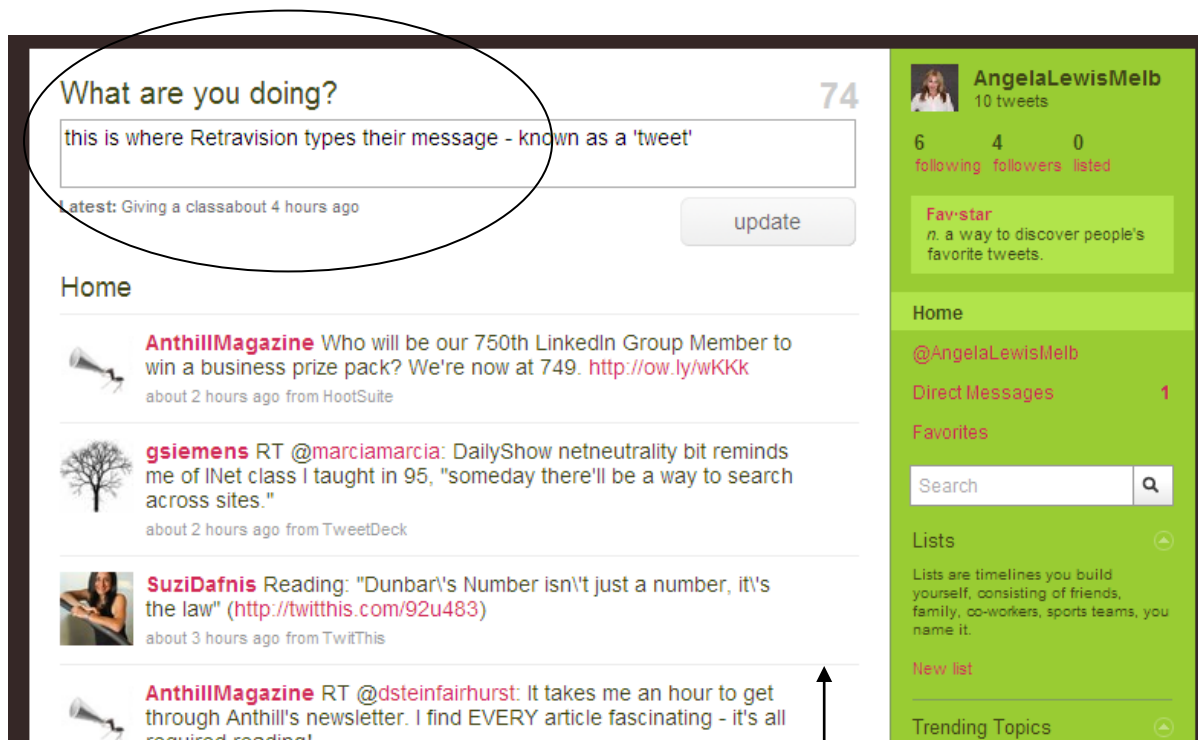
Small businesses without a web presence may consider setting up a Facebook profile or page as a no-cost way of connecting and advertising online. A personal profile page should be set up prior to a business page, as, the search engines won't rank the business page unless you have a personal profile set up first. If you want to use your own or your business name, register it under the username link in Facebook before someone else beats you to it. Consult the settings and help files in Facebook for more information.

Facebook for Groups

The Facebook Groups page might be what is used for the staff of an organisation to bond and communicate. What happens in a group doesn't link to anywhere, so group member's pages are not updated when information appears on a business page. In a group you can write to all the members and people upload pictures, videos, links etc, whereas they are unable to do this on a business page.

Twitter

Twitter is social networking program that works on the premise of posting a statement of up to 140 characters to the question:



Feeds from people you follow appear here

If people find what you are writing interesting enough they will follow your Twitter account, which means a feed of your statements appears on their Twitter page.

Twitter is what is known as a Microblogging tool. Twitter's annual growth-rate in Australia in the past 12 months is said to have been 3,200%, with 60% of users 35-plus. It is regarded as an excellent source of word-of-mouth advertising, but the flip-side is that it can also generate negative press. It is referred as a viral way of advertising, as the message is passed from one to another with no real control.

