

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS



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Social Media and Your Business

What's All the Fuss About?

You've no doubt been hearing a lot about social media recently. Is it all hyperbole, a fad? Should you pay attention or even care? The answers are no – it's not a fad and yes, you'd better care. Not only should you care, you should be doing something about it right now. Why? Because your customers care and they are using social media, and your competitors care and they're starting to use social media. With over 250 millions users today, if Facebook were a country it would be the fourth most populous country in the world, and according to Nielsen Research two-thirds of the Internet population visit social networks. Clearly there's something compelling happening here. When done properly, social media marketing can be an effective way to help your business reach potential customers and stay connected to current ones. But there are a few things you'll need to know to help you get the most out of social media and avoid the pitfalls.

What is social media?

Knowing the answer to this question is a good place to start. The technical definition found on Wikipedia is: "Internet and mobile tools for sharing and discussing information" or "the changing trends in the use of web technology and design." To me, social media is really about conversations. Conversations made richer and more convenient. Social media offers a set of tools allowing users to easily create and share information and stories including links, audio and video, and gives marketers the ability to communicate and share their stories in an effort to generate new business.

Know your story

Rocky Mountain Soap in Victoria BC recently began using social media – a blog, Twitter and Facebook - to market their store and build a following online. (Twitter is a micro-blogging

service that allows users to send and receive “tweets” which are text-based messages of up to 140 characters in length. Tweets will often include links to web pages with more information.) Marketing Manager Scott McDonald, who goes by the Twitter handle “FootButterGuy”, credits social media with a significant increase in store sales over the last few months. In fact, after a recent product swap campaign that they promoted heavily on Twitter and Facebook, sales were up dramatically and their social media profiles overflowed with positive customer comments. Have a read through their blog and Twitter feed and I think you’ll understand why Scott’s social media approach has been successful.

He’s friendly and self-effacing, yet engaging and full of relevant, useful content that customers naturally want to share with their friends. Even his Twitter bio espouses humility. “Just a guy making bubbles at Rocky Mountain Soap (Victoria), learning about how natural is important and sharing that.”

They highlight the importance of natural body care products and educate their customers by sharing information and creating a community around health conscious folks. They know their story and they’re telling it via social media. RockyMountain Soap – Victoria is doing social media right.



Hyper-local marketing

Once you know your story, the two key components to social media success for small businesses are immediacy and targeting. Twitter and Facebook enable you to target people in your geographic location with timely messages like special offers, sales and new product announcements. To do so you’ll need to find and engage the demographic most interested in your product or service. You can start by using tools like [Twitter Search](#) and [Twellow](#) to find your “tribe”, people who live in your area and are interested in your company and products or services. Once you find them get to know them by first “following” them and then connecting by answering questions, sharing content that may be of value, or helping them by sharing or retweeting their posts. (To “retweet” is to repeat/quote someone’s tweet. Usually when you come across an interesting tweet and you want to forward it so that people who follow you see it too - you retweet it.) This is something Scott from Rocky Mountain Soap has done very well. He has been building the company’s social capital by doing the right things on social media but also by participating in many offline social media events like local Tweetups (real world meetings between two or more people who know each other via Twitter) and getting involved in social media related charity events like Twestival.

Social media planning

As with any marketing communication it’s critical for small businesses to plan their social media marketing before they get started. In order to know if your social media efforts are succeeding or not, you’ll want to establish goals and have the right metrics and tools in place to measure them. Do you simply want to raise awareness of your company, drive store traffic and increase sales, or increase loyalty among a core group of customers? Once you know what you want to achieve with social media you’re well on your way to integrating it into your overall communications plan and measuring success.

The time to tap into social media is now, before your customers ask why you’re not on Twitter,

or worse yet, don't ask and simply move on to your competition.

Written by Chris Burdge, President, BWEST Interactive. BWEST Interactive is a leading social media marketing firm. They help small businesses develop sound strategies that create 'social capital' and build profitable, lasting relationships with customers. Visit <http://www.bwest.ca>, email chris@bwest.ca or call 250-508-7761.

