



The Art of Social Selling

Finding and Engaging Customers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Other Social Networks

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Take-Aways

- The nearly 1.5 billion social media users constitute an unlimited marketing audience.
- Companies now allocate about 7% of their marketing funds to social media.
- “Social selling” requires a meaningful investment of time, people, money, technology and organization.
- Effective marketers seed their quality content throughout targeted social networks.
- Unlike traditional advertising, social media marketing lets you engage with online prospects and customers.
- In fact, selling via social media requires building relationships.
- Social selling is “un-selling” – listening to people online discuss their wants and needs.
- Facebook is valuable for the “purchasing” stage of a sale; Google+ works best during the “post-purchase stage.”
- Don’t focus your research on the “who,” such as names and contact information. Instead, seek out the “what” – people’s motivating likes and dislikes.
- For social media sales, create a team pulled from customer service, marketing and sales.

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) Why smart B2B and B2C companies shift to social media to optimize sales, and 2) What methods to use to implement social media selling.

Review

More B2B and B2C companies now use online networks and communities to earn substantial revenues through marketing on social media. Yet some managers remain reluctant to come aboard. Conversely, those who think social media channels are the answer to their selling dreams should remember that countless new contacts don't necessarily translate into similarly huge numbers of sales and similarly inflated profits. Not sure what to do? Fear not: Social media and online marketing expert Shannon Belew demystifies the newest networks and explains how to use each link to make sales. *getAbstract* recommends her knowledgeable, illuminating approach to sales and marketing professionals who are unsure of their social media savvy and need the basics.

Summary

“For many salespeople and marketers, there remains the perception that tweets and Facebook posts are frivolous comments about what you ate for lunch.”

“Whether you are selling insurance or cars, social media is littered unstructured data that can help you match prospective buyers to your products or solutions.”

Sales Potential

Of necessity, today's B2C or B2B sales or marketing professionals must be proficient at “social selling.” Social media's current audience of 1.48 billion consumers continues to expand daily. If you can connect with only “one-tenth of one percent” of this audience, you will reach a million consumers at minimal expense, since you can use most social media for free.

Thanks to social media, you can engage in substantive conversations – “two-way forms of communications” – with every potential customer. Traditional advertising – “one-way forms of communications” – offers no conversations at all. One million new contacts, however, does not automatically mean one million new prospects, or even 100,000 new prospects. But social selling does enable you to get a strong, specific sales message to a staggering range of targeted prospects at the lowest possible cost.

Beach Decor

Caron's Beach House, a coastal home-decor firm, demonstrates how to market and sell through social media. Even before proprietor Caron White opened her business in 2010, she was active on social media, including having a Facebook page for her beach pictures and coastal posts. She developed three content-packed blogs to engage with beach-decor prospects and customers. She sends her blog content to “Twitter, Facebook, StumbleUpon, Kaboodle, Tumblr, Pinterest and LinkedIn.” She makes sales daily that she can track directly to her social media activities.

“Un-Selling”

Social selling is “the identification, targeting and reaching out to prospective and existing customers through social media channels and social communities in an effort to engage them in conversations that result in a potentially mutually beneficial relationship.” Social selling communication does not disrupt its target audience the way that traditional marketing does.

“A 2013 study by The Media Behavior Institute indicated that nearly 44% of total weekly time spent online was done through a mobile phone, while 17% of time was via a tablet.”

“Research shows that 25% of customers expect a response within one day when contacting a company via social media and 12% expect to hear back within 30 minutes.”

“Social selling barriers are often rooted in an organization’s internal chaos, or a lack of formal commitment and structured plan.”

“Pre-scheduled posts should never be a replacement for real-time interactions in your various social networks.”

Social selling does not mean “lead scraping” – that is, “reading through tweets, Facebook feeds, blog post comments, updates in LinkedIn groups, and questions and answers posed in various online communities” in search of leads. Social selling is un-selling – enjoying conversations with prospects, joining online communities and creating relationships. Un-selling involves listening to what people say online and talking about what matters to them, what they need, and how your products or services can help. Social selling, even for B2C firms, is like “consultative selling.” Social selling is multifaceted; you need a cross-functional team covering sales, marketing and customer support.

