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Quick Guide to Social Media

10 ideas to improve your social media marketing

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TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *Quick Guide to Social Media* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we give you ideas to effectively use social media with your specific goals in mind.

Social media can be both a blessing and a curse for marketers. In many ways, it's like a godsend – a way to connect on an immediate and personal level with prospects and customers. On the other hand, social media can be a huge challenge because it is constantly evolving and changing. As soon as a marketer gets the hang of one platform, another new one becomes the latest rage.

One common and costly mistake is trying to plan a strategy that encompasses the entire realm of social media. This will set yourself up for failure because your resources will be spread too thin and your focus will be scattered.

Instead, you need to choose the platforms that will best align with your objectives.

In this report, we'll show you:

- How to characterize the major social media platforms
- Tips for using social media for engagement
- Ways to establish credibility using social networks
- Why it's so important to customize your approach for each platform

We know you're in a hurry, so let's begin. We're eager to share these tips on how you can use social media to your greatest advantage by targeting your approach.

Bobbi Dempsey
Editor, *Quick Guide to Social Media*

About *Quick Guide to Social Media*

MarketingSherpa's *Quick Guide to Social Media* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We provide quick, simple tips you can use right away.

For each *Quick Guide*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and Benchmark Reports to MarketingExperiments optimization tests and analyses. We highlight tips to help improve your marketing performance right now … or at least by the time you're done with lunch.

Tactic #1. Understand the personality of each platform

In order to best plan your strategy for incorporating particular social media platforms into your overall marketing plan, you must realize each platform has its own distinct characteristics. Here's how Jonathan Greene, Business Intelligence and Social Media Manager, MECLABS, described three of the major social network platforms in the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "Social Media Marketing: Which type of content is appropriate for different platforms?"

Facebook: The pub crawl

People spend most of their Facebook time interacting with their "friends." In truth, most of the "friends" with whom we interact with on Facebook are merely acquaintances. Nevertheless, the environment yields similarities to the dynamics of a pub crawl. Surrounded by acquaintances and a few old friends, we dive into topics of various levels of seriousness ranging from the patently absurd, to the politically charged before wandering aimlessly from topic to topic for a spell.

We do so without expecting to be inundated with marketing messaging, much the same as we would expect to not be rudely interrupted by an insurance salesman while we were in the middle of telling our best frat house story from college at the local bar. In order to market effectively on Facebook, you first have to win a seat at the table, or be interesting enough to be the topic of our slightly buzzed conversation.

Twitter: The speed date

You've got 140 characters to impress me, so you'd better make it work for you. I might spend a few extra minutes after the last round of speed dating with a particularly interesting person – company, product, etc. – but if I do, it will be because you have done or said something particularly compelling in your allotted time slot. Equally as fun as interviewing potential dates, I can sneakily wander around the room to see what other people are saying about me.

In order to market on Twitter, you have to learn how to answer the question of what you're into right now, and answer it in a compelling enough fashion for me to care when you're done talking.

LinkedIn: After-work happy hour with the office staff

If you meet me at the Trendy Olive after 5 p.m., you'll probably hear me talking to my boss about my qualifications and why I deserve a raise or a promotion. If that's not happening, I might be talking to the manager of a competing firm at the next table over about possibly scoring a new job.

I'm not overly concerned with the "social" aspects of this event, unless it stands to benefit me in the professional arena. I may not even like the people with whom I am communicating, but it's sort of a necessary evil for me.

If you want to market your product on LinkedIn, it needs to be done within the context of me talking about myself and trying to sound like an expert in the process. If your marketing detracts from my awesomeness, I might be a lot less likely to pay attention to you.

Tactic #2. Consider the pros and cons of each platform

Don't wear yourself out trying to become a star of every social media platform. As noted in the MarketingSherpa event wrap-up, "Social Media Marketing: 4 tips for developing a winning social media strategy," the fear of falling behind in the latest social media trend may be causing another problem entirely – wasting time and resources for your organization. Stretching your resources thin with social media can also dilute your organization's message to your core audience.

