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Michelle Golden • Feb. 08, 2012

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Whether you already use social media for business or you're still thinking about it, the concept to start with is, "why." You can most certainly jump in and start experimenting—that's how many people begin. But sometimes I see frustration mount as these folks evaluate if their efforts are worth it.

The typical metrics (e.g., followers or connections, comments, or retweets) are nice for the ego but don't often correlate with dollars. It's at this point that some people abandon their attempts. Others realize that some goals might be helpful.

The most important aspect in using social media effectively is to be clear about your business-related purpose for using these tools. Why are you there? There are several possible reasons that fall into these three categories:

Business Development. By building and strengthening relationships with current

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reviews). Your presence online permits you to increase loyalty and make problems right.

Just Plain Learning. There's never been an easier way to isolate (through time-saving filters) high-quality, timely information to expand your knowledge. You can set-up content to be fed to you or manually skim for good articles within your chosen communities of peers, thought leaders, industry experts, and clients.

Select your primary purpose; this drives your considerations and next steps. It also drives who does what. Generally, educational and relationship-based activities must occur at the individual practitioner level. Others can perform monitoring, with your direction.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Start by identifying exactly who are you trying to reach. Where do they already congregate both online and off? What will it take to be a participant and maybe an influencer in those communities?

Think about one niche area at a time. Niches can be by industry, market segment (e.g., family-owned business, public companies), demographic (e.g., retirees, recent immigrants), or situational (e.g., divorcees, people caring for aging parents).

Then, within a niche, who are the decision influencers in terms of their roles? For each role, consider the person's mindset, business concerns, interests, and technological sophistication. What organizations and resources do they trust? Are they involved in discussion or LinkedIn groups? What blogs and Twitter feeds do they follow? Ask some clients these questions if you're not sure.

Your end goal is sales through warm inquiries and qualified referrals. To get them, you need to be visible to and (ideally) have conversations with influential people on

topics they are interested in. They should see that you're credible and capable. This is

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(<http://bit.ly/outsourcesm>).

To monitor for mentions, I like Google Reader to automatically aggregate results for search parameters that relate to you and your firm. Hubspot, a social media service company, has a great instructional webinar (www.hubspot.com/archive/monitor-social-media-presence-daily) on how to set up monitoring so it takes less than ten minutes (they say daily, but once or twice a week is sufficient).

You might want to track mentions to see if your presence is growing and if the right things are being noticed. Track:

- Where did it appear & who said it?
- What was said? Categorize the nature of the mention and keep a clip file.
- Who responded and how fast? Keep the response in a clip file, too.

The last item is the most important. Respond with thanks to positive mentions and if you find a negative mention, seek to resolve it. Don't be overly concerned about the occasional problem aired online. It's actually pretty easy to look good, even in a complaint situation.

Handle it exactly as you should handle a face-to-face complaint: 1) "I'm sorry about your experience," 2) "I'm going to make it right," and 3) you take it offline: "Let's talk by [phone or email]." When others see this reply trail they see that you're reasonable, own mistakes, and resolve them. To normal people, it's not whether you make a mistake, it's how you handle it that matters. Studies show that customer loyalty is stronger after mistakes are resolved well than when no mistake occurred; credibility can be gained through fallibility.

LEARNING

Leveraging social media just for learning is a great goal. But reading and reposting is passive as far as marketing's concerned; don't expect new business to result. Simply

setting up Twitter or LinkedIn accounts won't suddenly (or ever) drive up your

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twitter.com/michellegolden/accounting-firms-corp

IT'S ABOUT CONVERSATION

Social-media tools are simply communication channels, they're never strategies in and of themselves. Tools like LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs are for conversations within specific marketing strategies. The word "conversation" is key.

Social-media channels aren't appropriate for the one-way broadcasting typical of corporate marketing. It's okay to occasionally mention what you're doing or have been recognized for, but no more than once in, say, ten interactions, just like you would converse at a ball game or dinner with your client or prospect. As long as you treat your digital conversations the way you treat personal conversations, you'll be golden.

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