

Is Social Media a Waste of Time?

10 Ways Small Businesses Can Use Social Media to Save Time

When many people think 'social media' the automatic response is 'waste of time'. Facebook is the place you go to play Farmville while your boss isn't looking. YouTube is where you head when you have five minutes to spare and you need a good laugh so you watch the latest funny video a few more times. Twitter is where you end up when you want to commiserate about the football results or find out the latest on XFactor.

Is it possible that these sinkholes of productivity could actually save you time? Yes, and in this report I'm going to show you ten ways to leverage social media to make your life better, complete your tasks more quickly, and have more time for the things that matter.

Read on for ways to use social media for good, not just for gossip.

1. Connect with Customers

These days business is all about relationships. We buy a car from the person our neighbour's brother recommended. We hire the contractor our mother's accountant used. We go to see the films that everyone on Twitter talks about. So finding ways to take business relationships beyond transactional is a sure-fire way to cement yourself in the minds of your customers.

Social media – blogs, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and the like – are all ways to connect with people. And if you can use these tools to establish and enhance your relationships with your audience, you've got a leg up on your customers. Here are a few examples:

- The wool store owner who tweets her new customer to ask how the new sweater is coming along...
- The car salesman who leaves a link for £10 off an oil change on a customer's Facebook wall...
- The plumber who records a short video showing how to check your pipes are well insulated for winter...
- The golf instructor who holds a Skype party during the Masters...

The possibilities are as vast as the world of Internet business. You will notice some commonalities between the ideas above:

- They're relevant. They are directly applicable to the niche or industry you're in (the golf instructor, for instance, isn't sending out oil change coupons; the wool store owner isn't hosting a Masters chat).
- They're personal. Each interaction connects with the audience in a manner beyond a simple 'buy my stuff' way.
- They're useful. Each interaction provides value to the recipient. In some cases, it's a cash saving (the coupon); in others it's informational (the video and the sweater inquiry). And even the Skype party is useful in terms of entertainment (which may well also offer a learning opportunity). The recipient is better off for having taken part in the interaction.
- They're free. They don't cost anything on the part of the person reaching out.
- They're relatively low on the time-investment scale. A tweet or Facebook post takes seconds; the video, a bit longer, but actually saves time in the long run as the vendor is answering a question he receives over and over again. The Skype party takes place during an event the golf instructor was going to watch anyway.

In summary, social media provides ways to reach your customers on an intimate level, quickly and inexpensively. People want to be treated as individuals, not as numbers. And social media provides a way to do that without spending your life on the phone (which is maybe what these people may have used to the same effect in the past).

2. Get Answers to Your Burning Questions

It used to be that all answers to your questions could be found on Google. Then, when Google became overrun with junk sites and advertisements, Wikipedia became the guru of choice. But even Wikipedia won't give you the answer to every question you have. Sometimes the information is too obscure, or sometimes you don't want the facts; you want an opinion. So what better place to turn to than social media?

Social media is great for the following types of questions:

- **Opinions** - Heading to London and want to know where to find authentic Tex-Mex? Wikipedia won't help you and Google is full of sponsored ads. So instead of doing a fruitless search, post a query on your Facebook page and within hours your followers will have chimed in with a variety of suggestions, depending on your appetite, allergies, and budget.

When you want an opinion or suggestion, ask your social media network. They tend to enjoy giving help and assistance, and the resulting information may be more appropriate to your circumstance than a review written by a nameless, faceless entity.

- **New technology questions** - Your brand new video camera won't boot up after the last charge. You could spend an hour or two on the manufacturer's website, searching the FAQ pages for an answer. You could Google the problem, but all the answers you get are for the previous model. So you send out a plea for help from the Twitterverse and within minutes you have a handful of suggestions, as well as a site to go to for expert help.

Google often doesn't help much with tech questions because there either aren't enough answers out there to make it to the first page of the search results, or the resulting pages are all scams, junk sites, or sponsored posts for services that will fix your camera for a small fee. That's why you can often save time by asking your network first.

