

A guide to using social channels
for your SME digital marketing



Social media offers small and medium-size businesses a huge opportunity to reach target audiences, engage with customers and earn third-party recommendation. But how can you decide which channels are best for you and deploy your resources effectively?

Whether your small business is already active on social media or just considering how to start, there are few businesses that can afford to ignore it. It's not just the popularity, prevalence and low cost of entry that makes social media attractive; the value is the personal way that it allows businesses to interact with existing and potential customers.

But for the small business owner, with limited time and resources there's a danger of grinding away with little outcome. Good decision-making and strategy are vital: which channels to use, and how to avoid not ending up spending hours of time 'doing' social media for little tangible return.



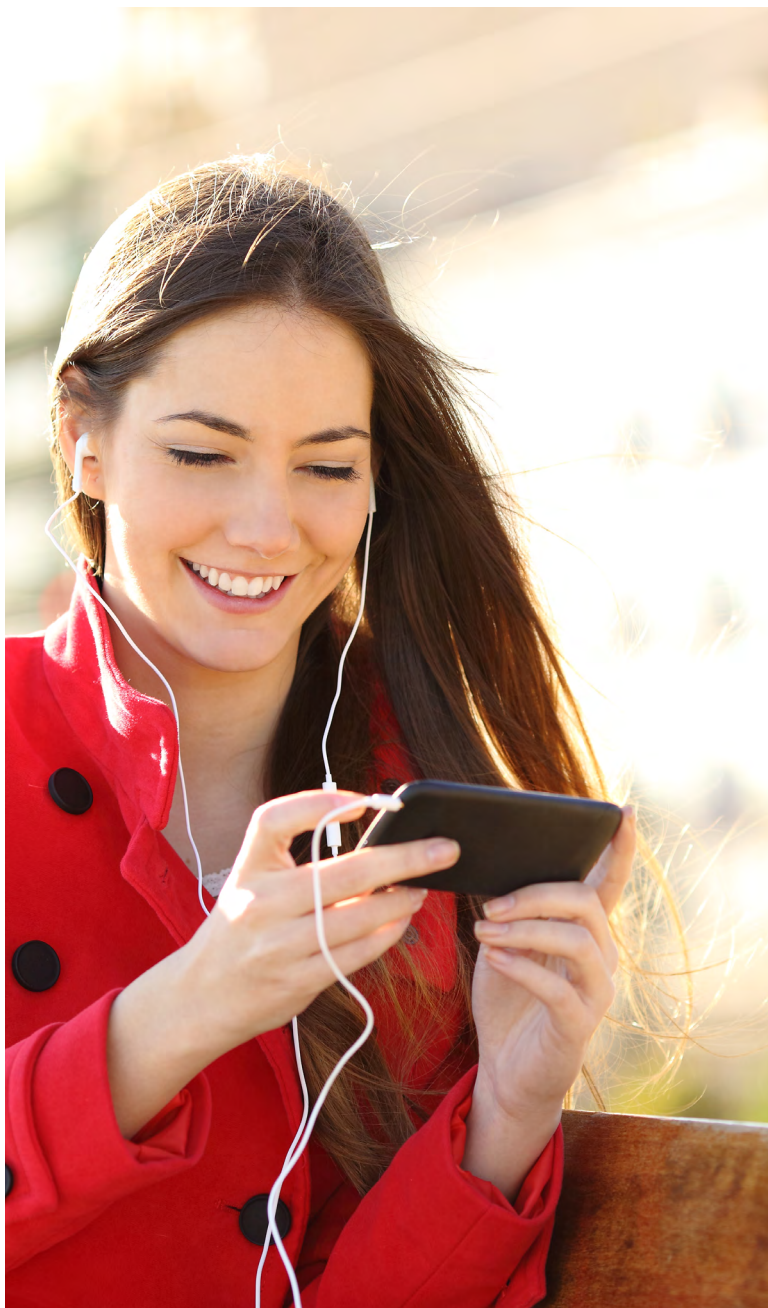
A changing landscape

In a rapidly shifting social media landscape, General Dwight Eisenhower's famous quote that 'plans are useless, planning is indispensable' could certainly apply. 'A lot of small business start creating and posting content with no strategy – no vision of where they are trying to go,' says Adam Gray, author of Brilliant Social Media. 'The key thing is to understand what you want to achieve, how to get there and what 'good' looks like.'

