



Whether it's celebrity tweets or teenage Facebook parties, social media is rarely far from the news. What's not so often highlighted is their usefulness for business.



BUSINESS GUIDE

Boost Your Business with Social Media

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“If you are serious about social media, you have to commit to be interesting at least once a day – potentially for the rest of your life!”

(source: columnist the Secret Marketer)

Introduction

The larger social media services reach far more people than any conventional media outlet such as a TV station or magazine. They're generally free to use. And they open up a new way of communicating with current and potential customers, as well as other people interested in your business: communication that is more like a two-way conversation than a one-way message.

However, success in social media (or 'social' for short) also requires a different approach to that needed for websites, advertisements, or many other forms of marketing communication - and in this guide we'll be emphasising that.

Why are people using social media?

The sheer numbers of people using social media are attractive to many businesses, especially those that market to consumers. But there are other attractions too.

By definition, people using a social site are in the mood to communicate and/or receive communications. Typically, they're also using it because they like using it. Those two factors mean social is the perfect medium to talk with people on an informal, personal level - even one-to-one - in a way that company websites, let alone conventional advertising, don't really allow. And, social also provides a way to listen to people.



SIX SENSATIONAL BENEFITS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA

1

Engage with your customers

2

Build your brand image

3

Promote your products/services

4

Monitor customer feedback

5

Provide customer support

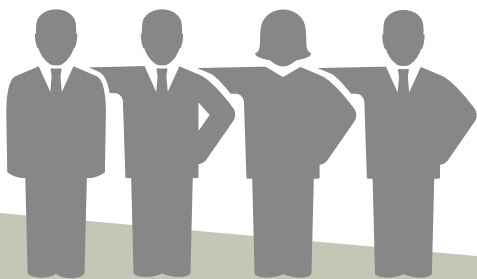
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Recruitment

What are social media?

It's been often, and rightly said, that social is not about sending out a message and hoping someone is listening; it's about engaging in a conversation.

From the boardroom to the street, nearly all of us are aware of social and the majority use it in one form or another. Surprisingly, though, it has no clear-cut definition. The term encompasses many services run by different companies, although only a few are of real importance.



Some things they have in common are:

- ✓ They are accessed through websites
- ✓ They enable people to share and/or create content (text, pictures, etc.)
- ✓ Nearly all this content is created by the users, not by the companies that run the services
- ✓ All users are created equal (by and large), and interact with a social site in exactly the same way
- ✓ They are essentially free (although they may have paid-for aspects), and open to anyone
- ✓ Most are primarily aimed at individuals using them in a private capacity rather than as part of their work

68% of brands use social media as an opportunity to engage with customers.

89% use information from monitoring social media to help improve their customer service.

[Source: Kcom/Customer Contact Association]

What are the major social media?



1



The biggest and most famous is Facebook.

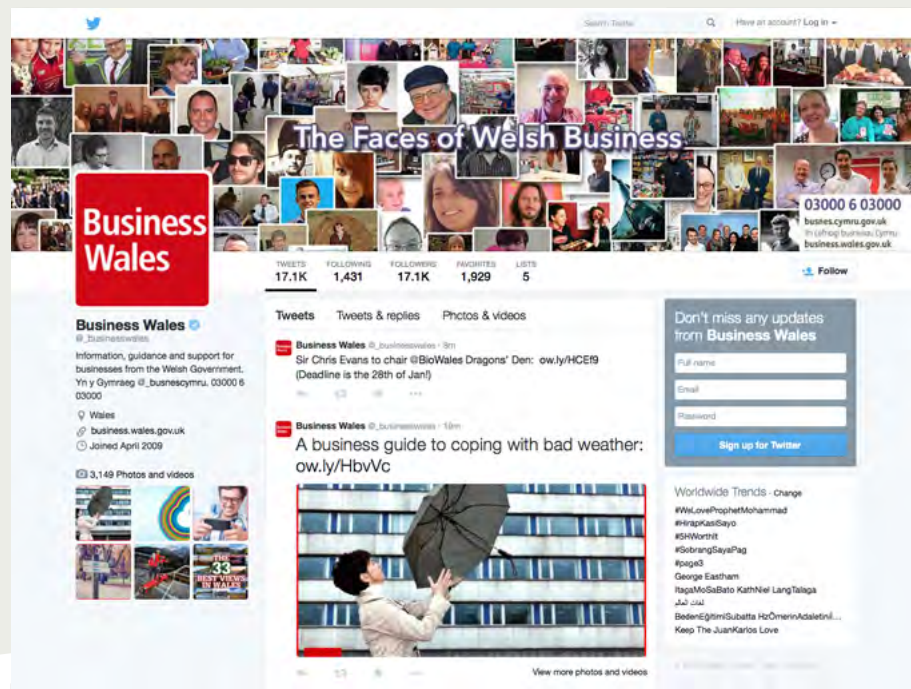
Its main role is to provide a place where individuals get their own page to post their latest news, thoughts, photos and so on, and share these with other users they've selected as friends. But businesses can have Facebook pages too, and do the same things.

