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Interactive allows
you to kickstart
your social media
initiatives through
coaching and related
website enhancements

Social Media Basics: What Everybody Ought to Know About Social Media

By Nancy Cavanaugh

Can you relate to any of these statements?

1. You've signed up at LinkedIn, but still don't "get" how to connect with others.
2. You're receiving lots of friend requests that involve silly, frivolous games and invitations.
3. You've got a profile on Facebook, but can't figure out how to develop a professional business presence there.
4. You've heard about Twitter but think it's too time-consuming and you're not sure about how to use it to meet your business objectives.
5. You suspect that there are unspoken rules of etiquette on social media sites involving whether or not to follow, reply, or unfollow. How do you learn the "right" way to use Twitter and Facebook?
6. You want to delegate some of the work to a "virtual assistant," but don't know what that person could be doing.
7. You have some understanding of Twitter and Facebook, but need some coaching to speed up the learning process.

If you are somewhat familiar with social media giants like Twitter and Facebook, then you need to understand that for every day you delay in figuring them out, you could be losing additional website traffic, subscribers, blog readers, sales and bottom-line profits.

As a business owner or entrepreneur, you have more than enough work on your plate already. The day is a blur; you handle email, phone calls, decisions, troubleshooting and more. And when the day is over, you realize that you still haven't planned for these additional, multiple income streams that can help secure long-term financial security.

So how do you begin? How can you speed up the learning curve, get a plan and monetize your social networking efforts?

Why can't this wait?

Statistics bear out that you must get active *now*.

1. Facebook has over 200 million active members and is predicted to top 500 million by 2011 or sooner.

2. Twitter, the fastest-growing social network, has 7,000,000 members and is growing by tens of thousands a week. It grew by 640% in 2008 and now averages 11 million visits per month.
3. According to The Social Media Industry Report (March 2009), the median age for survey participants involved in social media was 40-49. They represent highly educated professional people who are small business owners and employees working at a company. Though the demographic varies slightly for giants like Facebook and Twitter, these people include your target market(s), your industry experts, your peers, and your competitors.

You should be building a team, making your plan, and implementing proven strategies and techniques. For every day you haven't spent figuring out social media marketing, you're losing out on tens of thousands of dollars.

If you're still frustrated and feel trapped by time, then get a grip and read on because here's where it gets exciting. I will show you the basics and help you get up and running in no time.

First, understand what's happening.

There's been a seismic event in the Web 2.0 world that's called "Social Media." Unlike the general public perception, social media didn't happen overnight. Social networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook have been around for several years. Only when major influencers like Oprah Winfrey announced she'd signed up on Twitter in Spring of 2009 did the stampede really begin.

This new, interactive form of communication evolved from blogging, which allowed website visitors to post comments and engage in discussions with others. If the blog had an active moderator, then that person had to manage comments and discussions, as well as contribute his/her own content.

Blogs were a breakthrough online tool for businesses because they:

1. Tap into the thoughts and concerns of prospects and customers;
2. Drive the sales process by helping to answer product and service-related questions;
3. Build a sense of community among participants;
4. Allow direct access to a known expert in the business (where available) whose advice is sought after and respected;
5. Increase accessibility of key players (industry experts); and
6. Facilitate communication with media outlets (newspapers, radio and TV).

As you might suspect, a blog takes time and effort to manage. From the corporate perspective, a blog requires careful planning in order to justify implementation in concrete terms, i.e., increased traffic statistics, additional qualified sales leads, closed sales, and actual ROI.

Why is timing so important

When LinkedIn and Facebook were first launched around 2006, many business people were confused because traditionally, their online efforts had been geared primarily towards sales and marketing, not networking. Signup was easy enough; but then what?

Opportunities for networking have always existed in both the real and virtual worlds, but when Twitter's home page asked the simple (and innocuous) question, "What are you doing?," most first-time visitors really didn't get it! "How can writing about what I had for breakfast possibly help my business?" was the common confused reaction.