Worrying about getting things perfect often curtails effective effort and progress, Gray believes. 'The challenge is not to be brilliant, it's to be diligent and to engage. It's about nibbling away and building trust. Sometimes social media is only the equivalent of waving across the room, but it keeps you front of mind. It can be difficult for small business to believe in, because the results rarely happen overnight. Social media is about the medium and longer term.'

It's a great leveller, too. Small businesses can thrive on social media because it's easier for them to 'be themselves' and engage more naturally than a big corporate might.

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Engage, don't broadcast

The golden rule above all others is to engage, not broadcast, according to networking consultant Andy Lopata. 'People will switch off very quickly if you simply see social media as an opportunity to sell to them. Very few people have joined networks like Facebook and LinkedIn to be peppered with sales messages, even subtle ones. In fact, they tend to want to converse and be heard.'

But this is a good thing, because it gives your business the chance to engage in conversations and gather the views of people who are – or could potentially become – your clients.

'Spark curiosity among your network and answer their questions. Comment and share their posts where appropriate,' Lopata says. 'Make them laugh or make them think or feel inspired (which, in turn, will make them share). Make heroes and celebrities out of your network and connect them to each other. The more you do that, the more you invest in people through social media, the more they will gravitate towards you and want share what you do with their networks.'

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Choosing channels

The most popular social media channels are the ones that you've heard of: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat, along with networking big-beast LinkedIn. **For a small business, there's a Napoleonic danger of getting caught up engaging on too many fronts.**

Better do one network well than several badly, advises brand and digital strategist Steve Quirke. 'A well-established community on one platform will be more valuable than a trickle of interest across half-a-dozen social channels. Community means mutual engagement, interest and conversation. Have some personality and don't take it too seriously! You're there to be social, not to be in charge.'

The number one error that people make with social media is following the crowd blindly, according to Lopata. 'Joining networks because everyone else is - or says you should - without any clear strategy, can be very counterproductive. In many cases people either end up with incomplete profiles and inactive accounts that reflect poorly on them when found; or just wasting a valuable resource - time.'

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Get going

With this in mind, your social media strategy should be clear in terms of how you think each network might specifically help your business. That could be directly, in terms of funnelling traffic to your site, or more gradually in terms of establishing trust, credibility and connections.

‘Facebook and Instagram, for example, are great at spreading messages virally and subtly educating your network about what you do,’ Lopata says. ‘Twitter hashtags are useful for helping you research your clients’ activities or following trends in key industries. LinkedIn’s use of the first three degrees of separation makes it a very powerful referral and networking tool.’

‘With social, you aren’t competing against other brands, you’re competing against the biggest publishers in the world, people’s friends, family and cats,’ says Alex Clough, Social Media Director, Splendid Communications

Avoid cluttered visuals and heavy branding (it’s already coming from a brand page, remember). Shorter content will generally get more attention than longer stuff. ‘You can certainly post long copy and long videos, but you’d better make it the most compelling thing someone is going to read or watch that day.’

