

# 12 Essential Tips for Success in Social Media

## Marketing in an Age of Networked Customer Communities

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Whether you call it Social Media or Consumer Generated Content, there's no debate over the accelerating popularity of Internet sites and forums where consumers share opinions and experiences about every product and service imaginable. From blogs and podcasts to wikis and social networks, social media allows consumers to rate and review products, advise fellow consumers, and even make their own commercials praising or bashing businesses and brands.

The force that is driving social media is as old as business itself: word-of-mouth. Buyers have always shared advice on purchasing decisions, and consider word-of-mouth among the most trustworthy of information sources. But advancing Internet and communications technology has dramatically amplified word-of-mouth, making consumer conversations one of the most rapidly expanding sources of content on the Web. Both business and retail buyers are leveraging social media as a critical step in the process of making purchase decisions, elevating online word-of-mouth far above advertising and marketing as a trusted source of information. As a result, marketers are rapidly losing control over their own positioning and messaging as consumers begin to control the market conversation.

So how should marketers respond?

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**A** growing number of marketers are exploring and embracing social marketing opportunities. Business blogs are on the rise, as are podcasts, wikis and customer forums. Social media is also crossing over in mobile marketing campaigns. In fact, the variety of new social media options is growing so rapidly that it's often overwhelming. But there are a few fundamentals for an effective approach to Social Marketing that span all technologies and markets.

## Before You Start

### 1. Establish Clear Business Objectives and Metrics

You'd be surprised at how many blogs and podcasting programs are started as an executive pet project. That may relieve some pressure to demonstrate ROI, but as a marketer responsible for a social media initiative, you should never move off the starting mark without clear and measurable business goals. Measurability doesn't always mean revenue, but that's always a good place to start. Are you hoping to directly influence sales? If not, how can you best measure the value of your social media program against a specific business objective?

Many companies are embracing social media tools to reduce customer service costs by enabling peer support through online forums. Other companies are replacing expensive focus groups and other market research with online customer forums and advisory boards. If you're focusing on building awareness and generating leads, the available metrics are no better or worse than metrics currently available for advertising or public relations programs. You can measure RSS subscriptions and page views, and you can even measure your influence on market conversations by tracking inbound links to your social media site—a measure at least as worthy as brand awareness.

### 2. Reframe Your Notion of Marketing Communications

Many marketers embracing social media are bringing old skills to a new game, and they're making a critical miscalculation. The social media phenomenon is not just a new set of communications vehi-

cles for broadcasting value propositions to a target market. It's about customers sharing information to make better decisions, precisely because they're jaded by the packaging and spin that typifies most marketing and advertising campaigns. They want the straight dope, and they want it from people they trust—primarily their peers. When customers control content, marketers inevitably lose some control of the message. But that doesn't diminish the capability of good marketers to communicate effectively with their markets—in fact it can create a significant competitive advantage. It just takes a different approach. Marketers need to see themselves not as owners of market share, but as members of a market community, and their communications not so much campaigns as conversations with the market. Where the typical marketing program begins wrapping up when a campaign is pushed out the door, that's where a social media program begins. It's all about authentic engagement with the market community, at every stage of the customer lifecycle, not just during lead-gen and loyalty campaigns.

### 3. Clarify Your Positioning

For all the novelty of social media, successful execution invariably hinges on an age-old fundamental—a clear and consistent position across all business touch points. In social communications, your positioning is no longer confined to what's printed on your Website or brochures, and it's no longer static. Everything you and your team say in blog postings, comments, wikis or forums is part of the positioning fabric, along with everything your company does, from how it promotes its products to how the delivery driver behaves in traffic. If everyone is not crystal clear on what your company stands for, what it believes and how it behaves, at best you're setting the stage for a diffused and ineffective program, at worst a public relations nightmare. Some companies have always understood that every employee is a brand ambassador. By amplifying word-of-mouth, social media makes that lesson important for every company. Before you launch a social media program, you should clarify your company's current corporate and product positioning, as well as any relevant mission or vision statement, and make sure every-

one involved in the initiative understands it. You don't want employees quoting from a script every time they engage with the market, but you do want them to be able to authentically and consistently represent what the company stands for.

