

Social media is business **Virtual reach, real profits**



Businesses are wising up to the enormous possibilities afforded by the strategic use of social media. Online communication tools bring with them endless opportunities for businesses to strengthen their corporate identity, promote products, and improve customer services and public relations. Social networks can host customized applications and widgets designed to achieve corporate objectives through digital means.

BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

"Social media networks have become the most powerful business communication tool. They are capable of delivering everything to everybody," said *Karim Atallah*, marketing coordinator at Add Mind hospitality services. When used well, social media can be an enormous asset to a business' marketing and communication. *Rasha Rteil*, exchange manager, digital strategy levant at MindShare said: "The Internet has become social – it relies on social content, social searches, and the social graph to propagate." For businesses, the social aspect of social media makes it a potentially far-reaching marketing tool, enabling real-time customer service, the accessing of potential new customers, brand and reputation management, and sales opportunities. Social media has become a business application in itself, said *Ayman Itani*, founder and CEO of Thinkmedia Labs. Different social media vary in their approaches, target audiences, and end results. So before engaging in an active online presence, a company should assess its targets and explore which social media best fits the bill. "Social networks are like the wheels on a car. They're efficient together and complement each other," said *Walid Hage*, digital account manager at Apps2You. Whether promoting a service, launching a product, or supporting an existing plan, a customized digital widget can fulfill almost every communication need.

CLASSIC FAN PAGES

Creating a regular Facebook page is the classic first step in utilizing social media for business purposes, said Hage. Gathering

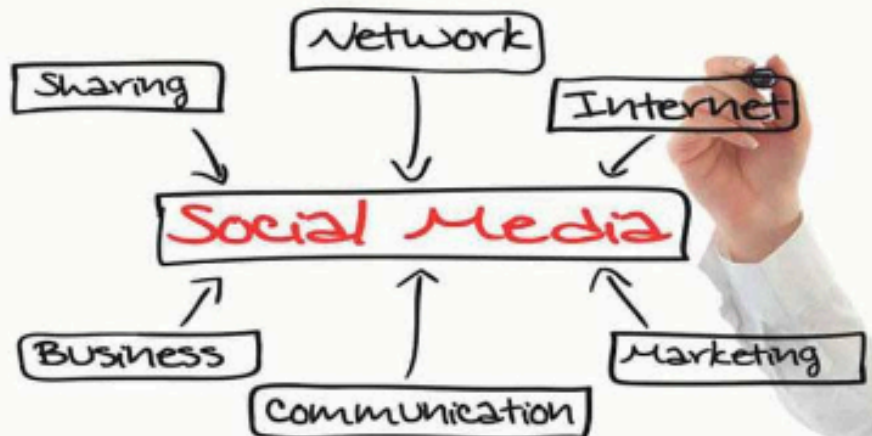
them on Facebook." Social media is simply replacing print advertisements. "Instead of publishing a 'Hire Lebanese' advertisement in a newspaper for example, we can create a free Facebook page and get thousands of hits on our website," said Mogharbel

CORPORATE STRATEGY

"We consider social media a very powerful tool for professionals and we consider it very seriously within our business development," said MTC's Khater. Even though using social media for business is not yet matured within the local market, "we're entering slowly but surely," said *Nada Hawi*, marketing manager at Debbas Lighting. Currently, employing social media is a tactical tool, but soon it will be endorsed as part of the whole business strategy of the company, said Hawi. "Twenty percent of the corporate strategy will be allocated to social media, since we're seeking to broaden interaction with clients," she said. "It has to be endorsed and aligned within the whole business strategy," said Dfouni. The sector's development has been impressive. "In less than five years, companies with no social media presence won't even exist," said Khater. BLF, alongside their social networking strategy, have created a Social Media Unit, dedicated to handling all social media tasks.

WEBSITES

With the emergence of the social web, some companies have started to doubt whether their websites still play a valuable role. Business cards are beginning to boast Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook usernames, as opposed to domain names. "Websites remain the best source for detailed information, whereas social media are the best way to spread any news speedily," said Atallah. Rizk said that for BLF, websites are the bank's catalogue where all corporate information is posted. She explained that individuals visiting websites are searching for information, whereas with social media, it's the bank who's hunting 'followers'. "People seeking information from our website need us. It's definitely the opposite when it comes to social media, where it's up to us to reach out for likers and followers," she said. However, websites can benefit from social media. "Websites can integrate the core functions of Facebook and drive growth and



interaction on any site through Facebook login and Social Plugins. It's the easiest form of registering users and bringing them to the brand's social platforms," said Rteil. Consequently websites and social media channels maintain a different Internet presence, varying components of the same system, said Itani.

MANAGING SYSTEMS

With so much activity going on in social media, trying to manage a business's online presence can become quite overwhelming. There are a handful of top management tools for assisting in measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of social media, said Dfouni. SproutSocial is one of the tools on the market. It allows a company to monitor and manage Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn channels. They offer a free 30-day trial, followed by a \$39 per month fee for the Small Biz solution. Raven Tools is another web-based social media management tool that seeks to maximize the benefits a company can reap from their social media platform. It's an advanced solution that's commonly used by agencies seeking integration, and it assists with search engine optimization as well. White labeling features are also available. HootSuite and TweetDeck are two other efficient social media management tools.

THIRD PARTY ADVISORY

Social networking is growing and evolving at breakneck speed. Since it's a critical and volatile market, old rules no longer apply and a misstep could lead to the equivalent of a marketing disaster. In some cases, specialized third parties are needed. "In a business which is growing ever more innovatively, resorting to technology

associated with real-time digital media consumption requires the expertise of parties who are exceptionally skilled in technology such as, augmented reality and 3D media implementation," said Rteil. Dfouni said simple tasks such as managing content and regular fan pages can be done in-house, but when it comes to sophisticated kits and widgets, they require a professional touch. Dedicated social media companies have the appropriate expertise to achieve the desired results. Digital agencies are a must, said Rteil. Expert consultants understand the social culture and landscape. They are aware of the most successful techniques and processes for engaging the online masses. They create social strategies that fit each business's specific needs.

BUT REMEMBER...

Without an explicit social media policy, businesses using social media risk incurring some potentially dangerous side effects. "Jumping into social media without a strategy or advice, and with insufficient knowledge could certainly have a negative impact on the whole business," said Itani. Dfouni said that having a badly maintained Facebook page is even worse than not having one at all. Any deficiencies in communication consistency will have damaging results. Each step should be measured carefully. Once a business has become 'social' it instantly becomes more exposed.

Reported by Rana Freifer

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▶ L0612-92 Patrick R. Dailey: Social Media and Business Strategy

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