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Supporting Employees Through Difficult Times

Tanya is one of your best employees. She has been with you for four years, is great at her job, skilled with your customers, completely dependable and loyal to your company. She's the type of person you trust to get the job done with little or no supervision with an A+ attitude in everything she does. Recently however, Tanya has been showing up late, forgetting things and doing sloppy work. She seems stressed and anxious and you've overheard her snapping at a co-worker and being less than friendly with customers. When you ask her casually if everything is OK, she assures you that it is. You are concerned about the reduction in productivity, the change in her attitude and its effect on your other employees and customers. Several weeks go by with no change. Finally, you call her into your office and tell her you've noticed the change in her behaviour and let her know you're concerned about its impact on her job. She bursts into tears and tells you that her 3-year old son has been diagnosed with a severe learning disability and she has spent the last few weeks trying to learn about the challenges he will be facing, talking to doctors and specialists during her lunch hour and trying to figure out how they are going to afford the expensive treatment and therapy he is going to need.

Believe it or not, there are employers who would say "Not my problem. I'm paying you to be productive at work so leave your personal issues at home." I know because I've heard them say it. However there is an increasing call for work/life balance, and employees are seeking employers that offer understanding and empathy when life throws curveballs that spill over into work. According to a study by the Corporate Executive Board (CEB) among more than 50,000 workers, work/life balance ranks as one of the most important workplace attributes – second only to compensation. The research also showed that employees who feel they have work/life balance tend to work 21% harder than those who don't. There is a misconception that work/life balance requires a huge investment, such as providing an on-site gym or day care program, but the truth is, people's needs for balance can be met quite simply. As a small business owner, don't be discouraged. You can be an employer who looks after his/her employees effectively without a great deal of cost, and the results are good for your business. Here are some ideas.

Provide time off. Let's say Tanya's wage is \$17/hour. If you gave her one day off to spend

some concentrated time on getting her head around her son's needs, it would cost you \$136.00. Two days would cost you \$272.00. These are not out-of-pocket expenses, as you'd be paying that wage anyway, and with some support from your team you can cover the workload for that brief period of time. That investment would show Tanya that you care about her and want to help her get back to her productive self. The impact on Tanya would be huge sense of relief at getting some help to manage her situation, and loyalty to you as an employer for understanding her plight. She will come back working harder for you than she did before. Similarly, providing an hour off per week for a month or two to someone who needs counseling costs you very little, but results in a healthier, more productive employee.

Be empathetic. People are not machines and work and life cannot be separated very easily when they face major life challenges. A spouse dealing with cancer, a messy divorce, challenges with children, family illness, or financial stress will impact a person's performance at work. Perhaps you can offer flexible hours to accommodate outside appointments, or reduce job tasks for a certain period of time to lessen the load. The CEB study indicated that 60% of employees indicated flexible schedules as the most important work/life practice of their employer. Your understanding and flexibility in helping them get back on their feet will be greatly appreciated and in the end, will benefit your business with the return of valued employees.



Provide financial help if you can. If you do not have an insurance program with an Employee Assistance component for your employees and you can afford it, paying or assisting with partial payment for counseling can be a great way to assure your employees of your support and get them back to work more quickly. Consider the cost of splitting a \$100 per week counseling bill for six sessions (\$300) versus the cost of an unproductive employee for those six weeks and beyond. Look at it this way, their personal issue isn't going to go away, so you've really only got three choices. Continue on with an unproductive employee (to the detriment of your business bottom line), fire the employee (after which you'll incur the high cost of turnover in hiring and training someone else), or facilitating their return to wellness. Seems to me the \$300 is well worth it compared to the cost of the other two options.

Stay connected. Check in with your employee to see how things are going. You're not imposing on them to give you specifics about their personal issues, but you do want to know if they think they are making progress in order to facilitate a full return to work plan. Checking in periodically provides a human connection and that contributes to their desire to get back to work. Encourage them to be honest with you about how they feel regarding their workload. Chances are, your empathy and willingness to work with them will mean a committed, hardworking employee.

The CEB study also indicated that ironically, many employees end up not actually using the work/life adjustments offered by their employers. They just need to be reassured that they have options when faced with life challenges. In other words, "the option value of work/life balance is more important at improving employee effort than the actual consumption of those same practices." (The Increasing Call for Work-Life Balance, the Corporate Executive Board). Doesn't it just make smart business sense to be that kind of employer? Rather than being a business owner who looks with disdain at how much this is going to cost, consider the costs of

losing valued employees, or employees working at less than peak capacity. Then consider the value of the loyalty of those employees you've been willing to see through their challenges. You may find it surprisingly cost-effective!

