7 Steps to a Successful Social Media Strategy

According to the 2012 Social Media Marketing Industry Report, 83% of marketers say that social media is important for their business. And marketers plan on increasing their use of YouTube (76%), Facebook (72%), Twitter (69%), blogs (68%), Google+ (67%) and LinkedIn (66%) in that order. As more companies integrate social media into their marketing and communications plans, emphasis needs to be on creating a social media strategy. Without a strategy, there’s a very good chance you’ll lose sight of your goals, and not make the impact you originally intended.

So how, exactly, do you develop this strategy? It’s not as difficult as you might think, provided you take a practical approach to determining what’s right for you and your organization, and move forward with a sound social media framework and targeted communications.

THE PREREQUISITES
Before you develop a strategy, make sure your management teams and C-suite understand why social media is important, and how it can benefit the organization. It’s critical they understand three fundamental things:

• Social media is not about the “hard sell.” The primary reason to take part is to engage and build relationships with your customers and other stakeholders.

• Smart organizations don’t jump into social media because “everyone else is doing it.” They do it because it’s the right fit for their organization, and their communication strategy.

• Social media is a long-term commitment and requires dedicated resources.

With a social media strategy in place, and a solid understanding of these prerequisites, it can help prevent any misunderstandings within the organization about the objectives and goals of social media, and emphasize why social media is relevant to your overall business and branding goals.

A few tips: If you’re having a tough time convincing your teams that social media needs to be integrated into your marketing plan, you might want to counter any concerns with these responses to common social media objections. It’s also important for your organization to understand that testing and experimentation are keys to success, so try, try, and try again. And it’s also vital that organizations understand their existing corporate culture; social media engagement often comes more naturally to an organization whose culture embraces proactive, open communication with internal and external audiences.

DEVELOPING YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY IN 7 STEPS

#1: Determine Your Goals and Objectives
Determine who owns social media within your organization. Whether it’s Marketing, PR, Communications or an integrated approach, social media should inspire a collaborative effort that breaks down silos. What’s important is to understand your social media goals and objectives and how they tie into your overall company goals, so be SMART: Keep your goals Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic/Relevant and Timely.
#2: Research, Research, and Research Some More
Instead of jumping into the social media pool with both feet, splash a bit of water on yourself first; test the waters, gauge your environment and know what to expect. Do a bit of research.

• Develop a list of social media sites where you see a fit for your organization, and where you’re most likely to find and engage with your customers and stakeholders. By virtue of their global popularity, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and a few industry-specific blogs and forums will most likely be at the top of your list. Dig a bit deeper into each site on your list. Search for your company name, brand name(s), your competitors, and your target keywords. See what’s out there, listen to what’s being said, identify key conversations and influencers, and get to know your target audience.

#3: Create a Digital Rolodex of Contacts and Content
Subscribe to blogs in your industry and make a list of influencers who are relevant to your business. This Rolodex comes in very handy when it’s your turn to share your own content and provide your own input, because you’ve got a network to engage. And remember, when you approach social media honestly and respectfully, relationships will build naturally. Begin making connections by following conversations. (Note: Emily Soares Proctor provides some excellent pointers on social media content strategy in her article, 5 Steps to a Winning Social Media Plan.)

4: Join the Conversation to Develop Relationships
Now it’s time to start making use of all the research you’ve done and take action. Participate in the conversations by posting comments on blogs and forums, answering questions on Yahoo! and LinkedIn, joining groups related to your industry and taking part in Twitter chats.

Develop relationships by following and “friending” influencers, advocates and others in your stakeholder group. Don’t just look for people with thousands of followers; you’ll be surprised by the value that someone with only a couple of hundred followers provides.

#5: Strengthen Relationships
It’s all-too-easy to hide behind your avatar or profile picture, and it’s important to remember that face-to-face networking and relationship-building is incredibly powerful. Attend offline events related to your industry—not only to strengthen your knowledge base, but also to network and forge relationships with those you have connected with via social media but never met in person. A tweetup is a popular way to go offline with your online group, and meet face to face with those you’ve been engaging on Twitter.

#6: Measure Results
You have goals and objectives, right? If you’ve set goals and objectives in your social media strategy, they need to be measurable. Without measurement, it’s nearly impossible to measure. Without measurement, it’s nearly impossible to gauge how successful (or, gulp, unsuccessful) you’ve been with your efforts, and how to attribute any return on investment (ROI) to all that you have done.

4 COMMONLY SOUGHT-AFTER OBJECTIVES INCLUDE:
1  Increased brand presence across social channels. You want to increase the number of followers on Twitter, number of fans on Facebook, number of comments, number of times your brand is mentioned in blogs and forums, and so on.

2  Increased positive sentiment about your brand. You want to convert the number of positive mentions while taking note of negative mentions. Has the ratio of positive to negative comments improved? With the good comes the bad in social media; better get used to it! (Note: Sentiment analysis, or evaluating social media conversations based positive, negative, and neutral tone, can be time-consuming and tricky when done on a grand scale. Solutions like Marketwire MAP and Heartbeat can help you to listen to the broader conversations that are taking place on social channels.)
3 **Development of relationships for future partnership opportunities.** You want to keep track of those with whom you’ve connected, and identify where there may be opportunities to make those relationships benefit your organization. For example, if you’ve connected with someone who may be a great guest on a webinar your company is hosting, include that person into your digital Rolodex, and follow up with him or her when the time is right.

4 **Increased traffic to your website.** You want to guide more visitors to your website, and a great way to do that is with your social media presence. Use Twitter hashtags, Facebook pages, etc. to lead social media audiences to your website. And remember to keep track of where site visitors came from; it’s a smart strategy that provides great insight into your efforts. Remember, when it comes to measuring social media, it takes a multitude of metrics as well as trending reports to get a sense of what and where to improve. Stay committed and stick to your objectives.

**#7: Analyze, Adapt, and Improve**

Your social media strategy doesn’t end with measurement; it goes beyond that. You need to analyze your social media campaigns, adapt any new findings into your current processes, and improve your efforts. Testing and experimentation can dramatically improve your social media efforts.

As you dive deeper into the bottomless pool that is social media, you’ll quickly understand what works and what doesn’t. More specifically, you’ll develop favorite tools to use, realize that there are certain days and times where it doesn’t pay to be active in social media, and come to the conclusion that you still have lots to learn. So there you have it: a social media strategy in seven steps.

Without a carefully thought-out and executed plan, it’s easy to be overwhelmed by social media and fall off course. While there is no “one size fits all” approach for organizations to take part in social media, the best chances for success rely upon a solid foundation of commitment, patience and an understanding of why social media is an important part of your organization’s communications efforts.