

Getting a Grip on Social Media

Opportunities for businesses to market their products, services and brands are plentiful in this internet age, and those businesses not employing emerging forms of marketing like social media stand to fall behind, while those that do can experience growth and strengthen the long-lasting bonds between customer and purveyor.

By Andrew Sobchak

Admit it, when you think of the term “social media” you think of a world of fourteen year-olds comparing what they had for lunch. But like it or not, if you run a business you must absolutely integrate the tools of social media into your business plan. Plain and simple. Because as Jeff Jarvis, author of the 2009 bestseller *What Would Google Do* suggests, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube “elegantly organize” what already happens in our workplaces, shopping malls, at home, over the phone and everywhere else in our lives – people talk to people.

Simply put, social media facilitates these conversations, and in so doing is changing the game. In the hyper-active world of the internet, these online conversations are super-charged with various media including photos, videos, and sound bites in addition to text. Their distribution is accelerated by word-of-mouth, and social media is a key facilitator of this process, allowing customers to take stories of experiences with your business – preferably positive – further than they have ever travelled.

All this means that since these online platforms provide a location for these conversations to occur, learning the tools of social media and engaging in these conversations gives your business a way to find, connect and collaborate with customers not realized in previous eras of business. As Steven Holzer notes in his 2009 book *Facebook Marketing: Leveraging Social*

• According to a 2009 survey conducted by 6S Marketing, 70 per cent of Canadian internet users use social media while CNW Group/Leger Marketing also reported in 2009 that 49 per cent of Canadians use social media at least once a day with use growing by 48 per cent in the past year. Another study conducted in the United States by Opinion Research in late 2008 indicates 60 per cent of internet users used social media to interact with companies while 93 per cent believed companies should have a presence in these forums. 56 per cent of the same polling group also felt they had better connections with, and were better served by companies in these online environments.

Media to Grow Your Business, a reversal of marketing channels is being caused by market pressure that forces business to listen “instead of providing unilateral ad copy” or “interruptive advertising.”

Tailor-made for the independent retailer

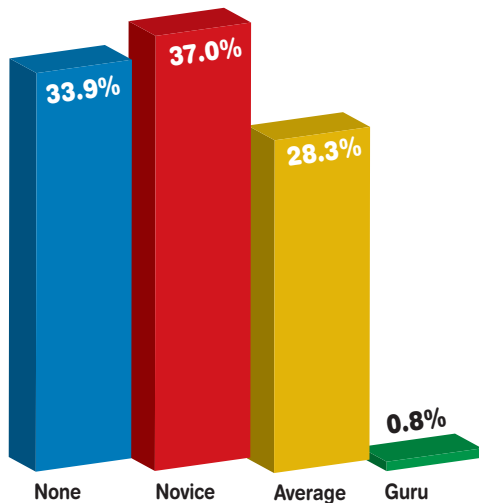
Social media sites routinely occupy the top 20 most-visited websites on the internet, with Facebook, YouTube and Twitter ranking second, third and 14th most popular in Canada in August 2009, accumulating 8.4 per cent of the worldwide page views according to Alexa.com. And although these

three sites are only five, four and three years old respectively, they have become increasingly stable and gained wide acceptance which means, like it or not, social media is settling in for the long haul. • Even if the social media landscape looks different in five years time – a long time in this rapidly changing industry – these platforms offer too many new tools today to overlook.

With the advent of social media the playing field for small business is becoming levelled. Effective marketing and brand awareness is no longer reliant on big budgets but rather on simple qualities like trust and integrity – qualities that must be earned and are the pillars upon which small business is built – and establishing credible relationships with your customers converts them into your own advertising agency.

SOCIAL MEDIA

How would you rate your level of expertise in using social media?



Results based on a *Centre* readership survey conducted August to October.

Social media is a do-it-yourself solution to business marketing that forces businesses, regardless of size, to interact intimately with customers creating opportunities to advance their brand in possibly the most cost effective manner available: free. Social media platforms are free to join: you could start a Twitter account now and in less than 30 minutes, with no prior experience, be marketing to prospective customers. A humbling thought that sizzles with opportunity for the independent retailer but cries for an effective marketing plan.

Although joining most social media sites may be free, certain value-add services such as advertising with Facebook or LinkedIn, for example, typically cost money but can render an impressive return on investment because efforts are highly targeted, further building on your credibility within the community.

