

5 Steps to Creating and Executing a Successful Social Media Campaign

Integrating social media technologies into existing efforts can be an intimidating prospect for many companies. It may seem difficult and even dangerous for your corporate reputation and risky for your privacy and messaging control. However, the online world is already involved in how your business is perceived with or without your engagement, so it's important to join the discussion to ensure your voice is heard.

There's no one sure-fire social media solution to fit every company's needs. Your business and goals are unique, and a successful campaign must be tailored to those needs and those of your audience. Patience, planning and sticking with it are the elements of a successful social media presence.

Improving your company's online presence doesn't need to be difficult. By following a few best practices, you can create a valuable online resource for all of your company's stakeholders.

1. Set goals. Before getting started, you should set goals for what the program should achieve. Online communication includes more than just websites and blogs. The technology has evolved rapidly, and with it the complexity and depth of communication potential in these channels. It may be intimidating at first, but having a solid set of goals in mind before you get started will help guide the rest of the process.

Are you interested in extending your brand recognition? Do you want to improve sales? Are you recruiting members to your organization? Do you want to use the channel to monitor and assess your competition? Set realistic goals and allow enough time to reach them. Think of the impact of these efforts on your overall marketing, business development, customer relations and reputation management activities, and set your benchmarks accordingly. Doing this early will make the process much more efficient in time and cost.

2. Audit. Now that you have a clear direction, take a good look around. Before you buy a single book, allocate staff or make a large capital investment, you should audit the online space that affects your company. There are many online resources that are helpful—from something as simple as a search engine to companies that specialize in online and social media audits.

Even if your company already has an online presence, it is very important to gather information as a baseline so that you will later be able to measure impact. One of the most intriguing aspects of all online tools (and social media is no exception) is the ability to accurately collect data on how successful your program is and where you are coming up short.

Regardless of the scale, all audits can essentially be broken down into two basic pieces—what and who. What is the company doing now? What is being said? What part of the online space is most active in your company's focus area? Who is talking about you?

Who are the people who are influential in the communities that you want to be talking about you? Who are you trying to reach? Conducting research in these areas can give you new ideas as well as help you identify and avoid the mistakes others have made.

3. Plan. When you are armed with all the information you need and have clearly defined results that you want to achieve, it is time to consolidate them into a comprehensive plan of action.

Creation of an overall strategy reduces cost, increases effectiveness and allows you to tie these efforts into traditional outreach, marketing and communication efforts. This integration is key to the success of an online campaign. If online is treated as a thing unto itself, it will not be nearly as effective as if it is incorporated into the wider efforts.

When creating this plan, consider whether you have adequate knowledge internally or whether you need to bring in outside expertise, how long you would like the campaign to run and who on your staff will oversee the rollout and ongoing care and feeding. There are other considerations that affect the answers to these questions, such as the scope, budget and staff, and, as a result, it is often valuable to conduct this planning as part of a yearly business planning exercise.

4. Execute. Moving forward with a social media campaign is best done in stages. There is no real advantage to making a big splash by starting everything at once, so it is better to proceed at whatever pace is most comfortable to you and your company. Staggering the rollout of the campaign will also reduce up-front costs in both time and labor.

Another benefit from a rolling launch is that it allows for certain aspects of the campaign to be tuned to fit the needs and realities of the situation more easily. This is especially true if your campaign has multiple efforts both through traditional as well as online channels.

Determining how many resources (staffing and financial) need to be allocated for each component of the plan that you have put together will help to inform the timeline and more clearly outline the efforts required by the staff designated in managing the effort.

5. Train, empower and encourage. Often, companies that follow the above steps see the value, return on investment and efficiency of participating in the online media space, but they are not prepared to shoulder the cost of a partly or completely outsourced program. Assigning existing internal staff to the project is a very good way to keep costs manageable while maintaining or, in some instances, increasing the quality of the results.

Some existing staff members are already participating in social media. While it is not likely that they focus on your business, industry or related issues, it is important to know that there is some communication being done about your company by your employees. This is not usually a reason to fear—while there are instances where these activities have landed the company or employee in hot water, a large majority of these online conversations are neutral or positive about your organization.

The first reaction of many companies upon realizing that their employees are talking about them online is to try and stop all use of these tools through more restrictive policies. That is often a mistake, because with the proper training and suggested guidelines, these staff people are much more likely to be assets to your program rather than liabilities.

This form of communication is all about relationships. Social media is, at its core, about interacting with others online. No matter what your organization does, it is already the case that your employees interact a great deal with clients, customers, investors and competitors—where this interaction is taking place should not be a special source of concern. Just as it is in traditional channels, it is valuable to have multiple members of your staff engaged and active in these programs because the more exposure you get, positive interaction you encourage, and relationships you build, the better off your organization is—both online and offline.

It is essential to the success of these efforts that roles and responsibilities are indicated at the outset, and it is equally critical to give these active employees the encouragement, resources, time and support to participate.

If your organization takes the time to ask questions, prepare, realistically budget both time and finances and engage with the online community in an efficient manner, the chances of creating a strong social media program are dramatically increased. Too often, managers read something in a magazine or online about how a particular tool is greatly benefiting a particular company or industry and feel inclined to rush out and adopt that tactic expecting success.

This is most often a waste of effort and money. New technologies are constantly popping up with promises of quick returns on investment and effort with little need for foundational planning, but—just as in traditional media—there is no turnkey solution or silver bullet to communicating with an audience. The social media world is too broad and complicated for a one-size-fits-all approach.

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