Integration

Uniting various members of your organization to mount a strong social selling effort will require the following:

- **“Buy-in from key stakeholders”** – This includes senior executives. Designate one individual as your social media contact to stakeholders.
- **“Clearly defined roles across each of the teams”** – Choose one person each from the marketing, sales and customer service department to spearhead these efforts. “Social selling is a team sport.”
- **“Development of a formal process”** – Develop a formal channel for each department to pass social media sales leads to the departments that can best maximize each contact.
- **“Shared resources across departments”** – You will run into shortfalls of “people, time and budget.” Consider asking someone from customer service to assist the marketing department in monitoring your social media channels.
- **“Commitment of adequate resources”** – An “integrated social media selling team” requires time, money and people. Don’t scrimp when establishing your team.

The members of your social media sales team should decide which platforms to prioritize and target. They must also determine which tools to use, including Customer Relationships Management (CRM) software and social monitoring mechanisms.

Social Media Platforms

As you select the social media platforms where you want to establish an online presence, you should learn the different strengths and weaknesses of each one:

- **LinkedIn** – This 200-million-member social network for professionals is growing quickly, with 173,000 “new member profiles” daily. LinkedIn includes free and paid connection tools. Create a strong LinkedIn profile with a nice head-shot photo. Add recommendations and endorsements from your customers and other online parties. Build your network by sending LinkedIn invitations to all your contacts. LinkedIn can be useful for building awareness of your product and can help inform potential customers during the “evaluation stages of the sales process.”
- **Twitter** – This wildly popular “microblogging” website registers 400 million tweets – 140-character-maximum messages – daily. Tweeting is an effective platform for introducing yourself to a vast online community. Tweets – the individual messages – are now so influential that Nielsen established its own Twitter TV Rating to rank the “social engagement” of TV programs and events. Thanks to Twitter, you can engage strangers and friends online by supplying a “Favorite” – similar to a Facebook “Like” – to their tweets, or by retweeting their messages. Never be overtly commercial with your tweets. Publish at a “1:10 or 1:5” ratio of selling tweets to tweets that entertain or educate.
- **“Facebook, Google+ and online communities”** – Technorati Media reports that blogs and Facebook influence more purchases than any other social media entities. Consumers

“In modern peer-to-peer influence, the power is shifting to your customers, competitors and critics.”

“Finding and targeting prospects on social networks is new territory for everyone – salespeople and marketers alike.”

“Aggressive selling techniques are likely to be ignored on social media.”

“Engaging with and getting to know influencers is a good way to gain visibility with your potential prospects, or at least find out where they are and what matters to them.”

rate Google+, Facebook and YouTube as the “most popular of all platforms.” These outlets enable you to connect with an impressive number of people and active online communities. Facebook alone has three-quarters of a billion members; it’s valuable for the “purchasing” stage of a sale; Google+ works best during the “post-purchase stage.”

- **YouTube and Pinterest** – YouTube fans spend four billion hours each month watching online videos, a natural, terrific venue for product demonstrations. Keep your YouTube videos short and to the point. Showcase photos of your products and related images on Pinterest, where “15% of all Internet users” spend time. Some brands’ pins include detailed data about their products, including prices. Pinterest promotes impulse shopping.
- **Mobile sales** – As smartphones and other mobile units become increasingly ubiquitous, companies must ensure their online content conforms to the smaller screens – and the other specs – of these popular high-tech devices. Market research from eMarketer predicts that by 2017, three out of four “digital buyers” will purchase via mobile devices.
- **Blogs** – Prominent bloggers are also prominent influencers. Look for appropriate communities: blogs where people with similar interests congregate and communicate. For example, GreensKeeper is an online community for people who love golf. Participate in “answer hubs and groups” – special divisions within “social networks or communities” where people seek answers to their questions. Or, comment on “online media/news sites.”