- **References and Referrals** - Looking for a great handyman in London can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. You can go through the Yellow Pages or check online, but are any of these people any good? To know for sure you need a personal reference or referral, and that's where your social media network can really help out. Post a Facebook query or tweet it out there, and you'll get answers that will steer you in the right direction.

We often think of social media as a way to just hang out with our friends and colleagues, but it is actually one of the greatest examples of the wisdom of crowds. Take advantage of it, and save time, too.

3. Get Fast Feedback

Everything online happens at the speed of light. Decisions that used to take weeks or months to make are now a matter of mere minutes or seconds. There is no time for a group consensus or 'sleeping on it'. But with your social media network, you can still get input from a number of people, quickly. There are literally millions of people on-hand ready and able to give you feedback in the moment.

For instance, want to know if the font on your homepage is too small? Send a tweet with the page link and ask what your followers think. Wondering which header graphic better conveys your business? Post them both on your Facebook page and ask for input.

The benefits of turning to your social media network:

- You'll get an interesting cross-section of respondents: Friends from school, curious passers-by, co-workers.
- It's fast. Depending on the size of your network, you could have responses within minutes.
- It's free. You don't have to pay a penny for the input.
- It's informal. No need to prepare a five paragraph overview, ten slide PowerPoint presentation, or other background information. Just ask and wait for input.
- It's objective. The people you're asking have little or no vested interest in the outcome.

Of course, this method is better for some queries than others. There are drawbacks:

- You have no control over the responses or who they come from. You could get input from people who aren't part of your target audience, or who offer silly suggestions.
- By soliciting opinions you can make people feel like they have ownership in the process. If you don't take their advice, they can feel slighted.
- You make some of the inner workings of your business public.

As a result, soliciting fast feedback via social media networks is best for the following situations:

- When the decision is relatively minor. You don't want to ask the general public what you should do about selling your business, or responding to a law suit, or customer service issues.
- When the results will be public anyway. If the decision is behind-the-scenes, keep it there. My examples above – font size, header graphics – are public anyway. Don't post private information, or anything that might breach confidence.
- When you need a variety of opinions from specific people. If you need feedback from a certain segment, you're better off emailing them directly rather than putting out a public call for feedback.

Your social media networks can serve as your own personal focus groups. Asking their opinion can also make them feel closer to your business, and part of the process – both good things!

4. See What People Are Talking About

Large corporations spend millions of pounds prowling the streets seeing what the trends in fashion, music, and culture are. They rely on feedback from companies like Gallup and the Nielsen Ratings to see what's hot and what's not. As a small business, you don't have the same level of resources. But that's okay – you can get your own feet on the street and get feedback, quickly and easily, using your social media networks. Here are some of the tools you can use to see what's hot, right now:

- **Twitter Trends** Go to <http://search.twitter.com/> and right below the search box, you'll see a list of trending topics (as of this writing, the trending topics include #IfOnlyUKnew, Bears Win, Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen, Billy Ray Cyrus - and this last one seems only to be trending because everyone is asking why he's trending!). Once you click on the trending item you can select to save the search for future reference.
- **Hashtags** If you want to follow a particular topic ('internet marketing', 'social media' etc.) via Twitter, you can simply follow the hashtag (#) associated with that subject. If you are using Hootsuite to manage your social media you can save this search as a separate stream to keep you up to speed with new info on the topic.
- **Facebook and LinkedIn Groups** It's a little more difficult to see what's trending on Facebook or LinkedIn, but you can see what groups are growing and what topics are hot. Do a search on either site for results, and join groups that look interesting and pertinent to your business. You can receive messages directly to your email inbox or opt to log in to your account to read. Either way is a great tactic for keeping tabs on what people in your niche are talking about.
- **Yahoo! and Google Groups** Go to groups.yahoo.com or groups.google.com to view thousands upon thousands of groups for interests as varied as recycling and Justin Bieber fans. Join the ones appropriate for your interests, browse topics, and see suggestions at <http://custom.yahoo.com/bestofyahogroups/>.
- **YouTube 'Most Viewed'** To see the most viewed videos of the day, head over to <http://www.youtube.com/videos?feature=mh>. You can even see top results by category (Education, Howto & Style, Nonprofits & Activism, News & Politics, Comedy, People & Blogs, etc.) The results may surprise you!