The wrap-up shared highlights from a MarketingSherpa webinar, "Stop Wasting Time and Money on Social Media," sponsored by Eloqua, in which Matt Bailey, President, SiteLogic, weighed different social media outlets and provided insight into how to best express your company message through them.

"The basis of building a social media campaign is knowing which social media [platform] is going to do the best job in communicating who you are to your audience. Trying to do all social media, and treating it equally, will just drain your resources," Bailey said.

Bailey added it is important to explore the aspects of each medium, and then decide how to match the best platform with the message you want to share.

Blogs

"I love blogs," Bailey said. "Blogs, to me, are one of the best ways of communicating information and also attracting a lot of search visitors."

Blogs are much more active and compelling in conveying information, and search engines can find them much more easily, according to Bailey.

Bailey suggested using blogs to:

- Increase search visibility
- Build for long-tail content
- Interact with a community and educate the market
- Build lists, conversions and reach
- Build brand value and equity

"It's ideal for communicating high-trust content … I love that ability of communicating clear information and providing a great network of resources. It's great when your goal is to build lists," he said.

YouTube

Bailey advised using YouTube when you have to "see it to believe it," and when content is highly visual. One positive aspect in using YouTube is its portability, where "you can grab a piece of code and put a YouTube video on your blog, on your website, or put it on Facebook," he said.

YouTube also influences search results, and videos generally have high search rankings, he said, adding, "It is easier to get a video to rank on the front page of Google than it is to get a website."

Pinterest

Pinterest will work best for your organization if you have a highly visual product, according to Bailey. Its value is in reaching "a niche group of people," he said. Bailey gives the example of Cabo San Lucas for a travel agency – only people who have been there, or want to go there, will re-pin the content.

This quality, along with being highly visual, makes Pinterest ideal for those who wish to discover motivations of certain niche groups or narrow their focus.

LinkedIn

"Especially for B2B, it is one of the most powerful ways to create networks and reach people in the industry that you're targeting," Bailey said. He also pointed out LinkedIn is international, with 161 million members in more than 200 countries, and it is the most affluent membership of any social media platform.

"You can so highly target an audience on LinkedIn, and the return on investment in a highly targeted campaign is one of the best you'll find," he said.

Twitter

People follow brands, according to Bailey, for four reasons:

- To give feedback
- Provide ideas
- Get insider information
- Get freebies and discounts

Bailey said what these reasons show him is people want to consult with brands through Twitter, and to voice their own opinions and be thanked for their feedback.

According to Bailey, Twitter should be used for:

- Immediacy
- Time-sensitive information
- Direct consumer contact with the brand and experts
- Samples, discounts and freebies

Bailey said he loves Twitter as a platform because it is "the most effective way to get information out quickly. It has that immediate time element."

Facebook

Most people are using Facebook for connection, self-expression and entertainment, Bailey said.

"It's the perfect discussion medium. Its power is in the conversation it produces. It's all about the conversation," he explained.

He cautioned just because someone is a fan of your brand on Facebook does not mean they want to be marketed to by you.

Something to be aware of as you move forward with social media is almost all social media companies have written into their user agreement ownership of whatever is posted up on the site, Bailey explained.

"They own your content – and that's why I love my blog, I own everything I put on my blog. Facebook, as they have in the past, could change tomorrow," Bailey said.

Tactic #3. Gather content from fans and followers

User-generated content is a great way to encourage customer engagement, while also providing you with a relatively easy way to gather creative material. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest all provide great opportunities for this.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "Social Media Marketing: How a small e-commerce site attracted 293,000 Facebook fans," Justin Winter, Co-Founder and CEO, Diamond Candles, said his company's marketing strategy is largely based on ad-free social media marketing and word-of-mouth.

According to Winter, the average Diamond Candles customer tells three people about the brand. Even if they have never heard of the company before, those customers will actually end up making a purchase. Customer-contributed photos are a central part of the company's marketing. Adding those to product pages increased conversion rates by about 13%. Photos also helped the company attract a jaw-dropping 469,661 Facebook fans since 2011 (as of October 7, 2013) without using ads.