## Ramping Up

### 4. Identify the Influencers

The first meaningful step of engagement is to identify where the conversations are taking place that are relevant to your market community, and who is shaping those conversations. This can lead to some interesting surprises for marketers who are used to targeting their market based on segmentation and profiling. Instead of beginning with the target and finding out what they have to say, you begin with what's being said that is relevant to your market and seeing who is saying it. Some tools, like BuzzLogic, are designed to allow the tracking of keywords and phrases through a complex trail of links through blogs and other social media, in order to identify and rank key conversation influencers on any topic. The effect of seeing how opinions, attitudes and even rumors are shaped around specific centers of influence is invariably an eye-opening experience for marketers, and often challenges entrenched assumptions about their market. It's important to recognize that influencers are not always your customers, but their impact on your revenue stream can be significant. They may be former customers who have become disaffected, they may be champions of a competing product, or they may simply be agnostics with a strong market perspective that challenges your own. Being able to see beyond the scope of your own customer base to understand how your market is influenced is one of the most important advantages of a social media program.

### 5. Listen Before You Launch

In any conversation, a smart communicator spends time listening to the dialog before they engage. It's not just about knowing what's being discussed, it's about getting the feel for tone and style, and getting a sense of the people driving the discussion. Nothing stands out more than someone spouting off completely out of rhythm with the flow of the conversation. Your market

## QUICK START GUIDE

1. Review your corporate or product positioning.
2. Use your positioning to define relevant keywords and keyword phrases.
3. Assign a team of cross-functional employees to help track and, when appropriate, to respond to social media content relevant to your market. Make your rules of engagement clear, especially proactive identification of employment and position.
4. Use your keywords and keyword phrases to identify social media influencers who are driving conversations relevant to your business.
5. Read the social media content of top influencers in your market to understand the tone, direction and drivers of the current dialog.
6. Submit comments on the blogs of influencers in your market. If you have a blog, link to the blogs of influencers, write posts that reference and link to their posts, use trackbacks and pingbacks if they accept them. Try to engage them in online dialog between your blogs and with others. Reach out to them in person and try to develop relationships.
7. Follow the same process to engage in other forms of social media, including forums, wikis, bulletin boards and other social media applications.
8. Track your engagements with influencers and review the related responses and metrics of attention to them.
9. Refine and repeat.

community will be distributed across numerous social media channels, and while the members of the community may be the same, the issues and attitudes can take on a very different cast from one blog or forum to the next. Just as a good media relations expert spends time reading the work of a journalist before they pitch a story, a good social media approach includes reading the posts on a blog or forum before weighing in—and it requires a sense of timing. If you steamroll through every blog in your market community posting the same content and just flogging the issues you think are important, you'll quickly be marked as an outsider. A better approach is to use the available tools to keep your finger on the pulse of conversation, and work your way into the natural flow.

## 6. Integrate Social Media with SEO

One of the most powerful capabilities of social media, especially blogging, is the ability to dramatically impact search engine positioning. The combination of continually fresh content, extensive page inventory from individual blog posts, content expansion through comments and