Moreover, social media sites are a new breed that seem to defy traditional means of analyzing how to start, develop successful tactics, and measure results. Networking in the past may have involved playing a golf game with a client (and using that to close a business deal) or joining business organizations like BNI, the Jaycees, Rotary Club—even a professional organization—and getting the word out about your business by attending meetings, seminars, and special events. Face-to-face networking is a traditional form of engagement that has been time tested and workable for anyone motivated to learn best practices.

Social Media: a better way

The real beauty of social networking is that a moderator is no longer required. People who are hungry for "face time" with others but don't have a lot of time to spare can focus their efforts on networking with others in short bursts. So social media gives busy business owners and cubicle-bound workers just that.

In addition, social media offers better chances of connecting with others you might never have met otherwise who might want to buy something, partner with you in a joint venture, become a raving fan—who knows what else?

Even better than blogging, social media networks offer you opportunities for great visibility for your business if you...

1. Post your individual profile to attract colleagues and like-minded individuals;
2. "Micro-blog" on Twitter to get your point across succinctly. These days people want short bursts of information, not long blog posts. So if you can offer valuable content in 140 characters or less, you'll get noticed.
3. Use keyword phrases related to your business. It's not generally known that optimizing your profiles and tweets results in higher search engine rankings and increased "findability" for your website, blog, and other online components. It's true. By its very nature, social media involves link-building, composing/editing profiles, and sharing tweets, all of which are indexed in search engines like Google.

Are you beginning to see the possibilities?

Let's get started

If you plan to use social media for your business, then you have to go in with some idea of the “right” way to begin.

Guidelines for ramping up

1. **Decide whether you want to present yourself or your brand.** There really is a difference. If you're a consultant or sole proprietor, you still have to think deeply about your user name, because it's not only a login name—it's the name that people will use to find you. On Twitter, it actually becomes part of the URL and will be visible wherever you promote your Twitter page. Example: <http://www.twitter.com/NancyCavanaugh> contains my user name that makes me easy to find. Choosing a username is like choosing a domain name; get it wrong and you'll cripple your ability to gather followers and build a reputation.

This may be less of an issue on Facebook, where the original purpose was to attract people, not corporate entities. However, even Facebook has conceded the need for additional pages to promote any business associated with a name. Did you know that creating that business-related page on Facebook can lead to extra traffic, increasing SEO rankings, and overall enhanced visibility for your name/brand? More on that later.

2. **Try to get a name as closely associated with you as possible.** Early adopters were lucky enough to get their own names without any additional numbers or letters. Sort of like Coca Cola arriving late for its domain name and finding it was already taken. Somehow www.coke777.com just doesn't make it easy to be found.
3. **Spend some time creating a complete profile.** This rule applies to LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter alike. Think about how you want to present yourself, your background and qualifications, and your experience. Your profile is part old-school resume but more importantly, also includes specific keyword phrases to help optimize your credentials and make you easier to find. Again, a little known fact that's true! So it really is worth the time spent putting together a succinct, well-developed description of who you are. In Twitter, you are forced to adhere to a 160-character limit, so you've got to communicate who you are in the fewest, most descriptive words possible. And just like your English teacher used to say, don't forget to check your spelling and grammar. Many people on LinkedIn in particular are well-educated and literate, and any sloppiness only implies that you either can't be bothered to write a polished profile that reflects your value or worse yet, you don't care to even try.
4. **Two words on using your picture—do it!** Because people are hungry for face time with others—even in a virtual network—they need to see your face. Don't underestimate the value of uploading a business casual picture of yourself that, when even viewed as a thumbnail, is close enough and

- clear enough to reveal your face, especially your eyes. In the past, businessmen prided themselves in being able to judge their peers by looking into their eyes and shaking their hand. While we can't shake hands in the virtual world (at least, not yet), eye contact is still important to people in trying to decide to follow you, connect with you, or join your group.
5. **Protect your privacy.** Some social networks walk you through the process of creating your profile. Answering questions about your age, marital status, address, and other personal information (including religious and political affiliations) may be detrimental if you make that information public. The majority of social media participants are genuinely interested in honest, up-front networking activities; however, inevitably there are a few misguided individuals who will take advantage of that information. Better to exercise discretion, just as you would in your real-world everyday contact with strangers.
 6. **Did you know you can upload a custom background in Twitter** for your profile page? Don't even think about using any of the sample backgrounds and colors. The background space in your profile represents valuable screen real estate for promoting your business. It makes up for 160-character limit for your profile description. So unlike LinkedIn or Facebook, your background gives you the chance to have it all.