Sell a conversation starter

Diamond Candles launched in 2011 to offer scented, soy-based candles with a twist: Each one has a ring at the bottom. Most of the rings embedded inside the company's candles are inexpensive, but a lucky few see real diamonds surface in the wax. Besides giving customers more incentive to buy, the rings help the company's marketing by making the product well-suited to social media and word-of-mouth.

To remove any questions about how the product works, each candle includes instructions on how to retrieve the ring. Customers also see a call-to-action urging them to take a photo with the ring and share it on Facebook or the Diamond Candles website.

Harness the power of photos

Winter is a big believer in the power of user-generated photos.

"A photo can create an intensely emotional response while at the same time requires only minimal invested effort," he said.

Creating and sharing a photo activates and engages a potential customer, he added. For example, that behavior helped Instagram and Pinterest build audiences.

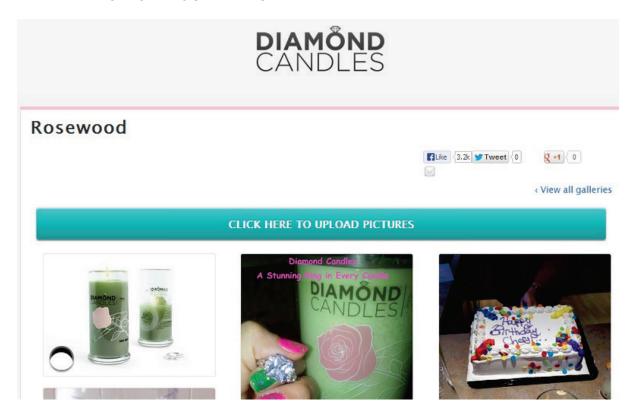*"Ring reveal" photos*

Diamond Candles focuses on what Winter calls "ring reveal" photos. These images, captured by customers after their rings surface, are the content that drives much of the company's social media strategy.

"Early on, we figured out that the best way to communicate the value proposition was really in a succinct photo that shows the ring coming out of a candle," Winter said.

To collect these photos, Diamond Candles' website has a "share your photo" button on each product page and gallery page. However, many of the photos are acquired through product giveaways promoted on social networks. The campaigns typically encourage people to create images, share them, or complete another social action for a chance to win free products.

The team even extended this approach to YouTube where it has given away products to the first 20 customers who uploaded a product review video to the network.

EXAMPLE: DIAMOND CANDLES GALLERY PAGE

Add to product pages

The "ring reveal" photos have several benefits. One of the biggest and most measurable, Winter said, is the impact on the site's conversion rate. Customer photos are featured prominently on the site's product pages and visitors can click to view them in a gallery. The photos increase the conversion rate of a product page about 13% on average.

"It's the additional social proof of having a whole gallery of hundreds of lavender-lemon photos that people can easily see," he said. "It's a ton of help when it comes to building trust and legitimacy."

For more tips on how social media can help you establish credibility, see Tactic #5.

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Tread carefully

Some social networks, such as Facebook, have terms of service (TOS) that restrict giveaways and contests. This creates a sensitive legal issue for marketers, and Diamond Candles treads carefully. One way it handles this is by promoting giveaways on social networks while centering them on the company's website or a third-party tool.

Before running a similar campaign, be sure to review each network's TOS with your legal team and create a list of do's and don'ts.

Tactic #4. Promote or enhance a campaign

In the MarketingSherpa article, "Email Marketing: User-generated content helps drive 16% clickthrough rate," the team at Litmus, an email testing and email marketing analytics vendor, was working on an email campaign to launch a new feature in its product and services mix.

Justine Jordan, Marketing Director, Litmus, said having a small team made keeping up with the company's IT development difficult, but that another pain point was "trying to figure out how to market to marketers."

While still in development, the new product was shared with a hand-picked group of the most valuable and favorite Litmus customers. Over a couple of months, this group had access to the new tool, and Litmus collaborated with the beta testers in what Jordan described as a "private base camp project."

Litmus' development team was able to work directly with the beta test group and received software bug reports as well as feedback on the tool.

While the beta testers were helping the development team refine and improve the tool, those beta testers were also providing a benefit for the marketing team.

