

Harnessing Social Media to Build Your Business

Social media platforms enable people to share information and network with others online. From a marketing perspective, implementing a social media strategy can create value for your business in multiple ways including:

- Promoting products,
- Gathering customer feedback,
- Engaging prospective customers,
- Collecting new product ideas,
- Building a loyal customer base and
- Quickly and effectively distributing news and information.

Social media can be a powerful tool to build local businesses, but creating and maintaining a social media presence takes time and resources. Whether you are starting a social media plan or looking for ways to improve your existing plan, this guide will discuss five considerations for maximizing your plan’s effectiveness:

1. Understanding different social media platforms,
2. Choosing goals and strategies,
3. Establishing an online presence,
4. Building an audience and
5. Developing a content calendar.

Understanding 3 types of social media platforms

Social media platforms may fit into various categories. Hootsuite categorizes social platforms in 10 groups. This guide focuses on three relevant to most small businesses: social networks, media-sharing networks and consumer review networks. Platforms in each category present content differently and provide different opportunities to collect input from your audience. Consumer review networks, such as Yelp and TripAdvisor, allow consumers to discover local businesses and attractions and post their assessments of products, services and experiences. Social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, allow businesses to connect with consumers and create an environment that fosters community and builds

relationships. Media-sharing networks also connect businesses and consumers, but they tend to emphasize storing media such as videos and photos in playlists or albums. Examples include YouTube and Flickr. Table 1 outlines these three types of platforms, describes a business’ role on each and suggests ways to engage target audiences and consumers on these platforms.

Some business owners establish their own accounts on social networks and media-sharing networks. On consumer review networks, consumers may post about a business and create a de facto page for the business without the owner’s knowledge or permission. If your business provides a service directly to consumers — for

Table 1. Examples of how a business can use 3 types of social media platforms.

Social media platform Type	Your role on the platform	Opportunity to engage your target audience
Consumer review networks (Yelp, Google, TripAdvisor)	Your business may already be listed. If so, then claim your page. If not, then set up your own page. Add menus, prices, hours or operation.	“Listen” to reviewers’ commentary to collect feedback. Respond to customer questions or concerns.
Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)	Create your own page or account. Inform, educate or entertain. Promote products and services.	Offer real-time engagement through livestreaming. Conduct market research through polls and posted comments.
Media-sharing networks (YouTube, Vimeo, Pinterest, Flickr)	Make content visual. Post with enough frequency to build awareness but not fatigue an audience.	Offer demonstrations, or educate about niche or newer products. Create playlists or albums for specific products or audiences.

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example, you run a restaurant, hotel, hair salon or recreational venue — then it may be already listed on several consumer review networks, especially if you are located in an urbanized area or an area that receives a lot of tourists. The more a business' growth depends on customer satisfaction and competing for new customers, the more important it is for the business to “claim” its business entry on review networks; add up-to-date information including menus, prices and photographs; and monitor and respond to reviewers' comments and feedback. Then, as Vendasta suggests, keep asking customers to provide their feedback in these networks.

Choosing goals and strategies

With your social media activity, take a strategic approach. Do this by first naming goals that articulate what you want to achieve for your business. Then, decide what strategies will position you to achieve those goals. Your goals and strategies will inform more tactical elements, such as the specific social media platforms to adopt and the messages you share in your social posts.

Figure 1 shows a sample social plan for a fictitious Frank's Fruits and Vegetables business, which sells fruits and vegetables at a farm stand and farmers market and makes value-added agricultural products. Use this example to consider how you can develop goals and corresponding strategies and tactics for your business.

Ideally, you'll put your goals and strategies in writing, so you can easily refer to them later. Before implementing a new social media activity or idea, always check that it aligns with your goals and strategies. This purpose-driven approach will help you maximize the return on time and effort invested in social media outreach.