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Marketing Your Home-Based Business

Anyone who runs a business knows that marketing is an important part of business growth, and should be a key part of your business plan. In fact, smart businesses, in addition to a business plan, also have a marketing plan. Very simply, marketing is spreading the word about your business with the anticipated outcome of drawing new clients or customers. As a home-based business (HBB), you will need to consider how to get the word out about your business in a different way than larger or existing companies. There are traditional marketing methods, such as printed materials like brochures and flyers, direct mail, word of mouth, newsletters, and advertising, as well as online methods like websites, link exchanges, banner ads etc. In addition, there is the new and ever-evolving world of social media, providing innovative ideas to reach broader markets. What's right for your small business? I can't answer that question for you because every home-based business will have different needs, however I can provide some basic steps to consider as you commit to a strategy to market your business.

1. Set a budget – one of the biggest mistakes HBB owners make is not determining ahead of time how much they are willing and able to spend on their marketing. If you don't have a budget, you'll be reluctant to spend anything, and you won't have a way to measure the effectiveness of your marketing dollars. Marketing is as important to your business as the product or service you provide. Without it, how will people know you exist? Look at your budget carefully and assign an amount you're comfortable with – or perhaps one that stretches you slightly. Then you'll be able to feel positive about spending those dollars as part of your business growth plan.
2. Do your homework – another mistake to avoid is jumping into one method of marketing without doing the research to determine which methods are right for you. This will depend on your target audience. If your primary market is under 30, you may need to seriously look at social networking ideas, since that's where that demographic spends most of its time. You may be wasting your money printing fancy brochures when a free Twitter account could accomplish much more. The point is, your intended market should drive your marketing methods. Do the research. Do the math. Talk to people in your market demographic and ask them how they make their buying decisions. Investing any money in marketing without this step is setting you up for failure in your marketing efforts, and wasting your hard-earned money.
3. Create a plan – you need a methodical approach to how your marketing is going to unfold. Throwing money here and there and dabbling in different methods without a

systematic plan will not be successful. Even if you do achieve some level of success, you won't know how to reproduce it because you won't know how you created it.

4. Create a monitoring process – part of your plan should include a method of gathering data so that you can evaluate what worked and what didn't. Perhaps it's asking every client or customer how they heard about you, measuring hits on your website or followers on your blog or Twitter. Whatever your plan, make it measurable so you know which marketing dollars achieved your purpose. It is trial and error initially, but as you gather information you'll be able to make more informed decisions and direct your marketing dollars to the areas that are giving you the best results.



5. Re-evaluate your plan regularly – if, six months into your plan you realize that a method you thought was going to bring you good results is not, and another that you had not anticipated, is – revise your plan. Also, something that worked really well last year, won't necessarily work again this year. Do an analysis at least once a year of the economic conditions, consumer trends, new competitors that have entered the market, and feedback from your customers to determine where you should go in the future. Make your plan flexible so that you can respond to sudden market changes. This will keep you one step ahead of your competitors.

Marketing is never static. It will change probably more than anything else in your business. If you want your home-based business to succeed you will need a plan to chart your course, a way to measure your success, and an ability to adjust the sails when the winds change.

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How to Improve Your Telephone Skills

And Teach Your Employees How Too!

Whether you're a one-person home-based business or someone who runs a busy office, the telephone can become a dreaded interruption to your work. How many times have you heard the phone ring and hoped it wasn't for you? Have you ever answered the phone with a less than hospitable tone to your voice because you were distracted by what you were doing? On the flip side, how many times have you called another business and felt like you were bothering the person who picked up the phone, or like they were far too busy to talk to you? Have you ever felt like your phone call was the last thing on earth that person wanted to deal with that day? It's not a pleasant experience, and can affect your perception of that company and your decision to purchase from that company.

Your voice is your customer's connection with your business. The impression you make and how they feel after talking to you may determine whether they want to do business with you. It may seem basic to be writing about something so simple – something we do a hundred times a day – but many of us don't realize how distracted we get by our tasks and how it affects the way we sound on the phone. Maybe you are always 100% pleasant and welcoming on the phone, but your staff could use a refresher course on customer service. Here are some things to help you ensure your customers feel valued and important on the other end of the phone.