Jordan said those select customers went to their social networks and began tweeting about the still unreleased product saying the new tool was "blowing their minds." Jordan explained she wanted to leverage that user-

generated content in the form of product testimonials before the product was available in full release, so she favorited those tweets to use during the launch campaign.

Jordan said this copy was especially valuable because it was authentic, and wasn't just "marketing spin."

She said, "It's the truth. People were just tweeting and saying it was blowing their minds, so I am going to use that [user-generated content]."

The key element in the email design was an animated GIF serving as a short demo of Litmus' new tool. But, it also featured screen captures of Twitter interactions from the beta testers and testimonials about the new product.

Jordan added, "While we do retweet user-generated content often – most frequently, we'll retweet praise or other positive commentary, effectively inserting testimonials into our Twitter stream – this is the first time we've used actual user tweets or content inside an email."

EXAMPLE: LITMUS TWITTER SCREEN CAPTURE

Including the user-generated content in form of tweets was a first for Litmus, but Jordan said Twitter and user feedback heavily influences the content strategy at Litmus. She said the team tracks user concerns for content market topics.

"Chances are, if our users are talking about [a topic] on Twitter, they'd also love to read about it on our blog. And then share that blog on Twitter," Jordan said.

She added, "Social proof can be very powerful when used properly and effectively. We're lucky that our audience and the email marketing and design community, in general, is very active on Twitter. A tweet can inspire a blog post, an email or be used as content itself when done tastefully and credit is given, of course."

"It's a win-win since people love to see their tweets being recognized – social capital – and it also helps us quickly create new content," she concluded.

Jordan said one interesting result of user-generated tweets embedded in the email send was the screenshot of each tweet was linked to the original tweet so it was easy for email recipients already logged into Twitter to hit the "retweet" button and share that testimonial to their network from within the email.

Tactic #5. Build credibility

One of the most important goals for any marketing professional is to help build credibility for their brand. Social media can be a valuable tool to help accomplish this, because it's a great way to encourage satisfied customers to share their experiences.

Testimonials are one of the best ways to establish credibility. In the MarketingSherpa article, "Social Media Marketing: Travel company uses Facebook as a tool for generating testimonials," Casey Halloran, Chief Marketing Officer, Costa Rican Vacations, explained the company embraced technology right from the start.

What launched as a two-man shop in 1999, led by fresh-out-of-college roommates, grew in relatively short time to the 100-person operation it is today due in large part to the company's leadership comfort level with high-tech tactics.

Costa Rican Vacations is more or less a virtual company with most sales agents working remotely across the globe, and the operational staff is a mix of locals and foreigners. The marketing team had always relied heavily on search engine optimization and pay-per-click, quickly adopting the then cutting-edge marketing techniques.

So, it's a bit ironic the company was a bit late to jump on the Facebook bandwagon. Halloran was a bit unsure how to best use social media to connect with the company's target demographic (an older, niche group). But, the marketing team was passionate about the power of social media, so they knew they had to come up with a plan to use it effectively.

They decided the best strategy was to use social media to persuade clients to advocate on the company's behalf.

Costa Rican Vacations turned its Facebook page into a tool for clients to leave testimonials, and then integrated those testimonials onto the website and into marketing emails.

Step #1. Integrate Facebook with email survey

Costa Rican Vacations staff set up a custom "Testimonials" tab on their Facebook page allowing "people to go in there and basically see a new wall dedicated only to testimonials."

Collecting those testimonials involved setting up a system to integrate the new wall into existing marketing materials, establishing how best to utilize them and offering an incentive for clients who gave reviews deemed the most "helpful" to staff.

Costa Rican Vacations sends out a survey to all clients after they have arrived back home, and the last question asks if they would mind posting a testimonial to Facebook.

The testimonials tab didn't really "take off," Halloran said, until the marketing team decided to integrate it with the already existing survey in the post-trip email send. Previously, it was up to Sales to persuade customers to leave a post-trip review.

The Costa Rican Vacations survey is 10 questions split over three pages, and clients are told at the beginning to expect to be asked to post a review on Facebook at the end of the survey. The client is then led directly to the Facebook page to post their review, and of course, browse other reviews if they so choose.