These pages provide easy-to-find, informal places where businesses can conduct conversations with consumers, for example to discuss a new product.

What are the major social media?



2



Another social media service that's a household name is Twitter.

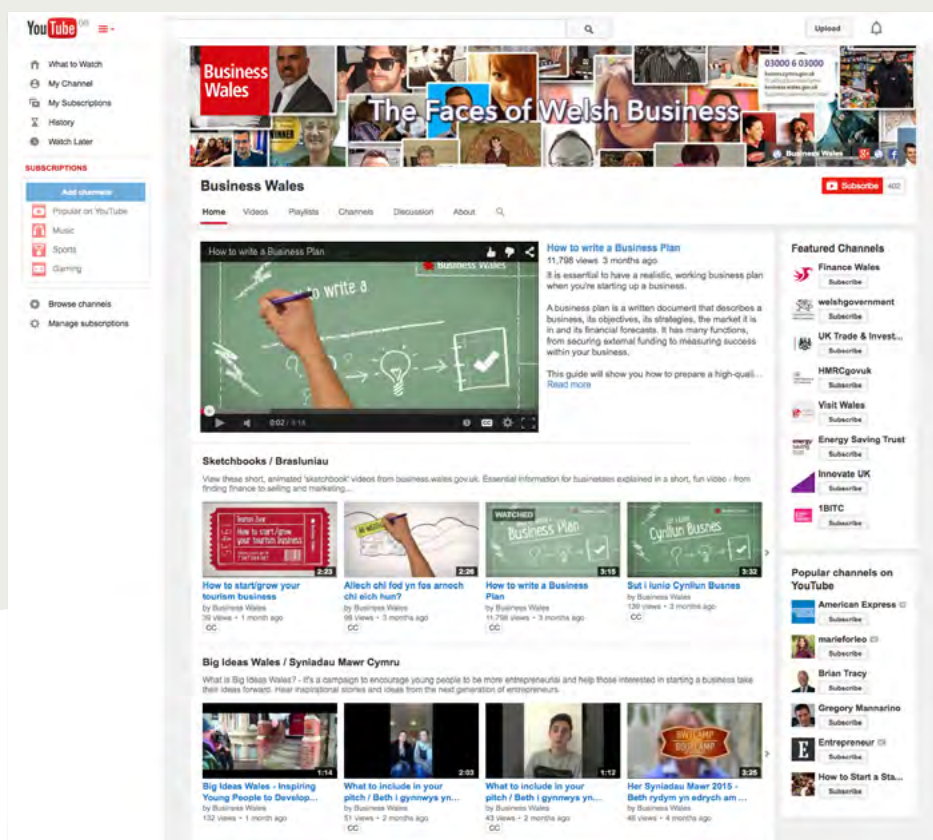
Twitter provides a way of sending very short messages (called tweets) to large numbers of people simultaneously. It emphasises lots of short messages rather than big chunks of content. This has implications for businesses using it: the commitment in terms of staff resources is low (a tweet can be composed in a few minutes) but it must be regular.

Users can choose to engage with your business specifically, by receiving your messages and replying publicly to them, or they can simply search for tweets which interest them using codes called hashtags. For example, suppose you were a crisp manufacturer, and wanted to position your range of flavours as perfect for eating while watching sports on TV. You could flag your tweets with hashtags related to major sporting events, and thus reach potential members of your target market even if they hadn't heard of your business. (Naturally, this technique could easily be over-used; any kind of 'hard sell' is generally a bad idea in social.)

It's also worth noting that Twitter is very popular with journalists and bloggers, so it's a useful way to reach these opinion-formers when you need to disseminate news quickly.

What are the major social media?

