

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.

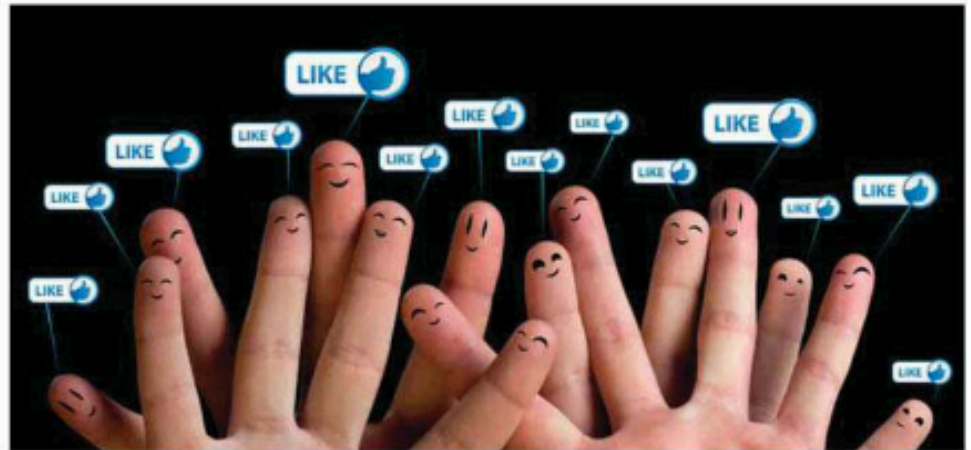
CLASSIC FAN PAGES

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

'likers' on Facebook and 'followers' on Twitter is a crucial concern for every company that goes social. When it comes to business expansion, brand awareness, and client engagement the greater the pool is, the bigger the impact. "A brand, a service, or even a whole company is perceived as well-established once it gains likers and followers," said *Badeeh Abla*, creative director at NoBrand Holding. Banque Libano-Française (BLF) launched its Facebook page in 2010, in a social media campaign aimed at increasing loyalty and augmenting the bank's reputation. *Tania Rizk*, communications director at BLF, said they are doing very well in terms of fans, having reached over 3,000 likes. Facebook pages allow for interaction between a company and visitors to the page through comments and posts. Events can also be instantly listed, spreading company news effectively and at no cost. The 'viral' nature of Facebook means any updates are flashed before the eyes of a very wide audience.

GAMES

Social media's popularity is centered on leisure and interaction, and businesses have to develop their online marketing strategies in line with these concepts. Interactive games are among the most popular tools for doing so. "They're fun, friendly, challenging, and fresh," said *Rteil*. Some 80 percent of Facebook's active members are between 18-24 years old. "They should always be kept in mind," said *Abla*, "as they are all potential clients." Games are a great tool for attracting young people while raising brand awareness and engaging 'likers.' *Almaza* launched the first local successful game, with impressive results. To build hype and unite beer drinkers, the company developed the *Almaza Social Game 'Ihtiyat'*. The game was exceedingly popular, said *Marc Dfouni*, CEO of *Eastline Marketing*, the company behind the project. *Almaza* benefited from a highly successful campaign, with over 32,000 full database registrations to the *Ihtiyat* game. The game increased brand exposure and affinity and generated great visibility and an unprecedented viral buzz. It increased *Almaza's* page 'likes' by 300 percent. BLF has also used Facebook games to increase awareness and engagement. As part of the bank's partnership with the



UNDP to promote and finance eco-friendly projects, BLF planted an animated tree on its Facebook page. "By adding a leaf to the tree, the liker could endorse the green attitude, while being introduced to the bank's services and products," said *Rizk*. She said the bank's strategy is to shift these 'likers' into potential customers. Inviting friends to join the game raises site traffic and spreads awareness and viral engagement.