But you're going to have to plan for it. When someone sees your thumbnail picture as part of someone else's Twitter page and decides to click on it to see your profile, they want to learn more about you. A good background can give them that all-important first impression of your business. Use a second, bigger photo of yourself in the upper left corner to add variety, if you wish. Put your logo at the top left to promote your brand. In the available space to the left of the Twitter feed, you could add an introduction bar that includes welcoming text, key contact information, and links to where they can learn more.

Make sure the color scheme in the background matches the right sidebar, which can be adjusted using web-friendly colors. If you don't have the ability to create a Twitter background yourself, hire a graphic designer like Cavanaugh Interactive. You can view my own profile at <http://www.twitter.com/NancyCavanaugh> to get some ideas about how to present yourself and/or your business. Backgrounds are reasonably priced and more than worth their value in projecting the kind of professional image your business requires.)

The "learn more" sidebar is absolutely critical because you're limited to only 140 characters per tweet. You can't possibly convey your business in this timeline; it was never intended for that. So you've got to have a way to send casual viewers and followers to your own pages to subscribe to your services, click on ads, and buy your products.

You need to think of that sidebar as an ad. It's an image; yes—it's not clickable and not search-engine friendly. That's a huge drawback. But if you treat it like more than just a background image, then you can begin to build a powerful statement about what your business has to offer.

Are you beginning to see the possibilities of showcasing your business and increasing its all-important visibility?

Get with a plan

So you've finished the signup process with the social media network(s) of your choice and created your profile(s). Now what?

At this point, there is no right or wrong way of engagement. That doesn't mean that anyone is free to use heavy-handed tactics in an attempt to sell. Repeat attempts to do so will be interpreted as a form of spam, and you will be avoided.

Social networking involves building professional relationships in very much the same way credibility and trust have been built traditionally; it's a process that takes time. Overt attempts to push a sale early in the process are not appreciated; in fact, you'll find yourself shunned because no one wants to follow or connect with a pushy salesperson. Got it?

Likewise, what you do in social media isn't necessarily driven by marketing campaigns so much as the ability to communicate effectively with your market. Do you have a mission statement? Before proceeding, review your goals and make sure everyone involved in the social media initiative understands it.

You need to be helpful and friendly in your networking as a general rule. But planning a strategy for how you engage in any social media network will depend upon several factors:

1. Your business industry;
2. Your marketing objectives; and
3. Your own personality.

Get past the stumbling blocks

When I first signed up at LinkedIn and Twitter, my biggest challenge was finding people to follow. My priorities included...

1. People I already know;
2. People I want to reconnect with; and
3. Industry experts.

People I already know

In the beginning, there should be a lot of listening to others. There are business leaders and there are business followers, and social media networkers are no exception. Locating people you already know and identifying conversations taking place that are useful to your market community is an excellent starting point. Did you know that you can even use keywords and phrases to identify and rank key conversation influencers on any topic?

Following those you already know also allows you to expand connections to others who are connected to the original contact. Find out if they're influencers; i.e., what they're talking about and who they are engaging with. As you learn more about your market community, you'll also learn what they're talking about, what impacts them, as well as pick up some surprising insights into their opinions and behaviors.

People I wanted to reconnect with

These illusive individuals can be a great source of information and even revenue. They may be former customers, or champions of a competing product, or simply be impermeable to your marketing message(s). If they are influencers, their impact on your revenue stream can be significant. Isn't it worth the attempt to engage them and find out what's on their minds?

Industry experts

Getting a "feel" for the tone and style—the sense of the people driving a discussion—is of vital importance. Once you understand the dialog, you can begin to follow the influencers in your market. If you feel you can make an important contribution to a discussion, pick the right moment and go for it. And if that industry expert replies, you've hit the jackpot! On Twitter, that means that all the influencer's followers will see your name and chances are, some of them will look at your profile to learn more. Some of them may become your followers or be influencers themselves.