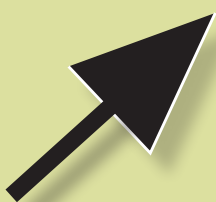
According to a recent survey released by The Marketing Professionals the top three social media outlets that provided the greatest value to businesses are corporate blogs, Twitter and networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook:

Corporate Blogging

As a business owner/operator, blogging is arguably the most valuable social media tool you can employ. According to Compendium Research, in 2009 91 per cent of internet users indicated searching for information was their primary online function. In order to present solutions to your consumers in their times of need, you need to be well-positioned in the results of searches on home improvement and hardline products. Blogging can get you there.

Not only is hosting a corporate blog on your business' website a great way to provide a personal voice to what could be an otherwise dry experience, but search engines love them too. Blog posts are keyword rich and search engine "spiders," the automated cataloguing bots that slink around the internet looking for content, feast on their freshness, sustaining your position high in any relevant search results without having to buy keywords through Google's AdWords, for example. **

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The Six "Must-Have" Social Media Profiles for a Great Marketing Campaign

By Heather Lutze

Any marketer worth their salt knows the value of setting up a social media advertising campaign on the many free platforms. However, with so many options and limited time, small business owners must have a strategic and targeted approach to social media advertising. Business people need to develop a Social Media Advertising Formula, made up of the sites that all advertisers, Web site owners, and business owners must have in order to run a successful social media advertising campaign.

Social Media Advertising Formula

There are six essential platforms that business owners must have in order to really harness the potential of social advertising. Each social platform plays a very specific role, and the combination of all six is what will take your social advertising campaign to the next

level. There is a secret ingredient at play here as well – the formula calls for a touch of optimization on each platform. Optimization allows your social media to work with your website and PPC campaigns to dominate the first page of search engine results. Essentially this formula will make you the only choice as far as the searcher and Google are concerned.

#1: LinkedIn –

A popular business profile site, LinkedIn ranks very well in search engines and is a great platform for sending event updates out to business associates. *Directions:* When optimizing your LinkedIn profile, select one core keyword (or search term you would like to be found under), use it frequently without sacrificing consumer experience, and watch your profile skyrocket in the search engines.

#2: Facebook –

As a closed community, Facebook does not rank in the search engines and makes the best choice if you want to have a personal profile online. However, optimizing your Facebook profile with your business keyword can make it an invaluable marketing effort. *Directions:* Optimize your Facebook profile for one keyword and become the "go-to" expert in your industry for the more than 22 million Facebook users. Also, include some personal touches, but beware of putting too much personal information online.

#3: MySpace –

As an open community, MySpace ranks great in the search engines, and more importantly, allows businesses to have fully-developed profiles, including personally designed backgrounds. *Directions:* In addition

**A recently launched website may temporarily push you up the search results list, but unless you frequently update this information, your position will plummet rather quickly. Being on the first page of search results has proven key for businesses to turn clicks into sales. As Jarvis puts it, "if you are not searchable, you won't be found."

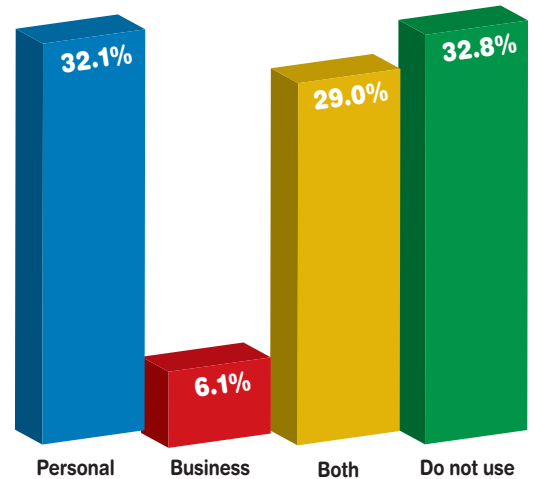
messaging or the web. The platform allows your customers to stay connected with you, and you with them, through an asynchronous communication feed into which you can tune into and out of as your time permits.

Twitter markets itself as a "communication platform that helps businesses stay deeply connected to their customers" providing opportunity to "quickly share information...gather real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners and other people who care about your company."

Social Networking: Facebook & LinkedIn

A comScore study released in late 2008 indicates 86.5 per cent of Canadian internet users over the age of 15 routinely visit a social networking site like Facebook, LinkedIn or MySpace, making Canada the most socially-networked country in the world ahead of Brazil and the U.K. Although each social networking site started with its own niche (Facebook was initially

For what purpose do you currently use social media?