COMPETITIONS

Social media competitions are also used to win over new audiences. They provide an exciting way of broadcasting messages about brands and products to a large number of potential new customers. "Competitions raise brand awareness and are a very good support for marketing campaigns," said *Dfouni*. Competitions can be as simple as polls conducted on a Facebook page. Poll apps allow a company (or individual user) to ask a question with several optional answers. Likers answer and the app shows the percentages voting for each answer. It can be a useful way of collecting customer feedback and gauging satisfaction, a kind of consumer survey. 'My Crest Smile' was a competition led by toothpaste maker *Crest* to find the most beautiful smile in Lebanon. The winner was promised to feature on the cover of *Femme Magazine*. The competition was widely subscribed to and was a successful and engaging marketing campaign. *Huggies* held the 'Greatest Hug of all' competition, aimed at young mothers. The company used a Facebook competition, focusing on their target audience. They invited mothers to have photos taken of themselves and their

babies hugging in *Huggies* booths and then enter them into the online competition, where their family and friends could then go and vote for their picture to award their the title. Again, brand exposure was enormous.

TAG ME

Tagging Yourself is a Facebook application which can be effectively used to raise brand awareness and increase website traffic, said *Dfouni*. It creates a user-brand connection and prompts product purchase. *Stolichnaya* opted for this approach when it launched its new *Stoli Gold*. In order to generate a substantial online following and to improve fan engagement the company bridged the gap between offline and online media by distributing "Tag Yourself" cards in pubs and restaurants across town. Photos by a professional photographer would be uploaded to *Stolichnaya's* Facebook page and drinkers are encouraged to tag themselves in their photos. To secure fan retention a sweepstake was then developed. This initiative put *Stolichnaya* in direct contact with its clients and gave the company insight into their lifestyles and habits. The brand reaped excellent results from the marketing campaign which created a considerable pool of Facebook page fans and increased brand exposure and affinity.

COUPONS AND GROUP BUYING

Offering discounts on products is usually a sure way to grab customers' attention. Distributing coupons via social media achieves several goals: It attracts clients to a product, increases site traffic, and can raise in-store walk-ins and purchases. Coupons advertise the business and help establish customer relationships. They can also be used to stimulate interest in new or slow-selling products. *Dfouni* said *Malik's*

Comments and posts create interaction between company and clients

Bookstore developed a system whereby anyone 'liking' their page on Facebook would be issued a coupon which would then give them a 20 percent discount redeemable on purchases made in the store. Another approach is a group buying site, which is a deal-of-the-day website that features discounted gift certificates used for purchases at businesses, generally in local markets. People usually sign up to receive notice of these coupons via their Facebook account. *Makhsom.com*, with 16,000 likers, is a local group-buying site. On a daily basis, the website offers several deals and discounts on multiple products and services. *Antoun Abou Zeid*, general manager of the website, said they are not specifically working on 'selling' these discount coupons via Facebook. Rather they are using it as medium to raise awareness and their website's traffic.



THE MIGHTY TWEET

Whereas businesses have already adopted and grown comfortable with Facebook, Twitter appears to still be unknown territory for most. "Twitter can be a great real-time engagement tool when used methodically," said Rteil. *Nadim Khater*, chief commercial officer at MTC Touch, said: "It acts as a basic assistant in our customer service process, as we use followers' tweets to help them with their enquiries." Tweets are brief and straight to the point. They allow for concise and focused interaction, he said. "We developed a Twitter interaction process in order to be able to reply to every enquiry in less than two hours." Twitter also provides powerful search features that present opportunities for monitoring people's responses to brands and products. By its very nature Twitter is a 'light' application which makes it ideal for use from mobile devices. The majority of 'Tweeters' tweet with Smartphones, allowing brands to put their company message straight into a consumer's pocket.

YOUTUBE

YouTube is increasingly being used as a business tool. It is a platform for demonstrating expertise, sharing knowledge, marketing products, and connecting with customers. "We have developed a YouTube channel dubbed MTC Touch TV which broadcasts all our campaigns and supports our services," said Khater. BLF also has its own YouTube channel. The bank posts all its products and services advertisements to YouTube. Rizk said they are taking this approach very seriously and are continuously updating their channel. They're even adding older videos in order to build and maintain the bank's identity and ethos. Once engaged in the YouTube community, a company can interact by leaving comments and uploading video responses to topics related to the business or industry. Special features such as annotations, language options, and quick capture are additional options. Companies can use YouTube's promotional strategy tools, like tagging and forming groups.