Establishing an online presence for your business

As mentioned above, your business may already have an online presence, even if you as a business owner haven't done anything to create a social media account or page. Use multiple internet browsers such as Firefox, Chrome, Bing and Microsoft Edge to search for your business online. Claim all of your business' listings on Google, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Zomato and other review networks by following each platform's instructions. Add up-to-date photos and information about your products and services. Look through customer feedback. Respond to questions. If you find constructive consumer criticism, then consider lightly engaging in a positive way to address the comments.

Choose the social networks and media-sharing networks you want to use to promote your business. Carefully consider the available platforms and how

Frank's Fruits and Vegetables social media plan

Goal: Increase online sales by 25% in next year.

Strategy: Develop a social-driven sales promotion program to incentivize customers to buy via website.

- > **Tactic:** Offer a discount code to track social-driven sales.
- > **Tactic:** Provide free shipping offers to social media followers.

Goal: Convert one-third of new customers into repeat customers in the next year.

Strategy: Establish channels for listening to customer feedback.

- > **Tactic:** Run a monthly post to collect future product ideas.

Strategy: Cultivate a core set of customers who will support your business' development as brand ambassadors.

- > **Tactic:** Invite these customers to special events.
- > **Tactic:** Ask the group about customer needs.
- > **Tactic:** Recognize this group on social media for its commitment to the brand.

Goal: Grow value-added fruit and vegetable products sales by 10% next year.

Strategy: Differentiate the value you add.

- > **Tactic:** Tell the story about the raw ingredients and process used to convert them into final products.

Strategy: Educate consumers about how to use value-added products.

- > **Tactic:** Livestream cooking demonstrations.
- > **Tactic:** Post recipe cards and photos online.

Figure 1. Sample social media plan for the fictitious Frank's Fruits and Vegetables business.

they could help you achieve your goals and strategies. Selecting more than one platform may help your brand reach a wider audience. However, consider your capacity to avoid spreading your resources too thin. Developing high-quality content for one platform is better than poorly executing on multiple platforms, says Jo Robinson, a writer with the Online Marketing Institute.

Start your social media efforts as an intentional way to market your business. Encourage your customers to engage with your brand online, and scale up your social media efforts over time, according to a column published by the Marketing Insider Group.

When vetting social media platforms, consider each one's strengths and weaknesses, so your business can reach its intended audience and best achieve its goals. Each platform — for example, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram — presents content and media slightly differently and tends to appeal to unique

audiences. For example, a business may use Instagram if sharing high-quality photos and attempting to reach a young audience. On the other hand, tweeting on Twitter may enable a business to better engage with consumers and respond to customer service-related comments.

As you examine social media platforms, look for accounts and pages of similar businesses in your region and elsewhere. You may see creative examples to inspire your own posts. View the number of post engagements, views, shares and likes to learn more about the platforms that perform well among audiences in your region. A key to success is tailoring content to a specific social media platform, notes Mike O'Brien in an article for the ClickZ digital marketing community. You can be more successful on social media when you know the audience you're trying to reach and can engage the audience in a way that capitalizes on a given platform's strengths.

After you've selected a social media platform, create and customize your page. On networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, choose a banner image and profile picture that are consistent with your brand. Then, add information such as your website, email address, physical address, phone number and days and hours of operation.

Building an audience

After you have adopted one or more social media platforms, encourage users to follow your page. First, ensure that your current customers know about your page. On your website, include a link to your social page, and print your social page's URL or handle on business cards or signs. Offering incentives, such as a sales promotion only available to your Facebook page followers, may also motivate engagement with your page.

A company that doesn't invest time into its own social media pages will soon find that others also won't spend time interacting with those pages. Maintaining followers' attention requires regularly updating content and developing a strategy for what content to post, writes Dhariana Lozano for Social Media Today.

Choose how often you'd like to post given the amount of time you can dedicate to social media and the amount of content available. Work to share enough content to maintain awareness of your business, but avoid posting to the extent that your followers view your posts as spam. An appropriate posting frequency will also vary by platform, so adapt to the norms specific to the social platform(s) you use. To manage your content ideas, Lozano recommends developing a content calendar.