Twitter (Micro-blogging)

Twitter, the latest craze and perhaps simplest offering in the social media arena, is a micro-blogging tool that allows you to post 140 character messages for all your Twitter followers to access through mobile phones, instant

to optimizing your profile with a keyword, you can also search for your target audience in MySpace friends and create an amazing outreach network.

#4: YouTube –

The main video sharing platform, YouTube is one of the best forums available to create a viral marketing campaign. From publishing client video testimonials to creating social proof of your abilities, YouTube videos are a great way to get other site owners to link to your website. *Directions:* Each new video is a new opportunity to optimize for a different keyword. For each video, be sure to include your keyword in the title and at least once in the description section.

#5: Blog –

If you only have the time or desire to create one social media platform, a blog should be at the top of your list. Blogs give users a few distinctive advantages over the other platforms that make them absolutely invaluable in the world of Internet Marketing. First, search engines love blogs. They have plenty

of content and are easy for the spiders to crawl and categorize online. Second, consumers love blogs. They aren't hard-sales, but instead are a mix of marketing and education that online shoppers trust. Third, every blog is a new opportunity for you to go after a new keyword. Whether you want to dominate a search page with one particular keyword or just have a presence under a different keyword, a blog is a free and easy way to get you there. *Directions:* As with a YouTube video, every blog is a new keyword opportunity. Use a keyword tool, and select your keyword before writing. Then, include your keyword in the title and throughout the content, but remember never sacrifice consumer experience. Also, be advised that repeating a keyword too many times will show up as spam in the search engines.

#6: Twitter –

The newest, hottest rage, Twitter is a micro blog that limits posts to 140 characters. Although you'll typically hear the most scepticism about Twitter, it can be an amazing tool for your business. Twitter plugins allow

you to update Twitter and literally push it out to your other platforms, such as Facebook. Additionally, Twitter posts rank in the search engines. *Directions:* Select one keyword and include that in all your Twitter posts. Also, don't forget to personalize your Twitter background for a totally unique and branded look and feel.

With the combination of these six social advertising platforms, your online campaign is sure to be a success!

Heather Lutze has spent the last 10 years as CEO of The Findability Group, formerly Lutze Consulting, – a Search Engine Marketing firm that works with companies to attain maximum Internet exposure. A nationally recognized speaker, she is the author of, "The FindAbility Formula: The Simple and Non-Technical Approach To Search Engine Marketing" (Wiley and Sons). Heather is a lead speaker for Pay Per Click Summit, and previously spent two years speaking for Yahoo! Search Marketing. For more information, visit www.FindabilityGroup.com.

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created for students, LinkedIn for professionals and MySpace being popular with the artistic crowd, especially musicians) most platforms are built using similar principles where users can create online profiles and then connect with others. A recent PEW Research survey showed that 35 per cent of American adults have a user profile somewhere on the internet, while this number jumped to 75 per cent and 100 per cent for the 18-24 year old and 'tween' demographics, respectively. If you want to connect with your customers now and in the future, social networking sites like these may be your customer's connection of choice. As Holzer says, what business owner wouldn't want to commune with "42 million smart, affluent and internet savvy" Facebook users?

Social media in the hardlines industry

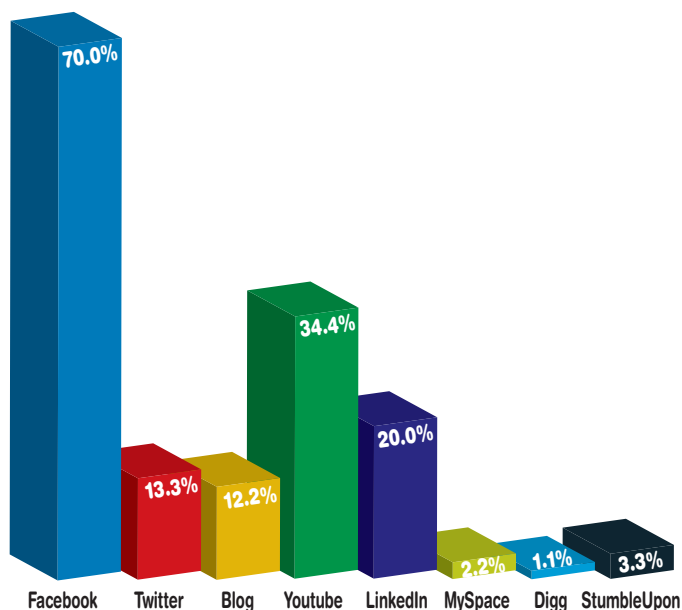
Despite its treasure trove of marketing opportunities, home improvement retailers have not exactly embraced social media yet, although there is certainly interest. Catherine Brownlow, advertising and communications manager for British Columbia-based IRLY Distributors Ltd., suggests "[IRLY is]

