

**EXTENSION****AGEC-638**

Social media marketing for small businesses: Best practices

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Social media can be a beneficial marketing asset for your business. It can complement traditional marketing strategies and help to expand your customer base. Employing some best practices can make your efforts more effective and give you a larger return on investment. This fact sheet provides some best practices when using social media to market your business, including:

- Identifying your business' benefits to the customer
- Choosing your competitive advantage
- The 80/20 rule
- Photo usage
- Customer communication and creating community

Identifying your business' benefit to the customer

Be a solution for your customers:

To stand out, show how your product or service solves a problem. Explain common frustrations and how your business helps to fix them can showcase to customers why they should choose your product or service (Roggio, 2009). Identify the benefits your product or service will give your customers. Show your expertise. Use storytelling to demonstrate why you have authority on the topic. Perhaps you created a product or service to solve an issue, and after successfully solving the issue, you want to share that solution with the world.

For example, imagine you are a busy traveler and are trying to stay under the liquids limit while flying, so you create a lotion bar using beeswax to limit carry-on liquids. Through social media, you can demonstrate the issue using text and photos during your next trip. Then, the product can be introduced as a solution. Next thing you know, friends and family are asking for these lotion bars as well, and your business is born. You can also ask for customer feedback and share their stories as well.

Be authentic, be approachable:

Social media is often used to portray the positive-only side of life. Being genuine while representing your brand will allow you to be relatable when engaging with customers. It can also create an authentic connection. Showing empathy for your customers' experiences while acknowledging their concerns can help to develop a loyal customer base.

Being approachable creates a friendly atmosphere, allowing customers to feel like they can reach out, ask questions and engage with your business. Key aspects of approachability include prompt responses, showing appreciation, being yourself and being transparent (Licano, 2019).

Be yourself:

An appeal of social media is that it creates a more intimate connection when compared to traditional marketing. Letting your unique personality shine through is one way to add value and engage with customers. Do not be afraid to be human and use humor, when appropriate. This can allow you to connect on a personal level (Hull, 2022).

Be transparent:

Transparency in using social media for your business can encompass everything from seeing behind the scenes to being open about the realities of running a business. Perhaps you hosted a sale or black Friday deal, and orders are plentiful. This can provide the opportunity to give your customers a glimpse into what running the business entails. Showing a stack of packaged

orders while thanking them for their support will let them know you are working hard to get products to them in a timely manner. Running a business is tough and can be stressful, but it is important to focus on the positive as much as possible and avoid venting or complaining.

Responding to customers

Responding to customers within a reasonable timeframe is the easiest way to keep customers happy and keep an issue or complaint from deteriorating rapidly. For businesses, it is considered reasonable to respond within 24 hours on business days. You can set an expectation for your customers by posting your business hours of operation and any specific customer service hours you plan to keep, such as on weekends when able. Be sure your response is not just timely, but thoughtful.

Showing customer appreciation is another great way to engage with authenticity. Thank your followers for their comments, likes and shares by responding to their input in your feed. This could be as simple as thanking for their input. Or, you could respond in other ways such as “I’m so happy you’re loving our product. Thanks for the support,” or, “The meal you made with our beef looks delicious, thank you!”. Engaging in this way will help to develop the community you are working to create.

Choose your competitive advantage

- Did you have a career within a certain field before going into business for yourself?
- Did you design a unique product?
- Did you assemble a highly-qualified team to launch your business?

Determine what your competitive advantage is and showcase it. This will allow customers to quickly and easily identify the benefits your business offers them (Lappe, 2013). Once you have determined what your competitive advantage is, make it front and center. Use customer feedback that highlights your competitive advantage. For example, if you offer a service and have an exceptional team, highlight your team members and their individual expertise. Amplify further by sharing customer testimonials that demonstrate how your team has helped them.

Photo usage

The role of photos and lifestyle imagery:

Using high-quality photos on your posts, even from your phone, will elevate your brand. For tips on smartphone photography, please visit [Fact Sheet AECL-9809](#). As the saying goes, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” When it comes to the visual nature of most social media platforms, this adage could not be more important. High-quality images go a step further by communicating an attention to detail and pride in your work (Ryser, 2024). In addition to demonstrating a level of professionalism, high-quality photos are more shareable and more likely to be shared (Li & Xie, 2020). Even with a small marketing budget and a smartphone, businesses can create and share high-quality images.

Images can provoke an emotional response and connection. Lifestyle images portray people using a product or service in real-life and in everyday settings (Dopson, 2024). This kind of marketing on social media allows your customer to relate by imagining themselves using the product or service. Compared to traditional product photos (which are often pictures of just a product against a plain background), these photos contain people, are more candid and are taken in authentic setting.

Customer communication and creating community

The 80/20 Rule:

The 80/20 Rule, when applied to content marketing, means 80% of your time should be focused on informing, educating and entertaining; and 20% should be focused on selling or promoting your brand (Barnatt-Smith, 2021). Providing value-driven content in the form of informational and educational posts is another way to demonstrate your expertise and build trust with your audience. This will help to keep your customers engaged. Of course you need to sell your product or service to stay in business, but being overly focused on promotion can be off putting to customers. Ask your customers to share what information resonates with them and create content that addresses their pain points or questions. By doing this, you are focusing more on building a relationship with your customers, which also demonstrates authenticity and builds loyalty.



Figure 1. Traditional product photo.



Figure 2. Lifestyle photo.

Celebrate your customers and community:

Everyone likes to feel appreciated. As a business owner, you're valued when someone chooses your product or service. Show your gratitude by recognizing and celebrating your customers and the community you've built. This helps create a positive image and strengthens customer loyalty (Pinkham, 2023).

Here are a few ways you can show customer appreciation.

- Simply thank them! Post a message thanking your customers and community for their support. Respond to comments with thank-you notes and personalized messages.
- Re-share their posts. Did a customer make a positive post about your business? Re-share it to your platform, thanking them. You may consider sharing outside the standard main page as a reel or story depending on the platform.
- Reward them with a special offer. Offer a discount or an additional gift or service for a limited time. Go a step further and include them in a drawing for products or services if they like and mention a post.

Ask for reviews:

You don't know what you don't know. Ask your customers for feedback and reviews. Let them know you are available (Pinkham, 2023). If customers provide complaints or constructive criticism, do not get defensive. Respond thoughtfully and thank them for their feedback. Use it as a learning tool, work to provide a solution and follow up with them.

Perhaps your customers are looking for you to share more in-depth information about a certain topic or are more interested in a certain aspect of your business. Knowing this will allow you to focus your efforts on things that matter most to your customer base.

Different social media platforms provide different ways to collect feedback. On most platforms you can post a survey link, post a poll or ask for direct messages.

In conclusion

Using social media for your business can offer a new way to reach customers. First, create a clear message and identify the benefits your business will offer customers. If you are offering a solution, show empathy for the problem in an authentic way. Identify your competitive advantage and showcase it. Use the 80/20 Rule by spending 80% of your time informing, educating and entertaining, and 20% selling your product or service. Taking high-quality images, even with your phone, can go a long way to assist with your marketing efforts. Show your product or service in action. Lastly, do not forget to celebrate your customers, show appreciation and ask for feedback. By employing some best practices, you can avoid social media mistakes and strategically work to increase sales and your customer base.

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