



ABOVE: For many consumers, the Internet is their primary source of information. Cultivating these tech-savvy customers is crucial to a business' success.

Solving the Social Puzzle

How you can use social media to grow your business

By Lindsay Ulrich

Though social media is a relatively new phenomenon, it has swiftly gained popularity. It seems almost everyone is Tweeting, Facebooking, or Instagraming their latest news, recipes, and photos. Small and large businesses alike are now joining these sites, using them as tools for promotion, marketing, and public outreach with great results.

At a time when more and more people are using the Internet as their primary source of information, these businesses are seeing the rewards of cultivating tech-savvy customers. Any Millennial will tell you that the first thing he or she does to

research a company is check out its social media presence. Does it have a Twitter account? A blog? Has it updated its Facebook page recently?

Yusuf Gad, president of a5MEDIA, a Toronto-based marketing firm for small- to

medium-sized businesses, puts it simply, "Social media is one of the most important marketing tools for any business wishing to target consumers. Many brands now are first discovered on social media. Not being on social media in 2014 is like

not being in the Yellow Pages in 1985." An absence from these platforms can mean missed opportunities to connect with potential customers, and by being online and reachable, you are telling your audience that you care about being part of a conver-

sation, helping to establish you as a trustworthy organization people will want to do business with.

But, where to begin?

Choose your platform

Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, Four Square. It seems like every few months there's a new social media platform on the market, so how do you choose the right one? When you first start out, avoid spreading yourself too thin. Social media can be a full-time job, so take it slowly while you're learning. Twitter and Facebook are great places to start because of their large numbers of users.

Tahnee Sanders, event director and social media manager of Celsia Floral in Vancouver, has chosen the shop's platforms carefully. "To us, each of these platforms serve a different purpose and audience,"

she explains. "Facebook, and to an extent Twitter, is where we tend to find our most local audience so we use these to engage more with the local community." She also uses the photo-sharing site, Instagram, which she sees as serving a different purpose. "We have the most followers on Instagram and we use this platform to showcase our design work."

Sometimes online promotion is all she needs. "In the past year we have re-branded and launched a series of in-store workshops, all of which have been solely promoted via social media. The response has been fantastic and proof that spending the time engaging with our clients through Instagram, Facebook, etc. is absolutely worth it."

Kat Kosk, owner of blumenstudio in Ottawa, finds Instagram useful. She uses it to showcase her shop's contem-

porary pieces. "It's quick and very easy to use, effective, and it's growing." She also adds, "it's connected to all my other social media accounts."

Connected accounts are important with social media. Make sure that whatever accounts you're on are linked to each other and to your website so your followers can easily find all your online activity.

Set and monitor goals

It's important to use social media mindfully, and with purpose. Sanders, of Celsia Floral, knows about strategy. At first, her shop didn't have any social media strategy in place and she quickly realized she needed a plan. "We have since spent a lot of time looking at where our followers come from and how they engage with our content. This information has helped us determine how we use different social media platforms to best grow our business."

An effective way of establishing goals is by using S.M.A.R.T., a popular marketing technique. This means establishing objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timed. Some examples might be:

- Increasing customer awareness by writing three blog posts and 90 tweets, and posting 30 images on Facebook by Dec. 1.
- Increasing media awareness by identifying, following, and making contact with 10 wedding bloggers on Twitter by Feb 1.
- Increase trust in readership by responding to every comment on Facebook by March 1.

Successful people will tell you that goals are only important so long as they're revisited often, so plan to track your progress weekly or monthly. Revisiting your goals often will

let you redefine and reassess them if need be.

Know your audience

Think about your ideal customer. They are probably the same person you've been marketing your product to for years, right? Well, maybe not. As your shop grows, so do your potential customers. Try establishing customer profiles that consider things like your customers' careers, personalities, motivation, ages, media preferences, and what they do for fun. Getting to know them and what they value will help to guide what you share on social media and how you connect to them. If your shop is geared towards corporate clients, you'll want to cultivate a different online persona than a neighbourhood flower shop that sells cut stems. How can you best connect to your audience?

It's also useful to identify and follow key influencers – people who set trends and have an audience who trust and will listen to them. These might include your peers, journalists, bloggers, editors, and other successful people in their fields. Look to follow people like wedding planners, event planners, stylists, hotels, and even suppliers. If you cultivate online relationships with major players in their fields, you will be aware of news and trends, and opportunities for your business may present themselves.

Sanders says Celsia Floral uses Facebook and Twitter to "keep up to date with the happenings of our professional colleagues." She also likes to spread good karma, and celebrates the successes of other businesses. She does this by "engaging with their work and sharing news of their successes wherever possible." When your community sees you as a positive and friendly person, it

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Share what they want

You've probably heard the phrase "content is king," and with social media this couldn't be truer. Your content is what drives interest in you and your company, so make it interesting, useful, and entertaining. This is where your customer research comes in handy. Put yourself in their shoes when deciding what to share.

Many companies have made the mistake of thinking social media is all about the instant sale. Yosuf Gad from a5MEDIA warns: "Nobody wants to read your tweets about your \$5 discount. What they want is advice, solutions, and ideas. Focus on those and the sales will come."

Remember that you are an expert in your field with years of accumulated knowledge

about flowers, design, and events. You have lots of useful and instructional information to share.

A good guideline is to follow the 80/20 per cent rule – 80 per cent of your content should be informational, educational, or fun. The other 20 per cent is for self-promotion.

Sanders agrees. "We share news about our upcoming workshops, new blog posts, florals of ours that have been published, updated designs at our online store, and any in-store promotions we are doing."

Social media is just another way to be creative, so have fun with it.

Be visually-focused

"Images and video are where it's at. People respond to photos and videos far better than they do to any status update. When it comes to social me-

dia, pictures are powerful," says Gad.

Florists can easily take the beauty they see around them every day for granted, forgetting that most people consider the tools of our trade to be jaw-dropping luxuries. People love to see images that inspire, so use that to your advantage.

Becky DeOliveira, owner of Blush and Bloom Floral Studio in Toronto, explains what she likes to share with her followers. "I like to post images from photo shoots I am working on, and I love to post my bride's bouquets on the morning of her wedding and announce happy wedding day to that couple. I also like showing my design bench with a few stems to highlight a "recipe" of what I am about to make."

She also offers suggestions to the amateur photographer. "I would recommend trying to use outdoor/natural light,



Handles to follow

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and to be aware of the details in the background of your photos. Take a few minutes to go outside with your bouquet and choose a clean and neutral background to place the florals on to really highlight your work."

As you join the online conversation, remember the social part of social media. Having fun is a big part of the experience so, as you share stories, photos, and information, remember to also have fun! **CF**



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