just now exploring opportunities in this area," while Kathy Philippe, direct marketing manager for Home Hardware, states "It is obvious that there are opportunities in leveraging social media tools to connect with customers and other stakeholders and there is definitely buzz about these tools in the marketplace. The key is to use these tools strategically and not just for the sake of it." Home Hardware has chosen to focus their current online marketing strategy outside the arena of social media and in more traditional areas by improving customer's access to product through their revamped website and email campaigns.

Others believe "social media is something that can no longer be ignored," as Pierre L'Heureux, RONA's vice-president of marketing, image and sponsorship says. RONA has begun using YouTube as part of its advertising strategy by posting videos such as "The Art of Recycling" and a "RONA is 70" event in Toronto that went viral, getting picked up by other social media forums such as blogs and print magazines and television news broadcasts as far away as Spain.

Aimee Feaver, director of communications at Tim-BR Mart believes "independent retailers [in the home improvement industry] should be a part of their community" and social media platforms represent another form of community. For example, Tim-BR Mart is hoping to engage the robust Canadian amateur hockey community through social media with their website, timbrtube.ca. This YouTube-esque offering invites hockey players, parents and coaches to upload homemade videos demonstrating team spirit, Canadian pride and their love of the game. The most popular video, as voted by viewers, earns the filmmaker and their team a trip to Saskatoon for the 2010 IIHF World Junior Championships. Hosting a contest like this is not overly innovative, but encourages filmmakers to send links to their videos and the TimBRTube website to all their friends in the hockey community, capitalizing on the viral nature of social media marketing.

Which social media platforms do you most frequently use?



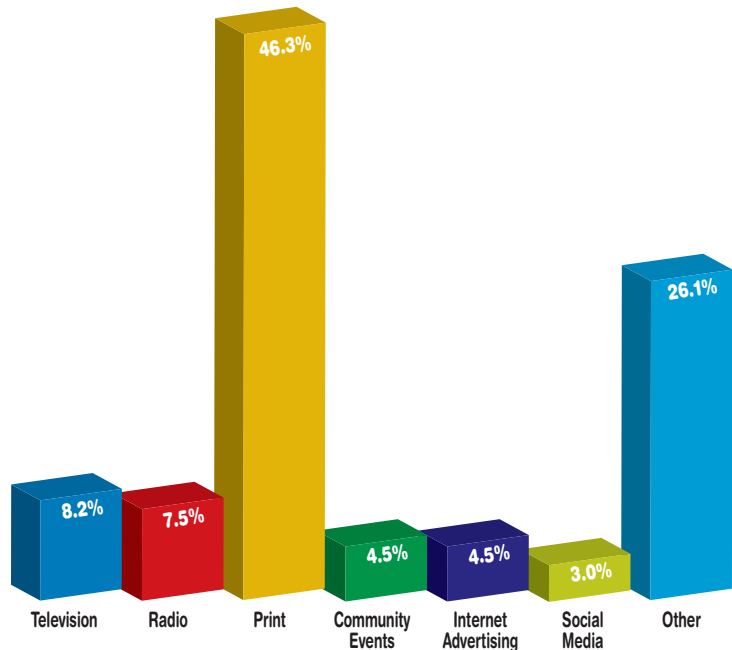
Feaver agrees social media is not a cure-all solution but encourages TimBR-Mart's 740 dealer locations across Canada to use it when appropriate to meet the needs of their customer base. "The strength of social media lies at the dealer level with the adoption process growing over time in a truly grass roots fashion, which is the philosophy behind social media in the first place." Use of social media in the hardlines industry is becoming a hot enough topic that at the upcoming Hardlines Conference on October 22 and 23 in Toronto, a panel discussion is being organized to address the topic and how those in the hardlines industry can effectively engage customers through these means.

He gets it

One such dealer who has embraced social media is Marc Robichaud, a fifth generation owner/operator of his family's 143-year-old business, U.J. Robichaud TimBR-Mart, in Meteghan Centre, Nova Scotia. Awarded the North American Retail Hardware Association's Retail Innovator of the Year distinction in June 2009, Robichaud swears by his use of social media for marketing. "Every year we have a major sales event in June and spend thousands on promotion," says Robichaud. By effectively using his website, Facebook advertising and his business' Facebook Group in 2009 he was able to minimize his marketing budget, cut his print advertising budget by two thirds and have the most successful event in it's 20 year history. "This confirms our clients are using the web," states Robichaud.