Agents check to see if clients have posted a testimonial on Facebook, and respond.

"My little marketing staff is watching that thing like a hawk," Halloran said, adding an agent is notified immediately if one of their clients posts. Continuing a conversation based off of a customer's review achieves Costa Rican Vacations' goals of keeping them as helpful to the company as possible while fostering a long-term relationship with current clients.

Step #2. Offer an incentive

To encourage people to post a testimonial on Facebook, Halloran said the team decided to offer an Amazon gift card to "the most helpful review."

Once testimonials started coming in, "it kind of snowballed, and once everyone was doing it, other people felt more comfortable," he said. Halloran added the team has gotten to the point where they receive one or two testimonials per day, and now have over 200.

Step #3. Integrate testimonials across other channels

Because the company is using a custom page on Facebook, Halloran said, "the cool thing is … you can embed that anywhere you want."

He said Costa Rican Vacations embeds the testimonials in two places:

- Testimonials page of the website, "which I love as opposed to most testimonials that are copy and paste, so … you're seeing live headshots," he said.
- Sample itineraries sent to prospective customers, where "it's embedded right there in part of the itinerary, so clients can see past client reviews."

Integrating the testimonials across channels has two goals:

- Increase conversion on the website

- Increase sales gross and percentage

As noted in Tactic #4, Twitter is also a great resource for testimonials. Positive tweets can be valuable testimonials (albeit brief ones). One advantage is it's much easier for someone to quickly send an enthusiastic tweet than it is for them to sit down and write a lengthy review or endorsement.

Tactic #6. Grow your email list

In the MarketingSherpa article, "Growing Email Lists with Social Media: KFC's Facebook tool adds subscribers," the team at KFC noticed some interesting trends around their most active online advocates, particularly those within their email database. Compared to KFC's other subscribers, its social influencers engaged far more often with the company's emails. Their overall response metrics – such as open rate and clickthrough rate – were also much higher.

"Over the last five campaigns, it has averaged out to about 70% higher," said Scott Geiser, Senior Digital Analyst, KFC.

After noticing several trends that pointed to this audience's power, Geiser and his team wanted to get more social influencers into the Colonel's Email Club. So, they tested adding an email sign-up widget directly to KFC's Facebook profile. Now, 3% of KFC's email acquisitions come from its Facebook profile.

EXAMPLE: KFC EMAIL WIDGET ON FACEBOOK

One of the team's first efforts integrated email and social media marketing channels to help launch a new sandwich, the Double Down.

"The first time that we truly used social media to our benefit, we sent out an email with just a picture of the Double Down and links to share it in social networks," Geiser said.

With more than 12,000 shares on Facebook and Twitter combined, the message successfully generated pre-launch buzz.

The email's success pushed Geiser to learn more about KFC's social influencers. Geiser's team considers subscribers "social influencers" if they have ever clicked a social-sharing button in a KFC email. These subscribers have 70% higher interaction rates with KFC emails.

Adding a registration form to your Facebook page makes it easy for fans to sign up for your emails without having to visit your website. Also, it could help add subscribers who are more willing to share your messages or interact in other ways.

KFC's registration form rests on a tab in its Facebook profile.

Creating a new tab on your company's profile is easier than it sounds. Geiser's team was able to create theirs and include the email form in less than half a day, he said. KFC used a canned solution to create the form, but whoever builds or maintains your website should be able to handle the task.

Two pieces of cautionary advice

- Double check the rules: Be sure to read Facebook's terms of use with your attorney. We do not believe this tactic violates the rules – but we are not lawyers. Make sure you're handling fans' information responsibly and within the network's guidelines. It's always better to be safe than sorry.
- Warn your international audience: Facebook is a worldwide phenomenon and some of your fans likely live in other countries. KFC's Facebook sign-up form mentions that the program was intended for U.S. residents only.

Request very little information

Facebook users only need to provide the following information to subscribe:

- First name
- Last name
- Email address
- ZIP code

This is far less information than KFC requested when generating sign-ups through other channels, Geiser said. The intent was to avoid overwhelming or intimidating fans by asking for too much information, and to quickly give them another way to connect with KFC.