Interacting Online

Social selling depends entirely on strong interactions with people. Authenticity is important everywhere, but particularly online: “Listen, listen listen” to the people you meet there to learn what really matters to them. Respond by answering their questions and commenting on their posts. Adhere to online communities’ procedures and rules. “Tailor the conversation” to your audience’s niche or particular interests. Social networks let you share information, so use that opportunity to “be helpful.” Don’t barge into online conversations; instead, identify and respect the “enter and exit signs.” Learn from your surroundings and the context of ongoing conversations.

Your Social Media Sales Personality

Online, keep your “professional and personal” selves separate. An online post to your friends must never be part of your online messages to business prospects. To promote an online persona that won’t confuse people, “be consistent.” If you do something wrong according to a site’s etiquette, admit it; everyone appreciates a sincere apology. Don’t be a “lurker” who listens surreptitiously to online conversations; participate actively. And, don’t be a “pusher” who constantly pitches goods or services to everyone else online.

To sell (un-sell) online, be patient. Focus on your customers as your first online contacts, and then pay attention to the most prominent online influencers in your industry. Work on becoming an influencer. This means going beyond recording basic information about your online contacts. Learn who they are and what’s important to them. Use conversations to discover their feelings about your products or services and those toward your competitors’. Brand yourself as a niche expert. Adopt a consultative posture online. Strive to gain as many customer recommendations and “likes, favorites” and “followers” as possible.

Useful Tools

HootSuite and Mention are online programs that let you monitor the “social mentions” that cite your company, products or services. Google Alerts sends you emails when someone online mentions the item you want to track. Use Wefollow, Socialbro and InfluenceRank (part of Trackur) to find out who the top online influencers are. Klout and Kred measure your social influence.

Social selling depends on sharing quality content. Tools like Bit.ly, SharedBy.co and Google URL Builder help you share effectively. Useful tools for curating your content include Feedly, Paper.li and Scoop.it. Content creation tools include Visual.ly and Infogr.am (infographics templates), Prezi (animated presentations), SlideShare (visual online presentations) and Scripted (white papers and blog posts). Many of these tools offer their own apps for mobile devices.

“You need a lot of content to build relationships and keep the sales funnel fed.”

“If you’re already familiar with what works and what doesn’t, and you actively use social media and have validated its benefits for you, then you probably need more money to support everything you’re doing.”

“The only thing constant about social media is that it continually changes.”

Social Media Sales Plan

Develop your social media plans and work from a defined strategy based on meaningful relationships. Try to build these connections. Base your online selling strategy on the following five elements:

1. **“Establish goals and objectives”** – Goals include the revenues you want to generate; objectives are your social media milestones.
2. **“Set the rules of engagement”** – Measure your progress, decide who on your team does what, and which social media tools you will use.
3. **“Conduct research”** – Identify your targeted social media networks, investigate the relevant online influencers and choose your searchable key words.
4. **“Know your assets”** – Become familiar with your available content. Tie specific content pieces – brochures, white papers, and so on – to specific online conversations. Keep your online profiles up-to-date.
5. **“Develop an outreach schedule”** – To achieve your strategic goals, set a firm, regular schedule for your online postings.

Time Allocation

Salespeople are always busy, so how can they find the time to carry out social media research, create online content, develop a strong presence on numerous social media networks and websites, engage in meaningful online conversations, develop genuine relationships and eventually close new business? The 2012 *Social Media Marketing Industry Report* states that 68% of marketing professionals find that they generate more leads when they spend six to 11 hours each week on social selling, so create your schedule and stick to it. Additionally, 40% report increased sales from these efforts.

Social selling calls for a meaningful investment of time, money, people, technology and organization. Set clear goals, like a “number of social media conversations” per week.

A 2012 marketing survey reports that companies now spend around 7% of their marketing budgets on social media. Survey respondents plan to triple their social media expenditures within the next five years. Your social media costs will include the following: internal resources, such as staff, and external resources, like agency costs, “training and education,” and membership fees, such as for the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. Your expenses will also include “online community sponsorships,” online media costs, “social contests” to build brand awareness, as well as “influencer programs,” such as sending free products to popular bloggers.

About the Author

Shannon Belew, digital marketing advocate and top-selling author, leads online marketing efforts for a global communications company.