However, Robichaud believes social media is just one piece of the puzzle in creating an online presence and effective internet marketing strategy for business. The list of ways his business reaches out into the cyber world is rather impressive. In addition to social media platforms, his approach includes a website designed to be a destination for his customers, storefronts on eBay and Amazon, use of digital flyers/newsletter that are easily distributed through social networking, positioning the business as an expert in various

Currently, what is the most effective form of marketing for your business?



online forums to answer customers' questions, a blog, clearance and over-stock sales through Craigslist and Kijiji and community advertising through Google AdWords, eBay AdCommerce and traditional website banners.

Robichaud also uses Facebook features to their fullest extent by engaging customers through Groups, Events, Fan and Personal pages as well as maintaining a storefront and purchasing advertising. All of the pages are connected and link back to his business' website which not only serves as a marketplace for his products but also a repository for installation guides, maintenance manuals and other support information.

Because the connection between business and consumer in socially networked sites is so close, response from both parties can be immediate. On his Facebook Group dedicated to energy efficiency and government sponsored incentive programs, "Not 30 seconds after making a post did the phone ring

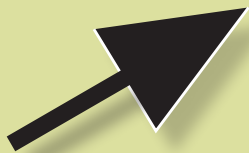
with a customer wanting additional details,” claims Robichaud. Similarly, posts about an incoming order of solar panels and wind generation equipment to his personal Facebook page sparked a discussion amongst his friends wanting more information.

Robichaud also maintains a Twitter feed, posting comments about energy efficiency, ecoEnergy grant programs, Air Miles and other local promotions. Twitter has proven to be an effective glue to link all of his online compo-

nents together including updates to his website and social networking pages on Facebook or LinkedIn.

Even though social media in the form of blogging, Facebook and Twitter only comprise a part of his online marketing strategy, Robichaud believes it is one of the most important parts. “They allow customers to become a part of [my] business experience. Let your customers share your experience and before you know it they will be sharing in your success.”

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The Top Five Mistakes of Social Media Marketing

By Pam Lontos and Maurice Ramirez, Ph.D

According to the Nielsen Research Group, social networks and blogs have moved ahead of personal e-mail among the most popular online activities people engage in. Additionally, *USA Today* reports that the time spent on these sites is growing three times faster than the overall internet rate. More than two-thirds of the world’s online population now visits social networking and blogging sites.

Knowing this, it’s clear that if you haven’t yet engaged in Social Media Marketing, the time to start is now. But before you do, you need to be aware of the top mistakes businesses make with this PR outlet so you can avoid them and get the biggest return for your marketing investment.

Mistake #1: Having more than one face on the internet.

When you’re engaging in Social Media Marketing (SMM) you’re really building your image from the ground up. The goal of SMM is to virally spread parts of your image across the Internet. The word “parts” is important. Basically, you’re starting with a holographic image of yourself in the virtual world. You then need to break that hologram apart and find the appropriate places on the internet where you can

frame certain pieces of that hologram.

When someone looks at all the pieces at the various sites, they should be able to put them together to see a single whole. They should not see multiple images of who you are, as that would ruin your credibility. Therefore, if you have multiple Facebook accounts, for example, your personal one has to be hidden and by invitation only. You don’t want that other image out there confusing people and possibly diminishing your reputation.

Mistake #2: Collecting friends.

SMM is how you create instant buzz on the internet by getting the same message out over and over. It’s spreading your message and getting yourself branded so you can get more business. Social networking, on the other hand, is about making friends. For example, you’ve likely seen someone on LinkedIn who has 25,000+ contacts. That’s great, but what do you do with all those contacts? Remember, just because you have a phone book in your office doesn’t mean you can open the book at random, pick a name, and call them for business.

When you collect a contact, you’re supposed to be opening the door to exchange

information and build a relationship. Think of it as relationship marketing in the 21st century, and the same rules apply. The only difference is that you’re building the relationship online rather than over coffee.