Smile when you talk. You may feel silly but you'd be surprised what a difference it makes to the other person on the phone. Try this little exercise with your employees. Turn away from them so they can't see your face. Say the normal greeting you use when answering the phone. Then say it again a second time, only smile when you are saying it. Ask them if they could tell the difference. My bet is they will. It's a small thing that can make a big difference.

Revisit your greeting. Have you ever phoned a company and it takes 30 seconds for them to get through their greeting? "Good morning, thank you for calling ABC Darts and Supplies Company Ltd, this is Joan Jetson speaking, how may I direct your call today?" People are busy. Think about what the person phoning you needs to know – mostly they just need to know they've contacted the right company. Giving a name may be appropriate, although a first name only is necessary unless there are two people with the same name in the company. I think most of us assume whoever answers is going to direct our call to the right place, so how about simply, "Good morning, ABC Darts and Supplies, this is Joan speaking." People will tell you what they want, who they want to speak to or why they are calling. You'll have to work out what's most important to your business but the key is to keep it as brief and simple as possible.

Take a deep breath or two. Especially if you are deeply involved in a project or task and feel frustrated at the interruption. It happens to all of us, but few people can hide the frustration in their voice. So before you pick it up, take a deep breath to transition from your task to the person at the other end of the phone. This allows your voice to be relaxed and the other person won't sense that you felt their call was an interruption.



Give the caller your undivided attention. This is especially difficult if you are a multi-tasker or if you are feeling pressured by the job at hand and annoyed at the interruption. Have you ever tried talking to someone when you can hear them typing on the other end of the phone? It doesn't feel very good. The message is that your call isn't important enough for them to stop what they are doing. When you pick up the phone – STOP whatever else you are doing. Stop typing, stop writing, stop drawing – your distraction with your task will come through to the caller. Listen attentively so that you can address the reason for the call quickly and professionally.

Take uninterrupted time if you need it. It's better for you to tell your staff you don't want to take calls for the next hour because you're working on a high-concentration project than to be frustrated every time the phone rings. You'll give more quality attention to your project and

your customers will benefit from receiving a call from you later when you can give them your full attention. Encourage your staff to do the same. The world will not come to an end if a call has to go to voicemail once in a while.

Maintain a customer service perspective. This may be the 50th time you've picked up the phone today, but it is your customer's first (and possibly only) call to your business. Whatever they are calling about is important to them, and if you want to make them feel that they are important to your business, pretend they are the only phone call you need to take today. Leave a good impression. Just like an audience remembers the last thing a speaker says the most, your customers will get off the phone with you with an impression about your business, and how you end the phone call does leave an impression. Try ending the conversation with "Thanks so much for your call today." or "It was great talking with you John." It leaves your customer feeling that they were important to you, and that feeling will influence their buying decision. I recently heard someone say "People don't remember what you've said to them, they remember how you made them feel." Think about your own experiences and you'll probably find this to be true.

With so many businesses employing computerized voice systems, people do love to get a live voice on the other end of the phone. Make the most of this tool and you'll find it is a great way to market your business. It's all about impressions, and the ones you make on your customers influence their decisions about doing business with you.

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The Critical Cause

5 Tips to Reduce the Sting and Find Value in Criticism

It's happened to all of us at some time or other. Someone gives us a piece of helpful "advice", but it feels more like we've been pushed in front of an oncoming truck. The advice is really politely masked criticism, but we don't acknowledge it as such. We smile and nod and thank them for their feedback, and close the door behind us so no one sees us licking our wounds. Or, maybe it is an outright attack in front of a group of colleagues. However it comes to us, criticism is never easy to deal with. Even the most savvy, confident, and bold of entrepreneurs among us feel the sting of being criticized. And that concept of "constructive" criticism? Although it may be intended to be constructive, it doesn't feel much different than the other kind. Criticism is part of life, and how we deal with it can make the difference between withering and weathering. If we allow criticism to make us value ourselves less, we will wither and become ineffective. If we learn to see some value in the critical words, even the ones we think were unfair or unwarranted, we can weather the judgmental storm and use the grains of truth, no matter how small, to make us stronger.