One of the most powerful ways Geiser's team found to segment and target email subscribers was by location – which is why the form requested a ZIP code.

Avoid pushing fans to the tab

Geiser's team avoided pushing KFC's fans to this tab, whether through Facebook or any other channel. This helped ensure that consumers who registered were truly interested in receiving the emails – which helped KFC keep its email response rates high, Geiser said.

This approach fit with KFC's previous approach to list building.

"We have grown our email database very, very slowly and organically," Geiser said. "That has really paid dividends for us. We have a tremendous following and tremendous trust in the brand."

Tactic #7. Make interactions more comfortable for the consumer (while doing some discreet intelligence gathering)

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post "Social Media Marketing: Social login or traditional website registration?" Janrain, a social Web user management platform provider, shared some interesting findings from the Social Identity Study (with the research conducted by Blue Research).

A key element of the survey was finding out how respondents felt about using a social login – Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc. – instead of having to register individually at multiple websites.

A whopping 86% of respondents reported being bothered by the need to create new accounts at websites and said they would actually change their behavior:

- 54% might leave the site and not return
- 26% would go to a different site if possible
- 6% would just simply leave or avoid the site
- 14% would not complete the registration

Meanwhile, 88% admitted to supplying incorrect information or leaving form fields incomplete, and 90% admitted to leaving a website if they couldn't remember their login details rather than taking the time to recover their information.

The study also found even though website visitors are becoming more frustrated with traditional marketing, they are becoming more open to using social identities for website registration. In fact, 77% responded that social login is "a good solution that should be offered," with 41% preferring social login over creating a new user account or using a guest account.

What does that mean for marketers?

Larry Drebes, CEO, Janrain, said allowing social login benefits marketers in a couple of essential ways:

- Removing a registration barrier will increase conversion rates.
- The data stored on a social network is typically more accurate and up-to-date compared with data entered on a website to go through a registration process quickly.
- On the next visit to the site, the user will be able to re-enter quickly and not have to remember the unique username and password created on a site – increasing the likelihood of future logged in sessions and eliminating password reset expenses.

When the user logs in with a social network identity, it is a completely transparent process and the user gives permission to the site to access specific parts of their profiled data. The marketer can then use that profile data for

future marketing purposes, such as: targeting, personalization and feeding other marketing programs such as email marketing.

Tactic #8. Use Facebook to host a landing page

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "Social Media Marketing: Should Facebook host your landing page?" Daniel Burstein, Director of Editorial Content, MECLABS, noted a growing trend in ad campaigns is directing customers to a special landing page in Facebook, as opposed to one on the company website. He said there are some advantages to this strategy.

Build your Facebook presence

This first one is a no-brainer. Every marketer (and pretty much everyone else) is trying to build their Facebook presence and get those likes. While there are plugins to do that on your own landing page, it's probably much more likely to, well, capture a like on Facebook's own site.

Social proof

The basic idea behind social proof is that if others do something, you're more likely to do it too.

No IT support needed

This is probably a bigger benefit if you work for a small company where resources are tight. With a good CMS, making a landing page on your own site *could* be easier, but since Facebook is aimed at the average consumer, it is pretty darn easy to use.

It's not a buy or bounce landing page

At the end of the day, Facebook is really a community. So, even if you don't get the conversion right away, at least you can get a new friend and nurture that relationship until she either comes to her senses and understands that you were "the one" all along … or decides to buy.

"It is easy to start a relationship with them at that moment," said Steven Van Belleghem, Managing Partner, InSites Consulting, and author of *The Conversation Manager*. "If they click the like button, we have the opportunity to maintain a conversation with them."

SERP domination

That search engine results page (SERP) real estate is valuable. Nowadays, you can take it up with more than just your homepage. Facebook can be one ally in that homesteading claim.

"For big brands, Facebook can be a powerful tool for asserting a little extra force on branded searches," Herndon Hasty, Associate Director, SEO, iProspect, said.

