

# face-time online

More businesses are discovering that social media networking can give them a competitive edge

Just a few years ago, no one could have guessed that something called blogging and tweeting would be considered valid forms of communication, let alone influence millions of people. Social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter were launched to enable people to stay in touch with friends, family and colleagues. But today's business owners are discovering another purpose for social media: staying in front of their clients and developing relationships with prospective customers. And other than an investment of time, these online efforts cost nothing—a benefit for businesses looking to preserve cash. Here, entrepreneurs and experts share their tips and insights about how they have made social media marketing work for their business growth.

## Build Relationships

“The most successful businesses first build relationships with their clients and prospects,” says Joel Comm, author of *The AdSense Code* and owner of InfoMedia Inc., a Web development company in Loveland, Colorado. “Social media is about getting businesses to walk through the four steps of marketing: like me, know me, trust me, pay me,” Comm explains. “Businesses that try to circumvent the ‘like me, know me’ and instead jump to ‘trust me, pay me’ are not going to have success in social media or in business in general. You have to walk through all four steps. Social media—and Twitter in particular—enables you to do that.”

So how do you get people you've never met to like you and want to get to know you by just pecking out a few words on a keyboard?

KeyBank small business client Rachel Daniel, president of Synergy Marketing Strategy and Research Inc., began using social media in 2007. In addition to running a growing market research firm in Fairlawn, Ohio, Daniel is a doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. “I began

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my SynergyBlog because people started asking me about my dissertation, which is about brand trust,” recalls Daniel. “Soon people who were interested in brand trust started posting my blogs on Facebook and Twitter, which really spread the word about my work. That’s when I began to realize that there is something to social media.”

Understanding the basic social media rule—no conspicuous business promotion—Daniel never advertised her business directly on the site. Instead, she posted blogs about how to build trust with your company’s stakeholders, including clients, prospects, employees, shareholders and the community. By sharing ideas and insights based on her academic research and her experience as a marketing professional, Daniel got potential customers to like her and know her. “Social media is about giving valuable, insightful, smart or interesting information to readers who are not just your colleagues but also your potential customers,” Daniel explains. “Building those relationships with like-minded people can lead to opportunities for your business.”

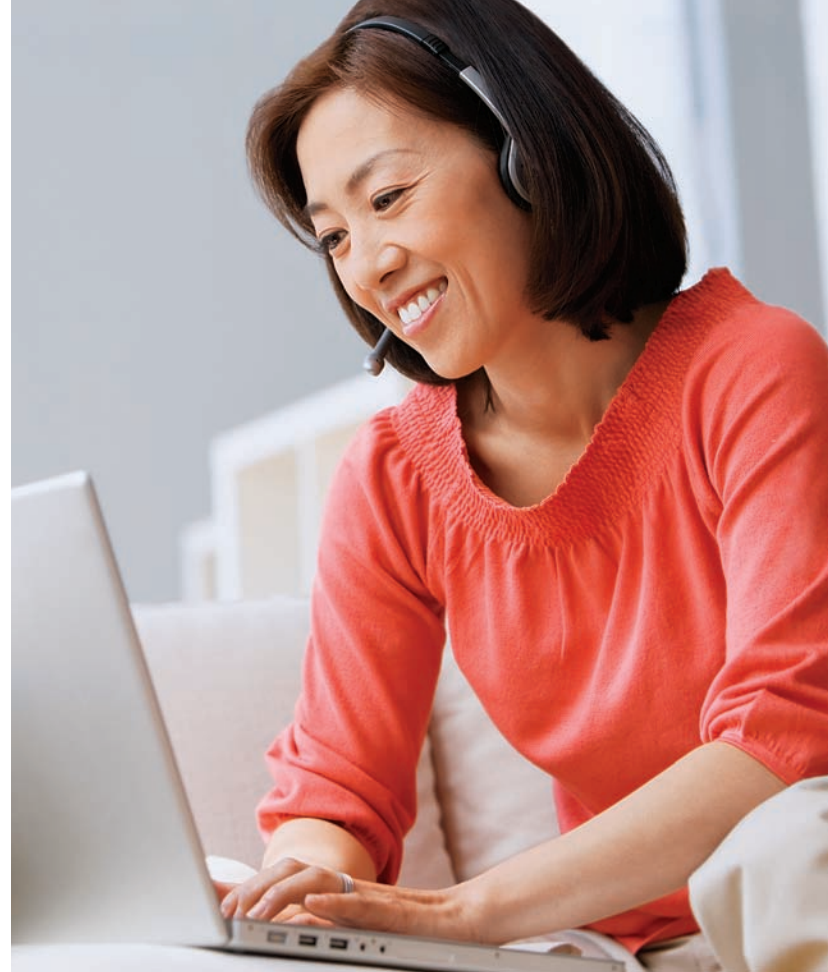
### Prepare a Strategy

Just as in the real world, where you hang out online says a lot about who you are and how you’re perceived. According to Rob Frankel, a Los Angeles–based brand expert and blogger, in social media there are two ways to protect your business and reinforce your brand strategy: proactive messaging and reactive messaging. Proactive messaging might be tweeting a helpful tip related to your product or sending a personal note thanking someone

### Dos and Don’ts

**Maximize your business’s exposure on social media sites with these tips:**

- Do** observe and read other social media sites.
- Don’t** blatantly promote your company on a social media site. At least 90% of your posts should be relevant to the conversation.
- Do** use search-engine optimization (SEO) to increase the traffic to your blog or Website. SEO tools help you find keywords your prospects are using in search engines. Google.com offers a free SEO tool, and how-to articles.
- Don’t** give up. It takes time to build your site. Staying engaged in the social media scene increases your chances of opening doors to new opportunities.



in your social media group who recommended your recent post to other social media sites or referred your service to a prospect. Reactive messaging is quickly correcting your mistakes or setting the record straight when someone posts a statement about you or your company brand that is incorrect, untrue or controversial. “Inexperienced businesses run the risk of losing control of their brand message by allowing too much outside influence,” Frankel says. “A tiny but vocal minority of social media participants can distort the brand’s real impression of itself.”

It’s important to remember that every tweet or blog you post shapes the story of your company. The more you share genuine insights with people in your social networks, the more they will want to help you get the word out about your company. When this happens, your influence becomes stronger, your reputation grows, and business opportunities will come to you. ■

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