

Building Social Media Communities for Business Growth

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Online Community Building

The past few years witnessed the tremendous growth of social media usage. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn are among the most popular sites that receive hundreds of thousands of visits every day and foster lively conversations among users. Why is social media so appealing and how can businesses leverage their popularity?

The answer is obvious if we consider the importance of communities in our daily lives. Friends, family, and colleagues are all part of our communities, and social media simply relocated communities from the physical to the online world. Random chats on social media, however, do not necessarily create business value. In fact, connecting with and persuading strangers to learn more about a product can be challenging. How should businesses treat online communities and utilize their resources?

Though the ultimate goal is to sell a product or service, it is important to know that a community does not form around a service unless a business proves that its service can empower others. A business should therefore take time to engage and cultivate potential customers. It needs to not just engage them but also engage with an open mind and humility. Positive feedback reflects the quality of the company's product or service, while negative feedback helps a business understand what aspects of the product or customer service need improvement. No matter what kinds of comments a business receives, showing respect to those in the community reinforces, if not improves, its online reputation.

Before deciding whether to join or form a community on social media sites, a business should define its objectives. Is it trying to recruit talents, find partners, or build a brand? If the answer lies in the former two, joining a community related to its industry may be sufficient. If a business wants to build an online brand, however, joining a community should serve as a step instead of a goal. Only by forming a community can a business have more control over the topics of discussions and their relevance to its products or services.

The general popularity of a community is another factor to consider. The more users a social media site contains, the more people a business gains exposure to. In addition, a large network empowers viral messaging. In a community with millions of users, valuable content travels afar because it can be shared many times. A message in a large network can therefore accumulate more impact than a smaller network. The combination of valuable content and large networks creates buzz around a business brand and helps draw prospects to a company website and thus increase website traffic.

Communities on social media are valuable not only because they can attract prospects. Online communities help in several parts of the sales cycle such as lead generation, post-sales education, and customer support. Call to actions on Facebook that guide visitors to a website, for example, help generate leads, while discussion forums enable interactions with customer and

feedback collection. A business needs to define what goals it wants to achieve on social media to maximize the return of time spent on managing its presence.

For any social media site, a business should do three things to build an effective community: *connect*, *create*, and *engage*. *Connect* applies to the people a business wants to invite to its community. It can either find contacts manually or review recommendations automatically generated on most of the commonly used social media sites. Though the goal is to focus on potential customers, it is not a bad idea to connect with friends and family, who might not become customers themselves but can refer others to the business.

Create refers to creating content that potential customers might find interesting and helpful. The idea is similar to that of blogging: the goal is to generate materials in which prospects can find value.

Engage is equivalent to establishing ongoing interactions with prospects. To engage people on social media, a business should not only create useful content but also interact with prospects. On Facebook and LinkedIn, for instance, a business can post comments and answer queries. Twitter, on the other hand, allows a business to share succinct updates. All of the networks on these sites are assets a business can grow to promote valuable blog or website content.

It takes time to grow a network using social media, but a business can avoid many mistakes by first observing how other businesses have utilized different social media sites. In addition, sites such as Facebook have learning centers where a business can gain a comprehensive overview of available tools and resources. The better a business understands its needs and how to utilize a platform to meet these needs, the more equipped it is to building a strong social media presence.

For those interested in professional networking and effective talent recruitment, LinkedIn is a good place to start.

LinkedIn

Each major social media site has unique features. LinkedIn, for instance, is a business-oriented social network and tends to attract those interested in professional networking. It allows people to create personal and company profiles, ask and answer questions, and join or create groups. A business can utilize both kinds of profiles to promote its brand. Personal profiles can be separate from company brands, but credible personal profiles can help improve online business reputations. Personal profiles on LinkedIn contain a headline field in which business owners can provide their professional titles and a link to their company websites. Headlines therefore provide an opportunity to integrate business brands with personal identities. Just as working for a well-known firm may add credibility to a personal profile, a good personal reputation may draw more attention to the business that person runs and increase website traffic.

Besides a focus on professional networking, LinkedIn also allows users to ask and answer questions. This feature benefits business owners in at least two ways. First, it allows those who

share resources and insights to accrue personal credibility, which may translate into enhanced professional credibility. Second, business owners may direct people to helpful blog articles written by their companies that address a question, which helps increase social media traffic.

In contrast, Facebook is a social media site that accommodates a mixture of fun and professional interactions between a business and its prospects.

Facebook

Facebook is increasingly popular among businesses. The fan page feature, for instance, enables businesses and organizations to form communities around their products and services. Fan pages are used to accrue fans, who first “like” the brand or company and may become potential customers of a business. Business owners can use existing personal accounts to create pages for their businesses, on which they will appear as administrators. Fan pages contain features such as discussions, wall posts, videos, photos, contests, events, and other tabs that businesses are free to name. A business can achieve a wide variety of goals by using these tabs. For instance, wall posts allow a business to share company updates, while the discussion tab enables one-on-one customer interaction. The video and photo tabs can be used to display fun images of corporate culture or share tutorials related to its products. The contest tab, which can be launched with an application such as Wildfire, can be used to generate interesting activities to engage prospects. In other words, Facebook fan pages foster a dynamic environment for content promotion, customer support, and brand building.

To measure the effectiveness of activities on Facebook, a business owner can review metrics through a Facebook tool called “insight.” “Insight” shows how fans are interacting with posts and consuming other types of content on a page, total number of comments, average number of comments per post, and the like. These statistics provide a general understanding of post quality measured by its ability to engage with fans on Facebook, which may drive website traffic and subsequently lead conversion.