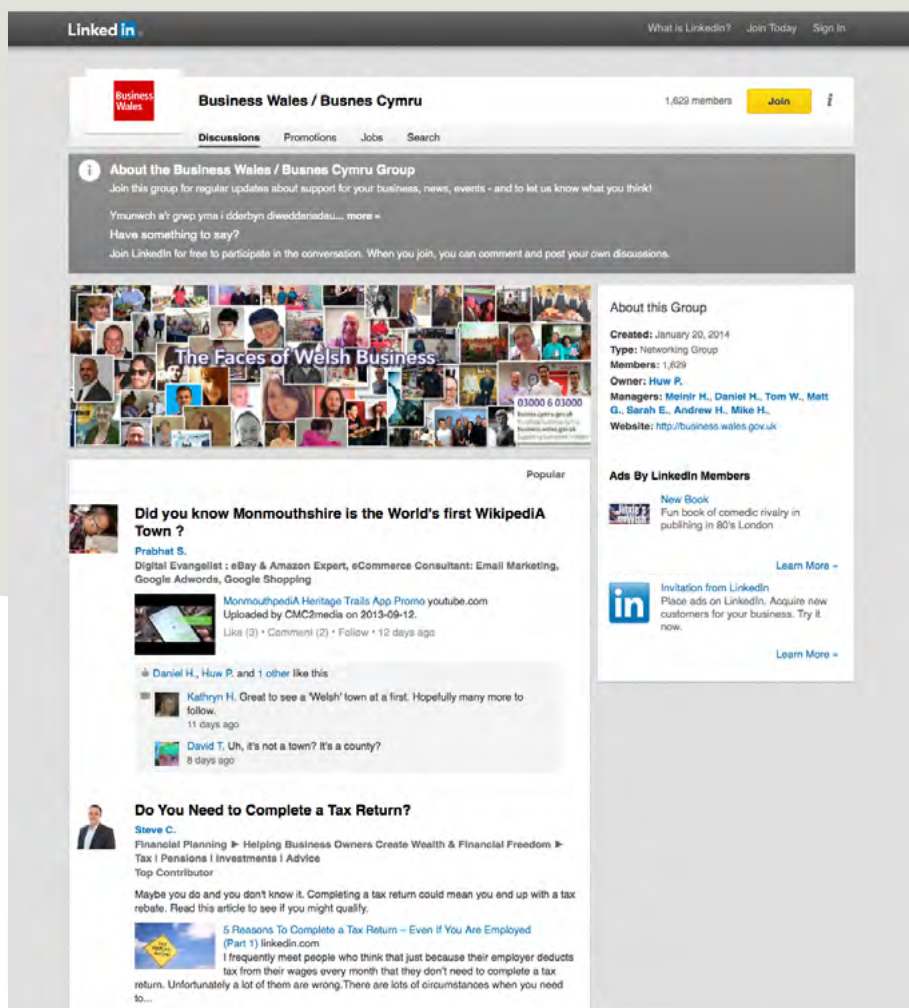
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Equally well-known, but not always thought of as social, is YouTube.

YouTube (owned by Google) is a site where anyone can upload videos for the world to see. Although there is less interaction among users than on many other social sites, YouTube is purpose-built to support video, unlike the others. So it's a useful complement to them; you can put your videos here, then employ a more interactive service such as Facebook or Twitter to encourage people to watch.

What are the major social media?



4

Finally, there's LinkedIn

LinkedIn is, perhaps, the best-kept secret of the social world: a well-established service that could be called 'Facebook for professionals'. Where a Facebook user might upload a list of their favourite films, on LinkedIn it's more likely to be their CV. There are also many business-related discussion groups, some of them highly specialist.

What business benefits can I expect?



BUILDING YOUR BRAND AND IMAGE

Social gives you the ability to communicate your business's messages to consumers in an environment much more flexible and relaxed than other media - and then listen to what they have to say back. Outside of the artificial context of market research, it has never really been possible to do this on such a large scale before.

PROMOTE SPECIFIC PRODUCTS OR OFFERS

As we've observed, the culture of social is generally very disapproving of the 'hard sell'. But you can still use social to initiate the processes that lead to a sale, for example by encouraging users to try a free sample. You can also use it to generally develop interest in a product, perhaps by asking for feedback on proposed new features. (This could be useful for R&D too, of course.) In both cases, the key again is to get your audience involved - don't just tell them something, let them tell you something back.



PROVIDING SUPPORT

Social is ideally suited to providing simple technical support and pre-sales advice, and - as well as serving the individual customer - doing this in a timely, helpful manner that's visible to millions of people can do a great deal for your reputation.