Developing a content calendar

A content calendar can help you plan your communication efforts. You can make a basic content calendar in a spreadsheet. In it, title columns with date, related goal, message and media needed (e.g., photos, graphics, videos). Then, place content for a single post in one row. As you create content, think about opportunities to convert people you reach into customers who buy from your business. However, don't exclusively focus on selling. As a general rule, use 80% of your messages to educate, inform or entertain, and 20% can take a sales focus. As Tanya Hall writes in Inc., this general rule may not apply to all businesses, so test what works best for yours. The idea is to avoid overpromoting to the extent that your audience finds your content and business distasteful.

In your content calendar, track important dates that your business can use as inspiration for posts. For example, on National Doughnut Day, Krispy Kreme and Dunkin' have created Facebook posts to advertise free doughnuts in their U.S. stores. Be mindful to choose days that you can connect to your products and your business identity. Plan ahead to more meaningfully engage potential customers, recommends Bennett Conlin with Business.com. Important dates to track may include the following:

- New product launches
- Holidays and observances that relate to your business (e.g., Fourth of July, National Farmers Market Week, National Dairy Month)
- Company milestones (e.g., anniversaries, farm expansion, seasonal successes)

Table 2 provides a sample content calendar for the fictitious Frank's Fruits and Vegetables business. The calendar specifically plans the business' Facebook post content and connects the content to the goals, strategies and tactics outlined in Figure 1.

Summary

You as a business owner can use social media to promote products, gather customer feedback, engage prospective customers, collect new product ideas, build a loyal customer base and quickly and effectively distribute news and information.

Creating and maintaining a social media presence takes time and resources. This guide discussed five strategies to consider when starting or refining your business' social media outreach. Begin by understanding different social media platforms and choosing your goals and strategies. Then, you can strategically establish an online presence, build an audience and develop a content calendar.

Table 2. Sample Facebook September content calendar for Frank's Fruits and Vegetables.

Date	Related goal	Message	Media	Notes
9/1	Grow value-added product sales	Here on Facebook, we'll be live in 15 minutes to teach you to prepare summer squash succotash — a perfect dish for your Labor Day party! During our livestream, be prepared to pepper us with all of your food questions as you're planning your weekend festivities!	Image of squash succotash kit	Prepare for Facebook Live segment
9/5	Convert first-time customers into repeat customers	Help us choose what salsa to debut at the market next week. Select your favorite flavor combo! Tomato-peach Tomato-watermelon Tomato-apple	Images of different salsas	Set up poll question
9/9	Convert first-time customers into repeat customers	Thank you to our Frank's Fans loyalty club members who visited us at the downtown farmers market on Saturday!	Image of Frank's Fans group at market	Ask permission to post club members' photo
9/15	Grow value-added product sales and increase online sales	Happy National Dessert Day! Our blueberry jam is a sweet addition to cheesecakes, thumbprint cookies and other treats. Today, buy any one of our blueberry jam products online, and use the JAMSDESSERT code at checkout to receive 20% off.	Image of blueberry jam jars	Include link to online store
9/22	Grow value-added product sales	We picked our first pumpkins today! We'll use this first batch to make our pumpkin butter — a recipe we've crafted to use all-natural ingredients. We source all of the ingredients from Missouri producers!	Image of team picking pumpkins	Share follow-up post when we shelve the pumpkin butter from this crop
9/28	Grow value-added product sales	Wonder where we get the strawberries that make our strawberry shortcake so special? We grow our own! Thank you to our team for pulling overtime in preparing next year's strawberry beds.	Video of team preparing strawberry plasticulture beds	Give field manager tips for shooting video
9/30	Increase online sales	Looking for seasonal goodies to share with friends and family? We launched our product catalog on our online storefront today! If you order our new apple spice cake today, then you get free shipping!	Image of apple spice cake in a shipping box	Ask kitchen manager to take photo

Resources

This guide draws upon the sources listed below to outline how businesses may consider developing their own social media presence:

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