- **Stumbleupon, Technorati, Alltop** Check out any of these blog aggregators to see what others find interesting, read-worthy, or titillating. You can see hot topics, trending news, and just plain weird stuff.

As you can see no need to hire a scoop reporter to tell you what's happening in your target market. You can easily track it all from your computer – no reporter's notebook required.

5. Find Resources

If you're in search of a great web designer, you may want to skip Elance and go directly to Twitter, do not pass go. Finding recommended vendors and freelancers for your business may be as easy as asking the hundreds of folks in your social media network who they recommend. Here's a breakdown of ways to find trusted contractors, by social media outlet:

- **LinkedIn** One of the most powerful elements of LinkedIn is the 'recommendations' feature. You can write, read, and request recommendations from others in your network. It may take a little leg work, but you can use this feature to find a great copywriter, and read what others have to say about him or her. Think of it as a Yelp for people.
- **Twitter** While you're missing out on the depth of information available on LinkedIn, you can get instantaneous responses. For instance, tweet 'Looking for a great online bookkeeper' and you should get a bunch of responses within minutes. Give more weight to those that come from inside your network, though, as often a request for referrals will generate automated responses from spammers. It looks like it comes from one of your friends, but is actually just an ad.
- **Facebook** You can post requests for referrals, just like on Twitter, and you can also search for people with those keywords in their profiles. Beware though - just because someone is listed as 'Penelope Bookkeeper' doesn't mean they're an expert. You could also post your request in groups that are associated with the topic (e.g. post a request for a logo designer on a graphic artists' Facebook group wall, for example).
- **YouTube** It might seem a little strange to put out a call for resources via video, but why not? Especially if you have a significant following, you could get a tremendous response. Added benefit: If the project you have in mind has a visual aspect, you can demonstrate it right on the video (think office organisation, website overhaul, kitchen remodel).

Even if fourteen people recommend the same web designer, make sure to do your due diligence. Get a written quote and scope of work, ask for a list of projects

completed, and confirm that that person will be doing your project personally, not outsourcing to another. With these tips in mind, you should be able to find great outsourcing resources at the click of a mouse.

6. Take a Quick Break

Whether you're working in an office or at home, taking regular breaks is essential for your mental and physical well-being. In the traditional office, you could head to the staff room for a cup of coffee, or head down to the proverbial water cooler. But when you work for yourself, taking a break to join into humanity is a little more involved. You can get in the car and drive to Starbucks for a quick latte, but that takes time and money.

You could call a friend to check in. But who talks on the phone any more? Instead, here are a handful of things you can do to take a much-needed mental vacation, all from the comfort of your own home, all via your social media networks:

- Head over to Facebook and see whose birthday it is using the notification feature. Then leave them a birthday message on their wall (5 minutes)
- Catch up on your favourite non-work-related blogs. Or read a few of the industry movers and shakers' blogs and leave them a thoughtful comment, linking back to your own site. (10 minutes)
- Post a question of the day (hashtag #QOTD) related to your niche, but in a 'just for fun' sense. For instance, 'What's the last ___ you purchased for your ___?' This is a fun way to engage your Twitter followers, as well as gather some informal intelligence. (5 minutes)
- Check out the latest videos in your niche (did you know you can subscribe to other video creators' YouTube channels?). Leave a comment or create a video response. (15 minutes)
- Log into LinkedIn and update your status. Then check in on some of your groups and see what the hot topics are. Offer your expertise where appropriate. (15 minutes)
- Do the same with Facebook. Visit some of the groups you belong to and leave questions on the wall, comment on others' posts, and leave links where possible. (15 minutes)
- See who's commented on your blog lately and visit their websites, leaving comments and thanking them for visiting you. Reciprocity goes a long way to establishing relationships. (10 minutes)
- Go to the iTunes store and see who hosts the leading podcasts in your industry. Visit their blogs and start establishing a relationship with these movers and shakers. (5 minutes)

Any of these ideas takes less time than a trip to the local Starbucks – or a trip to the water cooler, for that matter! Use your break time wisely and you'll receive the double benefits of refreshment and audience engagement.