CRISIS MANAGEMENT

In an emergency such as a product recall, or a damaging rumour, social can be a quick way to get your message out and respond to enquiries or criticism.



RECRUITMENT

Social can be a recruitment tool, simply as a place to post job vacancies. Equally importantly, your social activity may be one of the ways that a potential applicant judges your business.



INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

With a little care to keep activity hidden from prying eyes, many social media services can be configured to be suitable for internal communications. But this is a minor use of them, and other technology such as an Intranet may be more appropriate.

How can I use social media effectively?



Establish a purpose and a strategy

Using social just 'because it's there' will mean missing out on much of its potential. Decide on a small number of clear purposes for your social presence - these could include new customers, repeat sales, customer satisfaction, or reduced helpline calls, for example. Then decide how you will achieve them, and how you will measure that.



Commit the people

One of the most common ways businesses slip up in the social world is by failing to commit enough staff time to managing their social presence - not just at launch but indefinitely, and not just posting new material but also responding to users' questions and comments. Choosing the right person/people is equally important. This is not an IT task, and may sit most comfortably in the marketing department.



Choose the channels

When you have identified goals you can determine which social media services are suitable. The questions here are not technical but related to the kind of audience each attracts, and their focus when using it. For example, Facebook would usually be more appropriate for selling consumer goods and LinkedIn for business services.



Develop the content

Knowing your audience, and what you are trying to achieve, will enable the individual(s) responsible to decide exactly what material should be shared with the public. This is a continuous process, and should involve regular contact with management to ensure the social strategy is still helping the business's goals.



Set guidelines

Lay out clear, written guidelines for everyone in your business using social. These should cover issues such as what kind of information they can and can't disclose, and situations where they should obtain guidance from a manager before responding to a social media comment.



Common Problems

We mentioned under-resourcing as a common mistake made by businesses using social. There are others:

Short-termism

Social media will not make a difference in weeks or months.

Lack of transparency

Honesty and credibility are all-important - this cannot be over-stressed. The avoidance of difficult questions, when they come up, will actively harm your reputation.

Lack of management

Don't let your social presence become a free-for-all where anyone can contribute anything; the result will be an inconsistent image and message.

Over-management

Conversely, don't require that the board approves every single tweet, or nothing will ever get done. Set goals and guidelines, then allow your social staff to act freely within these.

Ignoring the law

There are no major legal issues specific to social, but do remember that it's a form of media, so laws such as those concerning defamation have force. Advertising Standards Authority rules also apply.

Monitoring Social Media

It's important to measure the success of your social media project, while remembering that benefits won't be seen immediately.

Exactly what you need to measure depends on your goals. At the simplest level, you can assess the impact you have made through tracking the number of Twitter followers you have, Twitter replies, Facebook friends, Facebook likes, and so on.

This won't tell you whether your business goals are being achieved, but at least it will indicate whether you're being noticed in the social world.

More sophisticated ways to determine business value would include, for example, checking whether telephone support calls are decreasing when requests for support through social media increase; or how many visits to your website were prompted by its address appearing in a tweet, and then resulted in a sale.

As well as monitoring your own social media activity, you might want to know what's being said about you elsewhere in the social world.

There are systems which will produce reports on this, although they're likely to be overkill for many smaller businesses.

Some examples of social monitoring sites include:



FOLLOW THESE

TOP
TIPS

1

Choose the services that are most popular with the audience you want to reach

Remember that technical capabilities are much less important than selecting the most appropriate means of communicating with your audience.

2

Measure what matters, not what's easy to measure

Ensure that the aspects of usage you measure give you a clear view on whether your business goals are actually being achieved and what you could do better.

3

Decide whether one solution 'fits all'

Consider whether you need a different social media presence for different products/brands, or whether one for the whole business will suffice.

4

Register all forms of your business and brand names on the major social media services

Plan for the future even if you don't plan to use some types of social media immediately.

5

Use traditional communications to encourage visitors

Use your website and emails to point people toward your Facebook page, Twitter account and so on.

6

Keep an eye on changes in the social world

Bear in mind that today's leading services may not be leading forever, so always be mindful of developments in the social media world.

7

Accept criticism and respond positively

Don't get depressed by unfriendly comments from consumers (unless they're all unfriendly, perhaps) and never get dragged into an online argument.

8

Be consistent, and don't lie

Ensure that you manage your social presence so that there is consistency in the messages you put out and always provide honest, accurate information – or inevitably it will come back to bite you at some point!



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