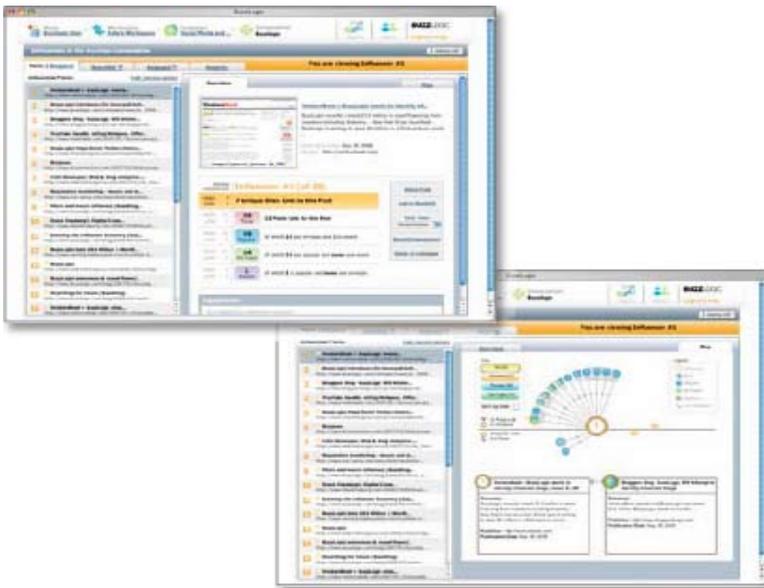
trackbacks, and incoming links from other blogs far surpasses the optimization potential of almost any static Web site. The keys to optimizing your blog for search engine optimization are focus, discipline and creative copywriting. You need to focus on a narrow set of relevant topics, with relevant keywords and phrases; you need to maintain the discipline to focus on those topics continuously; and you need to be creative in relentlessly working the keywords and phrases into your blog post titles, links, and copy, without sounding as if you're writing copy for a search engine. Ultimately your most influential audience are human beings, not computers, so don't let your SEO ambitions take the life out of your blog.

## Diving Into Social Media

### 7. Engage Your Audience

Whether you're launching your own social media application or engaging in others, the key to building influence in your community is getting involved. Simply launching a blog or a forum isn't enough. You need to participate in the conversation. If you've already identified the people influencing market dialog, comment on their blogs. Put them on your blogroll. Write posts that trackback to their blog if they allow trackbacks. Write posts that engage or challenge them on a topic that matters. Go forth and get in the conversation; don't wait for it to come to you. To be successful, you need to continually engage and develop relationships through dialog with the influencers. A couple of things to keep in mind about engagement. First, leading practitioners currently estimate that about 1% of the total audience for a social media site actively engage in public participation. The rest are either "lurkers", people who actively observe, but don't publicly engage, or people who only occasionally observe. Successful social media programs, whether they rely on consumer generated content—like wikis or blog comments—or consumer participation—like product ratings or file sharing sites—are those that can leverage one percent participation to provide value to the whole community. Second, it's important to plan for sustained engagement wherever you get involved. If you simply parachute in to a conversation to bestow

## Identifying Influencers and Mapping Communities



BuzzLogic is a search tool that surfaces influencers in social media conversations, and generates a social map to visualize the composition of a community.

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your position, and don't return until another conversation shows up on your radar, you'll fail to establish the kind of relationships and reputation that make you a trusted member of the community. People notice who takes the time to engage meaningfully, and that impression becomes a multiple for your reputation—in fact, many social media applications have mechanisms to rank your reputation by involvement.

### **8. Engage Your Employees**

Social media programs are a valuable opportunity to build cross functional teams in your organization. Select an initiative that helps you build bridges internally—or pipes into the organization as it's sometimes phrased. Everyone has a slightly different take on your market issues, and a different way of trawling the Web to find things you can link to and leverage. Put together an editorial team of employees, and set a regular schedule to discuss content. Assign people to cover keywords, or specific market groups, and keep the team up to date on what's being discussed in the blogosphere, and where the opportunities might be today for linking and dialog. Having a base for your social media team beyond the marketing staff does more to reduce than expand the risks of social communications. It provides a broader resource pool of expertise about all aspects of the company's operations, and it helps evangelize the company's market position—and the important role of marketing—within the organization.

### **9. Engage Your Customers**

Nothing filters up good ideas and new content like talking directly to customers. Interview a few of your customers or partners and ask for their take on the issues. Ask them what they want to know about. Ask what sources they listen to on the Web. Ask them what they'd like to see if they could look inside your company for a day. Don't "profile" your customers and assume what they would say, ask them and let them surprise you. Avoid the temptation to shape your customers' words into testimonials. If you want a glowing quote, ask for a quote. But use your social media program to have an honest dialog on open ground. One of the most promising areas of social

media is the opportunity to bring your customers into the marketing process, by allowing them to provide their own ideas and feedback to your products and programs. Some companies develop private communities where select customers can get an early view of emerging products, while others open up public forums where customers can post their own ideas and vote on others. Many companies are even getting into the trend of encouraging customers to create their own commercials for their products. Whatever course you take, it's important to recognize that your customers are a fertile source of new ideas and innovations, and social media makes that source more accessible than ever.

