



The Why and How of Social Media Participation

Join The Conversation.

We've all heard this phrase hundreds of times relative to social media, but what exactly does that mean? Why is this all worth our time, and what can we get out of it as a business? Let's have a look at some of the compelling rationale behind engaging in the social web, and the basic steps to doing it well.

Why Does This Matter?

Simply put: the social web is here, whether you like it or not. It's changing perceptions about business, giving individual people powerful voices of change and impact (for better or worse), and it's compelling companies to change their mindset about how they get their message out to the people that are relevant to their business.

Shorter attention spans, information overload, the abundance of mobile technology, and our need for instant, personalized information means that the social web has massive power to connect people, to share relevant information faster, and to make irrelevant the "cast a wide net" approach we've used from everything from customer service to marketing to PR to recruiting for the last several decades.

Instead, we can be refined. Targeted. Find smaller audiences that are much more likely to care about what we're doing instead of settling for single-digit conversion rates on our outreach activities. Locate our advocates and learn what makes them tick. Uncover our critics and learn about how we can improve their experiences and conceptions of what we are. Hear how the industry is changing around us and where our role in that change might be.

Customer expectations have changed, and how business interact with their customers online is changing too.

Want some compelling statistics? Have a look at [this video by Erik Qualman](#) and some of the hard numbers illustrating the impact of the social web.

Have A Plan.

When you've done the foundation work of building a listening strategy, you're ready to make a case for participation, and actually engaging with your customers, prospects, and community online. It can be a daunting task; but following some simple guidelines can help make your participation as beneficial as possible to both your business and the folks you're talking to.

Frame Out Guidelines

It's perfectly okay - and even a smart idea - to outline some guidelines for your company and employee participation in social media. Consider things like what you'll respond to and how (and [check out some fundamentals here to help you on your way](#)). Understand some of the culture and tenets of social media, and check out some guidelines that leading companies have put together for their



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employees. And if you need more help, read up on the [Anatomy of Engagement Guidelines](#) to get you started.

Map Out Goals

Knowing what you want out of social media is super important to making sure you're spending your time and resources wisely. And remember, increasing sales, donations, or customers is every business' goal, so think beyond that truth and focus on how building affinities and relationships online can help you achieve that through **elements that impact sales**.

Your goals should be focused, measurable, and point toward both qualitative and quantitative benefits to your company and community by achieving them.

Allocate Resources

Thinking about how much time and energy you have to dedicate toward social media will help set you up for realistic expectations and success. You're likely integrating it along with other approaches to your business challenges, so managing resources effectively is key.

Check out this e-book on [Social Media Time Management](#) for more tips and information on what to think through.

Know What Success Looks Like

Measurement doesn't need to be complex, but it does need to be something you do consistently, and completely framed against the goals you have for your social media participation.

Pick metrics that reflect your progress toward your goals, not just simply the ones you've relied upon for years. Be sure that you're already measuring the things you want to compare against to establish baselines, or that you've illustrated how you're going to measure it moving forward if you're starting from ground zero. For a few other ideas around [social media measurement](#), [check out this slide deck](#).

Ready, Set, Engage.

Once you've done some thinking about what you want out of social media participation and how you'll gauge your success, here are a few ways to consider how you might use your voice to build your business on the social web.

Build Awareness

The first objective many companies aim for in social media is simply raising more awareness for who they are and what they do. Social media is a powerful way to do that, but with a few ground rules attached that are often unspoken.

Lasting awareness on the social web is driven by several key factors, including:



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- **Relevance:** How what you're doing aligns with what someone needs or is interested in
- **Context:** Whether you're present and engaged when and where your audience needs you to be
- **Resonance:** How much your presence and solution endures and stays relevant over time
- **Accessibility:** How well you provide your community access to the people behind your brand

What's not in that list are traditional ideas of how to build awareness, which includes things like how many people you reach at once, or how many times you repeat yourself. Awareness in social media is often a reward for knowing who to talk to and when, and how well people connect to your company on an individualized level. Frequency and reach can still be relevant among the social web, but only when combined with one of the distinctive factors that separates impersonal, one-size-fits-all marketing from a more shared, human approach.