7. Share Important Announcements

You're changing the name of your podcast. You just gave birth to a baby girl. You're heading to London for an upcoming trade show. You are releasing a new online product. All these are perfect opportunities to use your social media networks to help spread the word far and wide.

When you have something that you want to share with the widest possible audience, leverage your networks – all of them. Here are some tips to make sure your news gets the attention it deserves:

- Don't be afraid to post it more than once. Particularly on Twitter, stuff gets lost in the noise. If people don't catch it the second you post it, it may be gone forever. Use a tool like Tweriod.com to see when most of your followers are online and post during those times. And post it a couple of times over the course of a day or so. Those who already have read the original post will just ignore it without thinking twice about it.
- Create an opportunity to connect. Turn a newsy announcement into a way to engage with your audience. Instead of just saying, “My new product launches next week”, say, “Check out this sneak peek of my new eBook that I'm launching next week. Let me know what you think!”. Or, “My daughter is here – here's her birth photo. Guess her birth weight and the person who's closest will win a free 30 minute consultation with me”. People are looking for new and different. Give it to them.
- Talk about the news before it happens. Telling people about what you have in progress not only helps them feel engaged, it also serves as a subversive way to promote yourself without sounding like you are promoting. Say, “Just finished the last chapter for my eBook. Have you signed up for early notification?”, or, “I'm interviewing so-and-so next week for my next online class. Do you have any burning questions you'd like answered?”.
- Interconnect your social media networks. Place an announcement on Twitter that sends your followers over to your blog to read more. Record an announcement on YouTube and then post it on Facebook. The stronger the interconnections between the spokes of your network, the stronger the overall network.

Forget about press releases and publicists and don't sit back and wait for the newspapers to find you. Instead you can do the promotion yourself by leveraging the members of your network.

8. Cut Through Customer Support

Make a choice: Would you rather spend the December holidays with your crazy Uncle Bob - the road kill taxidermist - attached to your hip, or spend the afternoon trying to troubleshoot your computer modem by phone with your internet service company? If you're like most people, you'd ask Bob to pull out the photos of the lifelike armadillos. Let's face it; these days, customer support is a pain in the rear, not to mention a huge waste of time.

Thank goodness, you can turn to your social network to help you out. Here's how:

- **Tweet first** There are a number of major companies, including Zappos.com and Comcast, who have customer service reps following twitter streams and searching for their brand name in search of unhappy customers. If you can post your issue in 140 characters or less, go for it! Hint: make sure you use the company name – spelled correctly – in your tweet, and employ hashtags where warranted. In other words: “My #HP OfficeJet 5600 won't print from my MacBook Pro. Anyone have any ideas?”
- **Take it to Facebook** Many companies have branded Facebook pages where you'll receive a personalised response within hours, or even minutes. That way you can go about your business instead of sitting on the phone, frantically working your way through the automated telephone tree. Hint: Post a message on their wall rather than trying to contact them via Facebook message. The public aspect of your plea for help will ignite a faster response.
- **Try their website** Bypass the 0800 number and email in favour of ‘live chat’. You can get a live someone immediately (or within a minute or two) instead of playing hurry up and wait on the phone. Live chat not available? Try the email contact form. You may have to wait 24 hours for a response, but you can use that time more productively.
- **Record a video** If all else fails, record a video and post it to YouTube. You never know what a visual plea for help, or a bad review, will do for cutting through the red tape. Be calm, though, and leave room for a response; if all you do is go mad, they'll just write you off as a nut.

The key here is to take control of your own time rather than letting someone else determine your destiny. Don't let ‘them’ tell you that you must sit on hold for 45 minutes before you get a living, breathing person to listen to your problems. Save time and take it online.