If you are consistent, useful and interesting you should eventually build followers; however, it can take between 6–12 months for this occur. Professionals say that a person needs to tweet 4–5 times daily over this period as any less than this will fail to foster engagement with other Twitter users.

Panasonic currently has 1,555 followers, Amazon has 9,700 followers McDonalds USA 3,504 and KFC USA 6,936 followers, while Harvey Norman has 396 followers. While some of these numbers may not sound high, people voluntarily follow these retailers and are in effect putting up their hand for marketing material.

Strategies for Using Social Media Tools for Business:

- The best strategy for gathering and keeping followers in Twitter, and fans or friends on Facebook is to have fresh and creative output. This can include discussion or proactive tips on issues related to your industry, statements and information on what your business is doing, links to other useful and relevant websites and blogs in your industry and links to articles. The key words to keep in mind are 'sharing' and 'adding value'.
- Search for, and check up on, what people are saying about your business, brand, industry or issues ((.e.g health care, counselling). Use Lexicon, a free tool provided by Facebook that allows you to follow language trends and usage of words and phrases on its profiles and pages. In Twitter use the provided search tool, otherwise set-up Google Alerts, and monitor blog reactions on [Technorati](#) and [BlogPulse](#).
- Have a clear reason for using Facebook or Twitter—is your primary motive selling, engaging customers or raising awareness?
- Do some research, thinking and planning to establish what people will find valuable. Become a Facebook fan of some the larger, well established Facebook pages and a Twitter follower of some of the popular Twitter members to see how it works and what breeds success.
- Prominently link to your social media platform from your website with a badges or links that encourage people to use these networks – just setting up these your social media site won't be enough, you will need to actively promote it. Below is an example of the way some websites use the follow the linking/forwarding concept:
- Some Things to Think About:



- Are you prepared to spend the time to maintain a Facebook page or tweet daily?
- Are you ready to dialogue with customers/clients on a regular basis?
- Do you have the resources to make a commitment to your chosen social media? Doing these things takes time and once you begin you need to keep updating, posting or tweeting—and it must be regular. It is not something you undertake for a brief marketing campaign.
- How will you engage with people? On Facebook, you will always need to respond to comments. As well you can host discussions around your customer interests, give out guides and useful links and content, make exclusive offers or set up contests. On Twitter, respond to comments and engage in conversations and exchanges of information with other Twitter users who are interested in the same issues.

However you look at it, maintaining a social networking presence takes time. While you may enjoy using Facebook to catch up with friends and swap gossip, it is completely different to the time, effort and thought needed to maintain a professional social network. With that in mind, it is important to choose a tool that that you are likely to enjoy using. You may also

not have the resources to participate in all of them, so pick what you feel works best for you. I've chosen to use my blog in a certain way and my Facebook page in a certain way—and while I have set up a Twitter account, I don't tweet at the moment because I don't have the resources to use Twitter the way it should be used.

I can be found at www.angelalewis.com.au, and my Facebook page can be viewed by typing Angela Lewis Consulting into the Facebook Pages search box.

Resources for Further Reading

5 elements of a Successful Facebook Page

<http://mashable.com/2009/03/30/successful-facebook-fan-page/>

Lancaster (2009) Is your website ready for social media? <http://nett.com.au/blogs/is-your-website-ready-for-social-media/98.html>

Master list of social media marketing examples

<http://wiki.beingpeterkim.com/>.

Nielsen Research (2009) 'Global Faces and Networked Places: A Nielsen Report on Social Networking's New Global Footprint' <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/nielsen_globalfaces_mar09.pdf.

Pew Internet Report (2009) : Adults and Social Networking Sites

http://pewinternet.org/~media//Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Adult_social_networking_data_memo_FINAL.pdf.pdf

Reuters (2008) Tech Firms Turn to Social Media to Reach Consumers

<http://www.reuters.com/article/internetNews/idUSTRE4AH8G820081118?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>

Word Of Mouth Marketing Resources:

www.womma.org

WOMMA's Case Study Library is a how-to resource intended to help you gain a better understanding of the different types of word of mouth marketing that exist, as well as how to put them to work for you.