

Social Networking is Big...It CAN Help Your Business...

This Guide Will Give You a Start.

In the physical world, networking is an indispensable part of a business operation. It helps establish and maintain important connections. These are the connections that can make it easier to build and run a business.

In the virtual world, what is termed as “social networking”, “social marketing” makes it easier to create those beneficial relationships online. Instead of attending offline events and meetings, you can meet the right people from the comfort of your computer chair.

That’s what’s really exciting about social networking - many of the barriers presented in the real world are torn down in the virtual one:

Time? Not a problem. Contacts sign in and show up on your virtual doorstep when they want to or have time.

Space? Don’t worry. The Internet is huge and can accommodate many competing businesses simultaneously. You also don’t have to shell out money for prime real estate or bulky, display pieces.

Geography? Also not a consideration. You can reach anyone anywhere so long as both of you have a working Internet connection.

But let’s back up a second...

What Exactly is Social Networking?

It’s a term that has received a lot of attention lately because of the growing popularity of social networks like Facebook, Twitter and so many more. But realistically speaking, online social networking is not new. It’s been around since people used the Internet to communicate with one another. Whether it’s a message board, a Yahoo group or some other networking type of opportunity – it all falls under the same umbrella. Even allowing interaction on your blog or commenting on other blogs is a form of social networking.

What’s new these days is the complexity of the technology and ability to share a wide variety of information in numerous formats. While all that technology is exciting and has its benefits, it’s important to realize that no matter the network, we’re dealing with the same thing – and that’s – people.

Why Do PEOPLE Use Social Networking?

Users of social networks gather together because they want to connect with others that share common interests. Once connections are established, they continue to gather together because they know each other, enjoy interacting and trust one another's opinions. People do it because it's fun and it offers a sense of support from their peers. In other words, it's SOCIAL and it's about people connecting with people.

Why Do BUSINESSES Use Social Networking?

The Internet is subtly shifting between information and participation (which still includes information at its core). Because of this, taking advantage of social networking should be an important part of your business' marketing and advertising strategy.

Social networking has plenty of business benefits, but let's break it down to 4 main ones. Understanding these benefits will help you shape an effective approach to your own social networking efforts:

- **Establishing business connections / joint ventures:** Because a lot of businesses are using social networking sites, there is no shortage of business owners to connect with. This is your opportunity to establish mutually benefit relationships to:
 - Find affiliates for your products.
 - Find new products to promote.
 - Embark on co-projects like new products, websites.
 - Discover new websites that will publish your content.
 - Recruit guest bloggers, content contributors for your own site.
 - Hiring skilled help (ex. graphic designers, programmers, etc.)
- **Getting new readers / subscribers:** Social networking generally requires more subtlety than blasting out your sales page link. People don't participate in social networks to get a sales pitch. They do it to share information and opinions, build friendships, have fun...and other SOCIAL things.

It's easier to attract attention and gain a faithful following in social networks by sharing your content – ex. your blog, videos, etc. Once you get their attention, this starts the marketing process by subtly preselling your readers and eventually turning them into customers.

If you approach social networking as a direct selling medium, you may see a few sales here and there (or even a big surge at the beginning, but soon people will tire

of you and/or you'll get banned from the network). But why annoy and alienate potential and existing customers?

That said, sales pitches may have their place and you need to use your careful judgment. For example, announcing your special on your own Facebook page, instead of blasting directly to your friends list or including a special coupon code in your forum signature line. As long as you conform to the network's rules and behave in a way that is acceptable to its users, it can work for you.

- **Creating transparency and connection:** This is your opportunity for transparency and closer connections to your existing readers/customers and the new ones you acquire along the way. Many of your readers and customers are already likely using social networks. Having you join them on a more personal level allows your readers to see you a 3-dimensional, flesh-and-blood individual. Trust is everything on the Internet and when you're readers/customers trust you and know you're the real deal, the more likely they are to buy from you and spread the word about you, which is our next benefit...
- **Word of mouth:** Everything we've talked about so far (establishing new business relationships, finding new readers and deepening connections) culminates in one of the biggest benefits of social networking and that is - word of mouth. Having people talk about you is better than any advertising you can buy. Word travels quickly and the benefits of a recommendation over a sales pitch are immense.

Think about it. If you join networks just to pitch, who's going to want to talk about you? You have to create something to talk about.

Clearly, social networking can be very beneficial, but there is something you need to consider and always keep in mind when planning your social networking strategy:

Social Networking Requires Time Investment

While social networking may cost little to no money out of pocket, it certainly can suck up a lot of time – which can take you away from other important aspects of your business. To avoid this, learn how to maximize your time spent while using social networks, evaluate your results regularly and make changes by refocusing your efforts if necessary, or allow a [social media virtual assistant to help](#).

IMPORTANT Not only can social networking take up a large chunk of time in a given day, it's something that needs to be given time to develop and grow. You can't join a network today and expect immediate and never ending results. Just like with building relationship in the "real world", you should be prepared to allow things to develop and grow over time.