Relationship Development

Business development and relationships are alive and well on the web. Once upon a time, we took our customers to the game or the golf course, or did business over dinner. We spent hours on phone calls and later emails, all with the purpose of forging stronger ties between our customers, prospects, and the people within our business.

Today, what's changed is simply the media. Technology has taken geography out of the equation: we can reach people across the globe, or home in on the people right in our backyard. We can chat over Twitter, share videos on Facebook, tell our stories on blogs and involve lots of other people in that conversation. We're still humans, connecting across communication channels. And the social web helps us find the people who want to know us and stay connected better than ever before.

Customer Service

If customers had issues with our product or encountered a glitch in our service, we had to rely on them to make us aware through the channels we had: first mail, then the phone, then later email and websites. It was always a one way system; there simply wasn't an efficient way to monitor for customer service issues while they were happening, and it was hard if not impossible to reach out first, before the customer said they needed you. Lots would get lost in translation, and several issues would never come to our attention at all.

Enter the real-time web. Customers now have myriad tools available to them with which to express their concerns, ask questions, or seek more information. It's on their terms, through the sites and tools they prefer to use. But along with that power for expression comes the power of discovery: companies can proactively search and find those conversations, while they're happening, where they're happening, and respond.

Traditional customer service channels become more efficient, because requests and issues can be funneled through the social web and routed appropriately. Representatives are empowered to reach out and solve the problems in real time without waiting for them to be resident on a website or a phone line. And companies who embrace this shift distinguish themselves as the ones that not only care about the needs of their customers, but that are invested and trustworthy enough to respond in kind.



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Provide Resources & Expertise

It's been a long standing constant of business: be the resource for people and the definitive source of information or product for a particular need, and the business not only repeats itself, but it spreads. But we were always limited in the channels we had to share that expertise, and it was difficult for people to propagate that information by sharing it with their networks in turn.

Businesses have unprecedented opportunity with social technologies to both establish their expertise, and perpetuate and enable the sharing of that information. Sometimes we call it content marketing, other times it's simply thought leadership. But the advent of "share this" links, of voting and tagging and linking and posting on walls and blogs and status updates means that the human network carries good information faster and further than ever.

Your company blog, your whitepapers, your webinars and your videos can stop being about full on product promotion. They don't have to scream and shout about your brand anymore. The association with your company is inherent among the chain of sharing; your brand announces its presence simply because of the value and purpose behind your content: to inform, to educate, to entertain, to empower. It's branding by osmosis, and it works remarkably well in the social spaces.

Research & Feedback

Focus groups, surveys, and more structured mechanisms for gathering data and feedback still have their place, and always will to some extent. But the power of social media to allow for continual and raw feedback about the world around us means that businesses have a gold mine of opinion, thought, and feedback to tap.

Solid listening strategies are key to doing this well - knowing what you're listening for and why - but the impulsive, familiar, and unfiltered nature of conversations in social media can provide candid and intensely human input that can't be replicated through a structured tool. Businesses can uncover information and insights about their products, causes, or services that might never be found or expressed elsewhere, and give them immense opportunity to differentiate through action and response.

That's Certainly Not All.

Businesses are finding more and more reasons to engage on the social web each and every day. The examples keep cropping up for companies that have averted or addressed crisis, build an amazing grassroots brand following, improved customer service, driven sales, and learned more about their communities than they ever knew before.

How social media can be of value to your organization is as unique as your business is. Think about what you want to accomplish, aside from the tools. And let your desire to put your customers at the center of your business be the driving force behind your participation for the long term. Your community will thank you with their attention, their trust, their voice and their loyalty.