"Facebook pages tend to rank especially high for brand names and, with the right management, can expand to take up two-to-three positions on the first few pages of results. This allows brands to own more natural search real estate around their name, and to push any sites – such as affiliates or less-than-stellar reviews – further out of view of potential customers."

To really help dominate that SERP, Hasty has a few tips …

"We know that the degree to which a brand is shared and engaged in social media can affect its search rankings, and over time that will become an even more significant factor. Brands should always make sure to take care of the basics:

- Fill in every "about us" section
- Secure the brand in the URL
- Include links back to the main website wherever possible

Additionally, marketers should promote through:

- Frequent postings
- Link sharing
- Encourage sharing directly from their website

All in all, Facebook can provide, at minimum, good person-to-person exposure of the brand, and can potentially drive ranking higher."

Some drawbacks

Of course, there are also a few drawbacks to hosting a landing page on Facebook, including:

A hit to SEO

Herndon also pointed out that while links to a Facebook page can help you dominate a branded keyword SERP, any links you send to Facebook landing pages aren't pointing, and sending link juice, to your own pages.

No landing page optimization

While there are A/B testing capabilities for Facebook advertising, I don't know of any for actual Facebook pages and walls and the like that essentially make up your Facebook landing page. Without split testing, it's very hard to perform landing page optimization, which can drive significant conversion gains.

On your own site, your abilities to test and optimize are only limited by your imagination … and IT budget.

Terms and conditions

You're playing in Facebook's house and if they don't like what you've done, they can just take their ball and go home, thank you very much. If you run afoul of their guidelines, Facebook can tear down your wall.

Tactic #9. Understand your customers (and use that information to validate or clarify your value proportion)

In the MarketingExperiments Blog post, "Value Proposition: How to use social media to help discover why customers buy from you," Burstein said social media can be a valuable resource to help marketers discover what value they truly offer customers.

The key is to learn how to effectively listen and engage.

How to listen

The great thing about social media is you can be what message board aficionados derisively call a "lurker." You can passively observe the way your potential customers talk about your overall industry, your specific business, as well as your products and marketing campaigns behind your back.

Before social media, most of this information was secret. Someone bragging over a new way to use your product (and thus, a new value that you never thought of) over beer at a barbecue. A dissatisfied customer complaining that your competitor doesn't serve a niche that you fill so well, but rarely communicate.

Social media has brought all of these conversations out into the open.

Here are a few ideas about how to listen for value proposition triggers using social media:

- Set up searches for your brand and product names on Twitter, the same for your competitors, as well as searches about key hashtags and words customers might use to describe a problem your product solves

or category your product is in. You can do this manually in Twitter, but more easily in free programs like Tweetdeck or HootSuite. Of course, paid programs like Radian6 offer even more advanced options.

- Also note: You might want to try a few variations if your company or product name is commonly misspelled. There are no copy editors on Twitter. For example, the search query I have set up in Tweetdeck for MarketingExperiments is – "Marketing Experiments OR MktgExperiments OR MarketingExperiments" (@MktgExperiments is our Twitter handle, which explains the abbreviation).

- Join LinkedIn Groups and/or Facebook Groups that your ideal customers might use. How can you find these groups? Start by asking current customers what groups they are members of. Don't forget to join your competitors' groups or like their pages to see what their customers are saying. Really, the same could be said for old-school forums or message boards, but I don't think they really count as social media.

- Don't overlook Google Alerts. You can set up alerts using the same type of keywords as you did for Twitter in Step #1. Pay special attention to the "Type" field. Blogs, videos and discussions can be especially helpful. But the real-time search will likely be of limited value since Google dropped Twitter from that search – which is why the first bullet point is important.

How to engage

Once you've lurked enough, you've probably got some pretty good ideas for important elements of your value proposition. Yet, this is where it can get tricky. By engaging your audience, and this includes everything from actively sending a message out on social media to even just having a social media profile, you can't help but influence their response. This is known as "priming" in psychology. You can't avoid it, but it helps to be cognizant of this effect.