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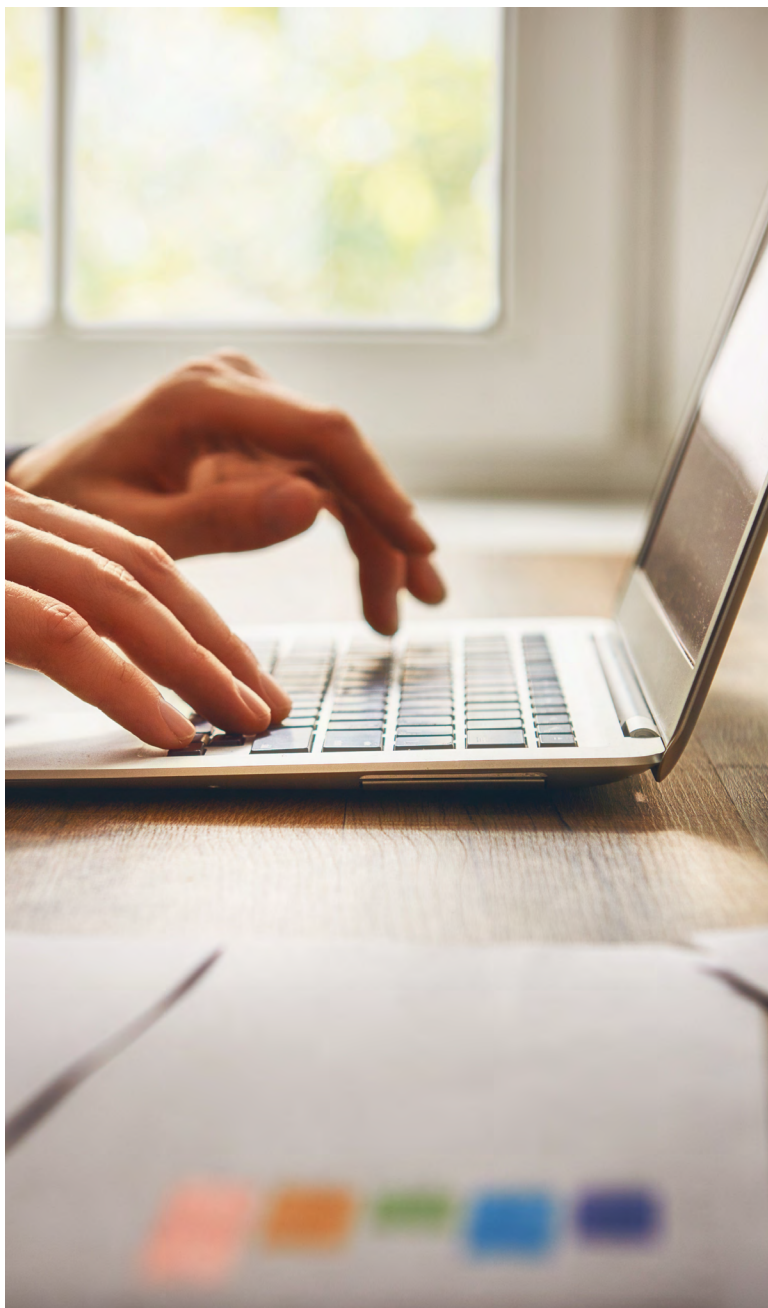


Measure success

One of the most compelling aspects of social media for promoting your business is the ability to measure and track activity. But this doesn't mean that tangible results will be immediate. It's important to think in terms of longer-term strategy such as growing a loyal community, building trust and showing the personality of the business.

'Obviously the only true way to determine whether any marketing has been effective is to know what it is you're trying to achieve in the first place and set clear metrics and KPIs against those objectives,' says Clough.

'But never judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree. Don't expect all or even most social activity to deliver revenue and leads, or reduce business costs. This is dangerous expectation to place on such a diverse marketing channel, and will lead to the wrong measurement of the content being created.'



Keep your website a priority

Build your social media around your owned media – your own website, your blog – rather than the other way around. ‘When you build on Facebook or Instagram, you are building on rented ground,’ says Carlton Jefferis, co-founder of social media consultancy, Digiterati. ‘You don’t control the rules of that platform, you are at the mercy of Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat as to how things pan out. They can make changes that may not favour you or your business objectives. We’ve seen this, for example, with Facebook posts by businesses having a declining reach year on year, forcing them to pay more to get the same result. These social media platforms are important tools in growing your business, but you are at the mercy of changes that could impact your business severely, overnight.’

Content that is archived on your website rather than just on social channels will have far more longevity too. ‘We’ve got content that we created years ago that still has really active and prolific numbers of comments and shares,’ Jefferis says. ‘That content isn’t being discovered via social media anymore; it’s being found because it is sat there archived by Google for people to find.’

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Less is more

You can stay focused on your core business activities and still thrive in social media, says Clough. 'If you have a smaller business, community or customer base, you'll find that the Pareto Principle probably applies. With the right tools and the right approach, you will most likely get 80% of your value from 20% of the time you spend. The trick is to always learn and improve; always strive to be more relevant, more creative and - at the heart of it - more social.'

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USEFUL RESOURCES

Steve Quirke founder of Brand Marketing

www.brand-marketing.london/

www.lopata.co.uk/resources

www.lopata.co.uk/blog/beginners-guide-social-networking

Brilliant Social Media (Pearson) by Adam Gray

www.pearsoned.co.uk/bookshop/detail.asp?item=100000000530223

Adam Gray's social media consultancy

www.social-experts.net/

Digiterati Academy – low cost practical online training in social media

www.digiterati-academy.com/

Digiterati – State of Social 2017 – “secret” link to video masterclass

<http://bit.ly/2mwNbxv>

Communication agency Splendid

www.splendidcomms.com