See how it works? In the long run, if you can keep your finger on the pulse of conversation, you can eventually work your way into the natural flow and have a growing, exponential impact.

Seven user tips

1. **Learn to listen, then find your voice.** Traditionally, company marketing tactics involved "out-bound" marketing in the form of direct mail, newsletters, sales calls, etc. Social media has turned this practice on its head because it encourages "inbound" queries that occur as the result of relationship building. Many businesses struggle with this idea because it involves giving up control of the process. They want to participate, develop tactics, and measure ROI, but the whole playing field is so alien that many aren't sure what will work for them. In my own case, I simply "listened" a lot at first in order to learn. I was patient, but also opportunistic.

2. **Be careful about how you converse.** A professional tone is necessary at all times. Even if you're replying to a client who's also a friend, resist the temptation to change your tone to one that's inappropriate for business. That includes bad language, rude jokes or innuendo, gossip, and character or competitive slurs. It's simply a matter of common sense because you never know who will see your comments.
3. **Integrate your social media with SEO.** Many social media newbies are completely unaware of the huge impact that social media activity has on SEO. Think about it: Compared to a static website, social media networking involves providing continually fresh content, extensive page inventory based on blog posts, content expansion through comments, and incoming links from other blogs. All of these components make up the perfect recipe for getting great exposure via major search engines. Because SEO in social media is so conducive to great exposure for your business, your role in maximizing optimization is to focus on topics relevant to your business, then write your content using tested keyword phrases to increase your SEO rankings across all social media touch points. Some creativity is necessary because you don't want to only communicate with search engine robots; your top priority is communicating with *people*. Make sure your content appeals to human readers, while at the same time building SEO for the keyword phrases you are trying to build rankings for.
4. **Engage your audience.** Once you establish who the influencers are, you need to continually engage and develop relationships with them through dialogs. Leading practitioners estimate that only 1% of the total audience in social media actively engages in public participation. The rest are "lurkers" who observe, but don't choose to develop a voice. On Twitter, it is estimated that if you had more than 80 followers, you were in the top 10% of twitterers. That being said, your role in active engagement—providing valuable content, contributing to worthwhile discussions, offering the benefit of your expertise and experience—can have surprising and unexpected results. You need stay honest and forthright, to go with the flow, and keep in mind that your contributions are being watched by a largely invisible audience.
5. **Print your Twitter and Facebook names on your business cards** and other marketing materials. Add those links in your signature at the bottom of your emails. When business people first published their website address the same way, they quickly discovered that people would follow the link to their site. No exception for social media either; it's a fast, no-cost way to publicize yourself as a social networker and business expert in your field.
6. **Track your engagements with influencers** and review their responses. In other words, build an ongoing relationship that's mutually beneficial over time.

7. **Your return is commensurate with the effort** you put into social media. Experienced social media marketers report that although they're spending up to 20 hours a week working on social media, the rewards are worthwhile. Currently there is a "gold rush" going on in social media, where businesses are searching for their marketing communities, engaging them, establishing niches for their expertise, finding common themes, keeping up with issues, responding to customers—all meant to achieve their overall objectives.

Whether you're looking for increased visibility for your business, more qualified referrals, increased traffic/subscribers/opt-in list signups, new partnerships, better SEO rankings, more sales—the possibilities are all there—you need to begin to sort out how this powerful communications channel can work for you today.

There's an old saying: "What you don't know can't hurt you." Not so with social media. The longer you hesitate, the more you stand to lose.

About Nancy Cavanaugh Social Media Consultant, Senior Web Designer



Nancy is known to her clients as the “Web Madam.” She has designed and developed websites since 1995—the year the web went commercial. She specializes in custom websites for small businesses and entrepreneurs. You can see recent website samples at <http://www.cavanaughinteractive.biz/corporate-nonprofit-websites.html>.

Nancy is also a business coach who is passionate about training others in social media networking. A former teacher, she trained adult classes in Dreamweaver for five years at the Wisconsin Macromedia classroom.

Nancy has also written an article on working how to work with a freelance designer called “Choosing a Communications Designer.”

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