You must be enough of an outsider not to influence your research, yet get in well enough with your subjects to learn what's really going on. It helps to engage with your potential customers as from a (clearly labeled) personal account as well as a brand account as you will likely get different results.

A few ideas on how to engage your audience to flesh out value proposition triggers using social media:

At a very base level, do something. Anything. See what response you get.

For example, Zuzia Soldenhoff-Thorpe, Research Manager, MECLABS, found this interaction on a Facebook page where Happy Cup Frozen Yogurt Bar was able to check people's favorite flavors without influencing the outcome too heavily by asking a leading question. They simply announced what flavors they were offering in a given week:

The above example shows some passive engagement and the response. But, what about active engagement? Soldenhoff-Thorpe recommended simply asking customers what you want to know.

- You can do this on your Facebook page specifically about your brand.

- Remember, the more active you become, the more you're priming your audience, and the more skewed your response will be. But at this point, you're only engaging in qualitative research to get some ideas you wouldn't have thought of in the four corners of your office. Later, you should test with quantitative research.

How to use this information

What should you do with all of this information? Mandi Frishman, Marketing Manager, Make Me Social, recommended that you structure it around the customer first.

Build a comprehensive customer profile that includes data like:

- Tips about their sense of humor
- Information about their lifestyle
- What they value in life, their struggles
- Their concerns, their expectations

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She also suggested you document influencers in each market and note suggested conversation topics and tactics.

Following the social market analysis of the target market, Frishman suggested you begin a competitive analysis using similar tactics. Listen for:

- Missed opportunities and niche topics that your company may be overlooking
- Identify what messaging is resonating with the audiences
- What is driving engagement
- What questions people are asking and searching for

Tactic #10. Use contests for a variety of purposes

When it comes to social media, one of the most popular ways to use these platforms is as way to hold or promote contests and sweepstakes. These can be used for a variety of goals – and in fact, are often an effective tool to help achieve several major objectives at once, as discussed in the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "Social Media Marketing: 7 steps for using contests and sweepstakes to promote your brand."

"Some of the main benefits of a social media-based contest are fast time-to-market, immediate responses/results, low-cost and no-cost program options, and measureable ROI," said Sandra Fathi, President, Affect. "I have yet to find an organization – business-to-business or business-to-consumer – that would not benefit from some type of online contest."

While online sweepstakes and contests can help boost your social media following, they can help you meet other objectives as well.

"The goals of any marketing effort should align directly with business goals – and the same holds true for social media promotions," Fathi said.

She provided some example objectives:

- Accelerate social media adoption/participation
- Increase brand awareness
- Generate leads/sales
- Drive product/service usage
- Recognize or reward customers/prospects

However, sometimes it pays to think outside of the box.

"For example, we launched the New York Intern Project as a recruiting tool that also provided ancillary benefits, such as doubling our social media following, generating media coverage and new business opportunities with clients who were interested in hosting contests of their own," Fathi said.

For that project, Affect was seeking a public relations and social media intern for the summer in New York, so the audience pool was rather small and narrow. The team marketed through social media – Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn – and on message boards and forums for students, as well as outreach directly to schools across the country with communications programs.

It attracted 110 entrants, nearly 16,000 votes and more than 260,000 website visits. In addition, Facebook likes doubled, and all other social media presences benefited from increased traffic and participation.

Here are a few more resources to help give you some inspiration (and educational examples) of how to use social media contests in a variety of ways:

Taking advantage of Pinterest's soaring popularity:

Social Media Marketing: Michaels Stores increases Pinterest board followers by 86% with contest

Using Facebook for fan growth, even if you're a small shop with limited resources:

Social Media Marketing: Startup achieves 900% Facebook fan growth through sweepstakes

Launch a viral contest campaign targeting a coveted demographic:

Social Media Marketing: Viral sweepstakes targeting moms grows Facebook audience 4,488%

Lastly, here's some valuable insight about how customers feel about contests

Social Media Marketing: A look at contests from the customer's perspective

Useful Links and Resources:

MarketingSherpa Blog: Social Media Marketing: Can you compete with your customer's mom?

MarketingSherpa Blog: Social Media Marketing: How to use Facebook for customer engagement [Video]

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