- **Outsource specific social networking tasks.** There are plenty of tasks involved with the planning and execution of a social networking plan. You can break down the tasks and outsource many of them including:
 - **Hire someone to regularly scan relevant blogs, forums and networks that might be appropriate for you to post on or become involved with.** Having someone do all of this for you can give you unadulterated insight into your industry and your specific target market. It keeps you focused.

The problem with doing the research yourself is that each activity offers a lot more content than is relevant to your business. It would be so easy to get caught up in interesting blogs, threads in forums you'd like to participate in and conversations in chat rooms that have nothing to do with your business.

- **Hire someone to build your profile pages.** The advantages of the hiring someone to design your profile pages on a networking site are numerous, but the main one is that you can save time. If you hire a professional designer to build your profile page, you take the guesswork out of doing it yourself. Investing in a professional design ensures that you'll have the job done right and relatively quickly.
- **Hire someone to ghost post.** Instead of logging in every day, you can hire someone to post your updates to your networks. Obviously, you'll want to guide this person in what you'd like posted, but it can be a timesaver and keep you from getting distracted. You can give your helper photos, videos and even text to post. It's up to you.

Places to Network

When looking for places to network, think targeted. You want to reach people who are interested in your content and your products. This means you should focus your efforts on sites/networks that bring likeminded people together.

For example, if you sell dog biscuits and want to connect with dog owners, social networks dedicated to dog owners might be a good place to start.

If you're using services like Facebook or Twitter that include tons of people with a variety of interests, don't try to make everyone your friend. Instead, make sure you hone in on people who fit your target market profile.

Some of the Biggies

Facebook is the biggest social network. Twitter falls behind in user numbers, but is an extremely powerful tool worth recognition as a “biggie”.

- [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com): Facebook is a networking site that allows you to create a personal page that can include photos, video, join groups, publicize events and more.

Here are some benefits of using Facebook:

- It’s viral. User home pages are continuously updated with all the activities of their friends. This means your activity is updated on your friend’s home pages too.
 - Users are addicted to it. Many Facebook users use it daily and makes it easier for to reach them.
 - Pinpointing your target market. Extensive user profiles help you find the right people to connect with.
 - Ability to join likeminded groups. Facebook groups allows you to further segment your marketing based on interests, etc.
- [Twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com): Twitter is a micro-blogging platform that allows you to instantly update and connect with like-minded individuals. Twitter is much simpler than Facebook and MySpace in its features, but is powerful in its potential.

Twitter operates on the question, “What are you doing?” Basically, you have 140 characters to post a message that goes out to everyone that follows you. You can add individuals as friends, so you see their updates in your timeline.

A few benefits of using Twitter:

- It’s simplicity means that no big time investment is involved. The messages are short. There are no bells and whistles to be updated, checked, etc. Put in as much or as little time into Twitter as you want.
- Following people and staying up to date is easy. Messages have to be short (this includes messages to the time line and any direct messages), so it forces people to get to the point. This is a refreshing change from the long drawn out posts people can make on forums, for example.

- It's instant. Active Twitter users love Twitter. Some people stay on all day. Others catch up frequently. You can broadcast your update and instantly reach your followers.
- New and already interested people can find you easily. Twitter allows your follower to post a reply directly to you that will appear in the timelines of everyone that is following your follower (is that confusing...don't worry, it becomes clear when you use the site). The reply includes a link to your profile, so all those people not following you yet, can click through to see what you're talking about and follow you too – making it easy to build your network.

The Rules – Well, Unofficial Ones Anyway

Obviously, you have to work within the rules and terms of service of each social network you join. Further to that, here are some rules of thumb to make the most of your relationship-building experience and to set yourself up for long-term social networking success.

- **Observe and get a feel for how things work in the network.** Different groups have different rules and understandings. Don't be in a rush or you may offend members with your faux pas.
- **Avoid doing nothing but flogging your product.** Concentrate on connections and adding value instead. It's what will build your following and increase word of mouth.
- **Do include your website URLs and branding, where allowed.** This can be in signature lines, profile pages, updates, etc. Keep it subtle and within the guidelines and what your followers/friends find acceptable.
- **Make sure your content gives them a way to learn more, sign up, etc.** When you do post your links, make sure that your visitors can learn more about your products, sign up for your mailing list, etc.
- **Share information freely.** This can include links (where they are allowed) to your own content, videos, pictures, etc. The links you include can even be some promotions, but only where very appropriate.
- **Speak *with* people, not *at* them.** Engage in conversations and leave comments, where appropriate. If you just post and run, you lose out on most of the benefits social networking can bring.

- ❑ **Use private messaging sparingly and wisely.** Only send private messages to people you know or if you don't know them, have a purpose and don't take up too much time. It's all about respecting people's time and virtual space.
- ❑ **Don't be afraid to be personal.** Remember, this is social networking – give people a glimpse into your life. It's OKAY! Of course, you still want to retain a level of professionalism that is required for your particular business, but that still leaves plenty of room to have fun.

What Next?

Because networking and building relationships doesn't happen overnight, be prepared to give things time to develop.

Here's to great friends and business contacts to last a lifetime!