LINKEDIN UTILITY

LinkedIn is still the forerunner of social recruiting sites. Social recruiting utilizes social networks to find the best candidate for any open positions. While the past few years have seen the rise of job boards like *jobs.com.lb* or *bayt.com*, the growing prominence of social networks has transformed the way businesses build their teams. "LinkedIn is a serious corporate social kit. It's used by major banks and agencies for job profiling. It's a mainstream recruiting tool," said Rteil. Detailed personal information contained in profiles, from job history to interests, allows businesses to use social networking sites to target a specific audience or skill set they want to. LinkedIn helps companies locate passive job candidates that might be perfect for the job but unaware of the vacancy. Job boards are mostly used by people who are proactively looking for positions. It's a low-cost method of finding high-quality



candidates. Premium subscriptions, which cost around \$100 per month, guarantee professional search capability and access to detailed CVs. Custom searches are among the best tools to recruit socially. LinkedIn has one of the most thorough searches of all the sites, allowing users to sift through profiles by company, industry, college, and even by how many 'degrees' one is away from the person.

HIRING SITES

Some complain about the fees for posting jobs via LinkedIn and searching for CVs. *Rabih Mogharbel*, CEO of HireLebanese headhunting website said: "Recruiters tend to use what is available for free from LinkedIn, such as people's profiles and names." Other recruiters and young professionals have created Facebook pages for employers to post their requirements for free. With many recruiters headhunting via social media, there is less traffic on recruiting websites. Fewer CVs amass in employment agencies, too. However, said Mogharbel: "Social media will not replace recruiting websites. These websites can benefit from social media channels by directing job seekers and employers to their sites and eventually increase their site traffic." He said that companies can post jobs on social websites, yet specialized recruiting websites still retain and store CVs. Candidates can personalize their resumes and update them continuously. Additionally, employers can search CV databases for candidates. "These are things social media has no interest in venturing into. They are making a lot more money from advertising and that is their main focus," he said. Most job seekers are entry- and mid-level, said Mogharbel. "Recruiters using social media are the smaller ones. Those who are in search of higher level candidates will have a hard time finding

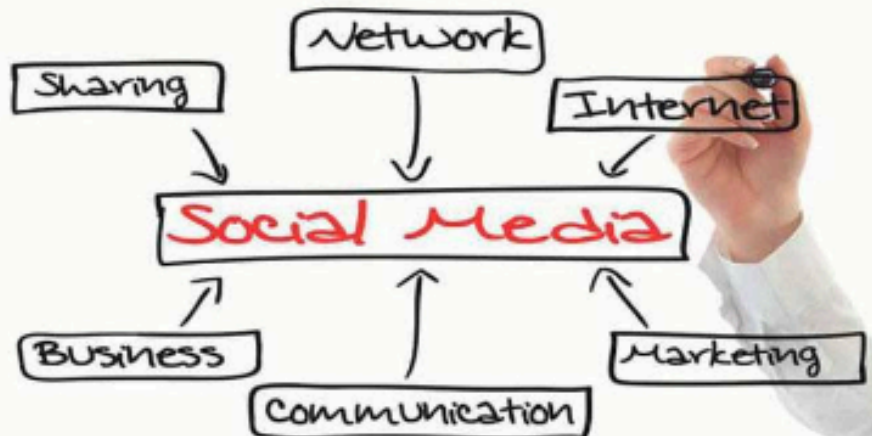
them on Facebook." Social media is simply replacing print advertisements. "Instead of publishing a 'Hire Lebanese' advertisement in a newspaper for example, we can create a free Facebook page and get thousands of hits on our website," said Mogharbel

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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