### **10. Be Honest and Authentic**

One characteristic of social media is that people are more aggressive about reading between the lines to interpret other people's intentions. And they're remarkably savvy about it. Just as the loss of sight often leads to an enhancement of other sensory input, the inability to read body language and facial expressions online leads readers to attend to the subtlest cues in written language. And it's not just something that happens from post to post. If someone suspects you're in some way misrepresenting yourself, they'll use any of the tools available to investigate your past postings across the blogosphere to sniff out what you're really up to. It happens all the time, and it severely undercuts the credibility of anyone exposed as a shill. Whether you're launching your own social media site or just participating in discussions around the Web, be conspicuously honest and straightforward about who you are and who you represent. The cost of being exposed or even accused as dishonest is never worth the small gains you may think you'll get by influencing the conversation as an "objective" participant. A number of well-known and very savvy public relations firms have been severely burned by trying to mount sophisticated fronts for bloggers with shielded identities. On the flip side, bloggers that openly announce their affiliations often do take disproportionate criticism, but usually earn at least grudging respect for being up front. At minimum, that keeps the focus on the story you

want to tell, rather than a scandal.

## 11. Define Metrics According to Business Objectives

Marketers often dwell on the ROI for social media, and there's a popular misconception that relevant metrics are lacking. While it's true that standard metrics are evolving, there are many ways to measure the impact of social media on your marketing performance. You can benchmark and track changes in the amount of conversation on relevant themes. You can track the number of inbound links to your own site, and thus track your influence. You can track the growth of engagement in your social media programs. You can track the impact of your social media campaign on traffic to your traditional Web site. And of course, you can measure participation in cross-channel marketing programs, simply by establishing tests against a control campaign without social media components.

Don't let the pressure for accountability turn ROI into a barrier against innovation. There may not be a ready-made dashboard to filter up top-line metrics to your CMO, but that doesn't mean relevant measurements are unavailable. Get involved in defining what business outcomes are relevant for your social media program, and look for ways to measure progress toward the goal. Chances are, the data is available.

## 12. Fail Quickly. Fail Cheaply

If you're launching your first social media program, focus on an initiative with minimal investment in time and money. Success is more often than not an iterative process. You're likely to fail. So do it quickly, do it cheaply, and correct your course. Don't set out with a big initiative that ties up a lot of resources putting all the bells and whistles into a flashy launch, unless you're ready

for a flashy failure. Social media lends itself well to this kind of iterative and incremental process.

## Conclusion

Social media is an important trend that is reshaping many forms of online marketing. While the technology is rapidly evolving—and is often confusing to non-technical marketers—the fundamental drivers are quite familiar. Social media is simply a broad amplification of word-of-mouth. While that basic truth is easy to understand, the implications are a direct challenge to many ingrained marketing practices that treat markets as a passive audience to be influenced with a broadcast message.

As social media engages your customers, it elevates and disseminates information about every aspect of your business. Your customers' own stories will inevitably compete with the story you have to tell, and influential members of your market community can amplify or nullify your carefully crafted positioning.

To respond to this challenging trend, marketers must avoid the temptation to leverage social media as a new technology to manipulate word-of-mouth messages. Such tactics are regularly exposed by consumers and typically cause more damage to a company's reputation than any short term gains in positioning. Instead, marketers must develop trusted relationships with their market community by leveraging tools that enhance their ability to focus on critical issues, identify key influencers, track market conversations, and engage responsively in market dialog. Such an approach toward social media—using the technology to enhance the development of meaningful customer relationships—provides a competitive advantage by improving market insights, access and acceptance within your market community.

MotiveLab is a marketing agency that helps businesses incorporate social media trends and technologies into their marketing programs, from launching products and generating leads, to building customer communities and driving referrals. For more information, please visit [www.motivelab.com](http://www.motivelab.com).



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