9. Execute a Survey or Poll

In section 2, we covered using your social media networks to get informal opinions from your followers and friends. Now, let's cover how to solicit more structured input. There are a number of ways to create and post 'official' polls or surveys, none of which involve getting a paper survey printed, and sending it out via snail mail to your followers. Here are some options that are much faster and less expensive:

- **Google Docs** Create a simple survey in Google Docs (docs.google.com) and get your results in spreadsheet format – for free! You can even brand the survey with your own colours and logo.
- **Survey Monkey** If you want to email out your survey, check with Survey Monkey at surveymonkey.com. You can create surveys quickly and easily, and aggregate answers from up to 100 respondents for free. Get more surveys and more answers for a small monthly fee.
- **Facebook Polls** Facebook makes it really easy to add polls or surveys to your Facebook profile or page. Just go to facebook.com/survey to be walked through the free process.
- **Wordpress Widgets** There are a number of Wordpress widgets and plugins that can be added easily to your Wordpress blog or website. Check out WP-Polls, Poll Code, Snap Poll, and Vizu.

Polls are perfect for the following circumstances:

- **You want to increase engagement among your followers** Polls are a perfect way to gather information and use it to further discussion. Most people don't just want to weigh in with their position; they want to discuss it too!
- **You want to use current events to spark conversation** Does your audience think the latest Google search algorithm changes will affect their business? Do your blog readers agree with the latest findings on the uses of social media? Ask them, and you'll establish yourself as an expert by hosting the conversation.
- **You want input from your followers and volume of responses is more important than speed** If you are in the process of developing a new product, you can find out if people would prefer an audio, video, written, or multimedia product. If you're thinking of visiting a few cities on tour, you can see where your pockets of fans reside.
- **You want to gather demographic information about your followers** Want to know how often your followers golf, how much money they spend on equipment, and what their biggest challenges are? A survey is a great way to solicit that type of information.

10. Connect with 'Experts'

Ever thought you could be involved in a conversation with Ashton Kutcher, Stephen Fry, or Miley Cyrus? What about some of your industry's rock stars? Well, you can through social media. Tools like Twitter and Facebook make it easy to connect with the stars and the experts on a person-to-person level. Here's how:

- **Get on their radar** Read their blog. See what they're writing about. Retweet their tweets, comment on their Facebook page, and link to their content. The goal is not to become a stalker, but to let them know you're out there, and you're more than just a fan. (If you feel a little stalker-ish, remember that they're posting their content in a public forum, for public consumption.)
- **Add value** Leave insightful blog comments that expand on the topic. Write your own blog post and link back to theirs. Create a video response. Let them know about your experiences and results using the methods or techniques they've taught.
- **Ask a question** Give them something to respond to! Ask a question that shows you understand their topic, and that you've followed their information streams. Don't make it too personal, but make it unusual – something that you haven't seen answered elsewhere, but something other followers might wonder about, too.
- **Don't get offended** With tens, and sometimes hundreds, of thousands of followers, chances are that your question is one of dozens they'll receive. If yours doesn't get answered, don't get hurt feelings. It's purely a matter of volume, not anything personal against you.
- **Rinse and repeat** Keep at it – the longer you work at establishing the relationship, the more familiar your name will seem. If your question isn't answered the first time you ask it, post it again. Try a few times, and then move on and ask another.
- **Give before you ask.** If you're hoping to establish a relationship with someone in your industry as a potential joint venture partner, or because you want to guest post on their blog, then you have some more work to do. The top dogs in different niches receive dozens of requests for help. Stand out from the crowd of favour-seekers by doing something for THEM first.

Getting noticed by the stars in Hollywood, or in your industry, is possible. But rather than sending a fan letter via post and waiting months for a reply, cut through the red tape and go directly to the source via social media. It will save you time, and save yourself a postage stamp.

Conclusion

As an entrepreneur time is your most precious asset. It's the one resource you cannot beg, borrow, steal or replace. While some people are thinking of social media as a sinkhole for losing hours and days, smart business people know they can leverage their networks for a variety of business-related purposes. Hopefully, this report has given you some ideas for saving yourself time, money, and effort.

I hope you've found this report useful. If you have any questions or thoughts following reading it then please head over to my Facebook Page and let me know <http://facebook.com/jododdspage>

If you are not already receiving regular emails from me about online marketing and small business you might like to visit my website and sign up for my free 10 day ecourse about using social media in your business <http://www.jododds.com>