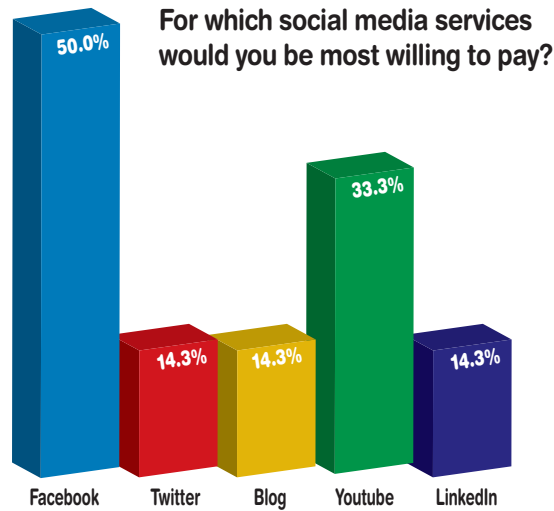
Mistake #3: Putting out the wrong messages.

You’ve likely seen people put posts on Twitter or Facebook that say something like, “John Smith is watching a great movie and eating popcorn.” Such messages may be fine for personal networks, but for business networks you need to put out messages that are useful to your readers. In other words, don’t talk about yourself. You want to give valuable tips and advice so that the people who read your posts want to repost them to their own sites. That’s how your message spreads virally.

The key is to keep your messages consistent. Remember that people are subscribing to various feeds in order to get your information. They are essentially saying that your message has value. That’s why you can’t do a series of sales tips and then post a couple of your favourite omelette recipes. You have to stay on message, and your message has to be for your readers.

With that said, it’s okay to occasionally

The internet is littered with success stories of businesses using social media to their advantage. But when it comes to the home improvement retailing and hardlines industry, leaders in social media marketing are just now being defined. This means there are many opportunities for the taking and businesses that choose to become early adopters of this technology could find themselves in industry leadership positions for years to come. **C**



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have a press release type message that says something like, “John Smith is speaking at ABC Convention on employee productivity today.” Such a message does two things: 1) It tells people they might not get a tip today or tomorrow because you’re busy, and 2) It shows that other big-wigs out there think your message is important. It’s a positive reinforcement that boosts your credibility, so long as you don’t do it too frequently.

Mistake #4: Posting inappropriate information.

Don’t allow yourself or anyone on your site to post anything online that you don’t want your most conservative client to see. You never know where something will end up, especially since the nature of the internet is for things to spread virally. For example, a CEO of a corporation had a picture of himself and his girlfriend on a topless beach in Mexico. In the photo she’s riding on his shoulders with her breasts exposed. For some reason, he decided to post the photo on his personal invitation-only Facebook site.

The only problem is that he was married. His wife (or rather, his now ex-wife) saw the photo. How? Someone on his invitation-only Facebook account thought it was a great picture and decided to repost it on the public internet. To top it all off, his board of directors got wind of the photo and fired him. Now he’s no longer employable in that field or that position again. The moral of this story: never post anything on any site that you wouldn’t personally show your own grandmother.

Mistake #5: Assuming that it is better to have your message in only one place on the internet.

In the “old days” of the internet, people believed they had to keep all their content on their own web site. The theory was that spreading it out ruined your credibility and diminished your reputation as being a unique speaker. Not so today. In fact, with SMM, the opposite is true. The more places you can get your message to appear simultaneously, the more effective your message will be.

Think of it as constructing a funnel. You want to lay several trails of information, all of which lead to your main site. Therefore, no matter how someone stumbles upon you, as long as they “follow the trail,” they’ll eventually find you. That’s essentially what you’re doing with your Twitters and other SMM messages. You’re putting out kernels of information. If someone wants the next kernel, they have to follow the trail. Eventually it funnels them to one web site, which is where you wanted them to be anyway. You’re creating an environment where people see your message everywhere. As a result, you now have their attention and you have the opportunity to sell your product, your services, or whatever you’re selling at that point of distribution.

Here’s an example of the power of funnelling. Recently Aaron Chronester posted a message on Twitter. Someone saw his post and reposted it on their blog. CNN and *The New York Times* found the post interesting and reported on it. Because of that exposure, Chronester got a book deal from

Simon and Schuster. So, what was his post about? Current events? Global warming? A tell-all celebrity biography? Nope. It was a Twitter post with a unique bacon recipe, as Chronester was trying to get publicity for a barbeque club he belonged to. That’s how powerful funnelling your message can be.

Get Noticed with SMM

The marketplace is changing, and you have to change with it. Your name has to be everywhere – in print, on radio, on TV, and on the social networking sites. The more you can get your name and message circulating in the various mediums, the higher your chances of clients seeing your information and ultimately hiring you. Thanks to SMM you can get your message out to thousands of people in an instant. And the results are greater credibility, more exposure, and higher sales, all of which positively impact your bottom line.

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