As a small business owner, that criticism may come from a customer, an employee, a manager, or a business partner. It may even come from a competitor, or your bank manager, or your investor. Learning how to discard what's not true and learn from what is, can really impact your business in a positive way. Here are five tips for dealing with criticism the next time it's levelled at you.

1. Maintain your emotional balance.

The ability to separate yourself emotionally from the comments being made and the person

making them is extremely valuable. If all your hot buttons are being pushed and you feel your blood pressure rising, chances are you'll do or say something that will make things worse. Recognize that after it's all been said, you can accept or reject what you please. It's your choice. Allowing your emotions to get the better of you in the moment rarely makes things better. Two things that contribute to keeping your emotional balance are stifling your natural instinct to deny or defend and defying the urge to counterattack. When we feel attacked there is an immediate instinct to deny the allegations or to defend our position. Trying to defend yourself weakens your position before you've had a chance to think about it. When someone criticizes you, it's also natural to want to fight back. If you allow either of those things to take over, you will undoubtedly regret what happens. There is usually some truth in a critical comment, and there is also garbage, but in the heat of the moment it's hard to tell one from the other. After you've had time to think it over, you may find there is value in what's been said. If so, take those things and make decisions to change what needs changing. If you feel it's unwarranted, dismiss it and move on.

2. Determine the spirit of the criticism.

Was this person trying to get back at you for a decision you made that impacted them negatively? Or were they genuine in their desire to see an improvement, even if their comments hurt? Evaluating the motive for the criticism can sometimes help you to see the truth more clearly.

3. Separate opinions from facts.

If someone tells you they think you're a selfish jerk, that's an opinion. If they tell you that the way you yelled at them in front of their colleagues made them feel belittled, that's a fact. When criticism is given, it is usually one of those two. Opinions are difficult to deal with, but facts can be dealt with in a concrete way. Sometimes you can draw out facts from someone who is giving you opinions, (for example, asking the criticizer "why do you think I'm a selfish jerk?" may lead them to disclose the facts behind their opinion), and those facts can be very helpful in dealing with the situation that caused the critical comment. There is a third category that sits in between opinion and fact, and that is criticism that is intended to instruct. Say your business partner comes to you and says "Jim, I've noticed that when things get heated in our staff meetings, you tend to raise your voice. I know it's not your intention to belittle the staff, but I think sometimes it comes across that way. I've seen staff members leave meetings looking dejected and discouraged. Do you think you could be more aware of that in the future so we can maintain the great morale we have here?" He's given you his opinion that your behaviour is negatively affecting your staff, but he's offered concrete evidence as to why he thinks that. You then can choose to deal with the facts that have been given.



4. Accept responsibility for what is true, discard what isn't.

No one likes to hear ugly things about themselves, but the truth is, none of us is perfect, and all of us have traits, behaviours and methods that are less than exemplary from time to time. If you really looked at the criticism objectively and see some grains of truth, acknowledge it to yourself and the other person, and be responsible for dealing with it. If you have a habit of being sarcastic and sharp with others when you're under stress and someone points out that destructive behaviour, be thankful that it was brought to your attention before it really got you into trouble. If you acknowledge and accept responsibility for the truth, it makes it easier to discard the rest.

5. Choose your response thoughtfully.

If you have found some truth in the criticism, what do you need to do about it? Is there someone to whom you need to apologize? Is there some way you need to modify your behaviour? Is there a situation you need to correct or rectify? Do you need to go back to the person for clarification? Do you need to do some work in a specific area of your life? Allow the truth in the criticism to propel you toward positive change. It's all within your control, and your response will say volumes to other people about who you are.

The next time you get pushed in front of the criticism truck, remember these five steps. They will guide you through a process of growth rather than destroy your confidence. Handling criticism graciously is a trait that others will admire and is a sign of true maturity and leadership. Your business will only benefit by that kind of humility and commitment to positive change.

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Community Futures White Horse Plains
56 Royal Road North
Portage la Prairie Manitoba R1N 1V1
Tel: 204-856-5000 Toll Free: 1-888-WHP-CFDC (947-2332)
Fax: 204-856-5006
info@whpcfdc.ca
www.whpcfdc.ca