Groups on Facebook accommodate slightly different features. Both Facebook groups and fan pages can be found on search engines, but a Facebook user must be a group member to view content published in the group. On the other hand, group administrators can email group members using the message feature, whereas fan page administrators can send updates to Fans that appear only in fans’ message box on Facebook. Before deciding whether to create a group or a fan page, a business should find out their differences and see which features better suit its business objectives.

Twitter is another social media site whose uniqueness lies in the concise format of user interactions.

Twitter

Unlike Facebook and LinkedIn, Twitter is a micro-blogging service. That is, every message or update on Twitter needs to stay within the limit of 140 characters. As a platform that

accommodates only short messages, Twitter now has close to 80 million users worldwide and is one of the fastest-growing web applications. What value do people find in micro-blogging?

Fast knowledge-sharing is one explanation. People might not read a long article word by word, but it is easy to read updates less than two sentences at a glance. Of course, tweets themselves do not guarantee readership. Only those that resonate with the interests of those looking at Twitter in real-time are shared widely. In the context of using Twitter for business, an effective tweet could draw readers to a company's website, who then read the information corresponding to the tweet and be interested enough to fill out a call to action form.

Another important function of tweets is timely customer service. A business can be quickly notified of customer inquiries or feedback and respond promptly on Twitter. When crises occur, businesses can manage public perception by tweeting their immediate, official responses. This not only conveys sincerity in addressing problems but may also mitigate customer complaints by addressing their concerns. Tweets, when well utilized, are a great tool for public relations and strengthen a brand.

A business can also use tweets for efficient talent recruitment. Retweets (tweets of an existing tweet) of a position description broaden the networks that may see the message and help reduce time and cost of finding potential candidates. Instead of paying headhunters thousands of dollars, a business should leverage the power of social media for effective candidate search.

To get started, a business should fill out a profile completely and mention its Twitter username on the company website. For usernames, business owners may choose either personal names or company names depending on which identities they would like to promote. For those who want to emphasize both personal and professional identities, they may consider including both their names and their company names in the Twitter username. Alternatively, employees can put their company information in their profiles instead of their usernames.

It is important to set business objectives before plunging into the Twitter world. What does a business want to accomplish on Twitter? Answer all customer inquiries, acquire a large base of followers, engage followers in depth, or earn a large number of retweets? The metrics of success are different depending on the goals, and a business should measure success only by its objectives.

Active engagement on Twitter has not only direct impact on site traffic but also ripple effects in the offline world. News that travels virally on Twitter is likely to be discussed in the real world and spread afar by word of mouth. Tweets that have been re-tweeted many times show influence and may draw attention from well-known media such as Forbes, New York Times, BusinessWeek, and Inc.com. By being a content generator and an engaged listener, a business may achieve and convert success on Twitter to business growth.

To truly harness the power of social media, businesses need to measure whether its impact has increased through social media usage. The number of group members, depth of customer interactions, and increase in site traffic attributed to social media campaigns are all indicators of effective use of social media toward business growth. Social media success can take time but, once achieved, gains ripple effect that strengthens a business in every aspect.

Review

1. What factors should a business consider in joining a community?

- A business should join a community that has a large user base, attracts people who might be interested in its products or services, and accommodates its objectives (optimally goals along multiple stages in its sales cycle).

2. How can a business succeed in social media?

- Connect with customer targets and people who might spread its messages, create content that prospects find engaging, and interact with them frequently.

3. What distinguishes LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter?

- LinkedIn is a business-oriented networking site that helps business owners build both personal and business credibility through answering questions and sharing profiles.
- Facebook fan pages allow businesses to build a community of potential or existing customers and share multi-media content
- Twitter enables succinct and text-only interactions that make talent recruitment, business collaborations, and information sharing timely and effective.

Discussion Questions

1. On social media sites, should business owners represent their businesses under company or personal names? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
2. How much time should a business spend on social media marketing? How frequently should it update and add new content its pages on multiple sites?
3. Besides sharing content or information already published on its website, how else can a business engage users on social media?
4. What ways of content promotion would be considered appropriate and not appear spamming?

Additional Resources

Social Media Marketing Hub

<http://www.hubspot.com/social-media-marketing-hub>

Facebook Resource Hub

<http://www.hubspot.com/facebook-for-business-marketing-hub>

Twitter Resource Hub

<http://www.hubspot.com/twitter-marketing-hub>

LinkedIn Resource Hub

<http://www.hubspot.com/linkedin-for-business-marketing-hub>

Inbound Marketing University Class on Social Media

<http://inboundmarketing.com/university/social-media-and-building-community-gf201>

Inbound Marketing University Class on Facebook and LinkedIn Business Usage

<http://inboundmarketing.com/university/successful-business-useses-for-facebook-and-linkedin-gf202>

Inbound Marketing University Class on Twitter Business Usage

<http://inboundmarketing.com/university/twitter-for-business-gf-501>

Inbound Marketing University Class on Social Media for Large Businesses

<http://inboundmarketing.com/university/social-media-for-big-businesses-gf302>

Free Tool to Evaluate the Effectiveness of a Twitter Account

<http://Twitter.Grader.com>

Free Tool to Evaluate the Effectiveness of a Facebook Profile

<http://Facebook.Grader.com>

Free Tool to Evaluate the Effectiveness of a LinkedIn Profile

<http://person.grader.com/linkedin>

B2B Social Media Guide

<http://www.marketo.com/b2b-marketing-resources/best-practices/video-social-media/social-media-definitive-guide.php>

90 Essential Social Media Resources

<http://mashable.com/2010/05/31/92-essential-social-media-resources>