

What's in it for me? A snappy guide to social media success.

In the old days, running a thriving business meant engaging with customers the old-fashioned way. First, you bought some traditional advertising spots on billboards, radio stations, and local TV. Then, you built rapport by chatting with whoever came in the door.

But this is the twenty-first century. The internet has changed all that. Now, the best way to grow a customer base is through social media – though that's easier said than done. Luckily, these blinks demystify the world of online advertising. Using practical, clear examples, they show how any business can use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – whether to generate word-of-mouth advertising, positive user interactions, or happy customers that will like, subscribe, and recommend your business to a friend.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how to advertise to your wife;
- what makes Facebook like a college classroom; and
- why it's okay to talk to strangers.

Always be listening.

Imagine this: You get into a small fender-bender through no fault of your own. But, after taking your ride to the mechanic, you get some unsettling news. Your car insurance won't cover the bill. Surely this can't be right?

So, you call the insurance company hotline. After being on hold for two hours, there's still no response. Frustrated and tired, you log on to Twitter to vent. You post, "my car insurance company is awful, worst customer service ever!"

Now, if you run that insurance company, what would you like to happen next? You could ignore the post as it gets faved and retweeted hundreds or thousands of times. Or you could dodge the PR disaster and be ready to respond right away.

The key message here is: Always be listening.

Communication is always a two-way street that involves both talking and listening. Unfortunately, a lot of companies overemphasize the talking part. They spend a huge portion of their budgets on flashy advertising campaigns. Meanwhile, they neglect to listen to what their customers have to say. In the old days, this was excusable. Gathering feedback was time-consuming and expensive. But with social media, listening to your users is easier than ever before.

So, what are the benefits of listening to customers? For one, you'll gather valuable insights directly from the people who know your business best. You can discover which products work and which are failing. You can even glean great ideas for future endeavors. You can also catch any negative stories about your business and address them before they turn into viral sensations.

The most successful businesses already invest extensively in listening programs. For instance, the computer giant IBM created an initiative called Listening for Leads. In it, a special team of people called "seekers" constantly scans social media platforms for conversations that could be turned into sales. So, when someone posts something like "my old server is starting to die," an IBM sales rep can quickly contact them with a suggested replacement.

Any business can start listening with very little overhead. Simply search social media platforms for key words related to your business. This could be your brand name, the names of your competitors, or even common phrases related to your industry. You can also subscribe to paid services that monitor these sites for you. Either way, the insight you'll gain will be worth the time and money.

Use Facebook's powerful functionality to connect with the right customers.

In March 2009, Dave Kerpen, founder of Likeable Media, was far from home at a media conference in Austin, Texas. One night, while resting at his hotel, he decided to tell his wife and business partner how much he missed her. So, he bought an ad on Facebook.

Obviously, Kerpen's message of "I love you and miss you Carrie" had a target audience of one. So, how did he make sure his ad reached the right eyes? He used Facebook's micro-targeting features to show the spot to only a very specific demographic – that is, 31-year-old, married, female employees of Likeable Media living in New York City.

And, voilà! With just a few clicks, he bought an ad that appeared to just one user out of billions.

The key message here is: Use Facebook's powerful functionality to connect with the right customers.

Before the internet, businesses had to spend lots of time and money blanketing the media with advertisements just to reach a few potential customers. Sure, there was some specialization – a women's fashion brand could place ads in women's magazines, for example – but it was an imprecise art. Social media platforms like Facebook make it easier than ever to reach the exact audience your business needs.

Using Facebook's micro-targeting tools, it's now possible to buy ads that only reach your desired demographic. For instance, a senior wellness company can invest in spots that only appear to users over the age of 60 who are interested in topics like fitness, yoga, or health. Or a sports bar can spend a few bucks targeting young folks who list football and drinking as their hobbies.

Another way to reach a specific audience is to have people "like" your company's page. Users who like your page see the posts you make in their news feeds. This gives your business a direct channel to your customers. The best way to garner this engagement is to ask and entice people with offers. Any time you interact with a potential customer – through ads, emails, or in person – suggest they like your page to hear about future discounts, sales, or special offers.

Facebook posts are seen by more people when they're clicked on or interacted with. So, when making posts on your company's page, try to create space for engagement. Ask questions, tell stories, and start discussions. This way, you'll create a channel for two-way communication. We'll cover this more in the next blink.

Don't talk at your customers; talk with them.

Think back to your college days. What were your favorite classes like? Were they the ones held in a large, impersonal auditorium? You know, the ones where the professor droned on and on from a lone, distant podium. Or did you prefer the small, intimate seminars where students and teachers alike could discuss issues like peers?

Most people prefer the latter. Sure, the big lectures made it easy to snooze in the back row, but you probably learned more, and had a better time, in the smaller setting.

The amazing thing about social media is that it allows businesses to foster the same convivial atmosphere in the digital realm. A clever company will use the internet to build rapport with its customers on a personal level.

The key message here is: Don't talk *at* your customers; talk *with* them.

Too many companies treat social media like traditional media. They simply post an advertisement on their Facebook page or Twitter feed and leave it at that. But this overlooks the main advantage of these platforms. Namely, that they allow for actual conversations. Yes, your company can still make official announcements online, but it should also talk to customers like the real people they are.

This personal approach works well for addressing tough situations. Often, an upset customer will post a complaint on your company's page. Don't ignore or delete these comments. Respond publicly instead. Tell your customer you understand her frustration and provide a way to get help directly through a private channel. Not only will this assuage the initial complaint, but other users will see the interaction and be impressed with your company's service.

Of course, you can also use social platforms to engage in more lighthearted interactions. Respond to positive comments as well. If someone posts about your products, give them a cheery reply in return. In these interactions, avoid using a cold corporate tone. Instead, post like a regular person. Don't say "we value your patronage, sir." That's much too stiff. Try something like "Awesome! Hope you had a great time!"

If you do this right, an authentic voice will shine through. And you'll gain a deeper personal connection with your audience. People like actor Ashton Kutcher and politician Cory Booker are exemplars of this approach. Big brands can do it as well, though – if they let each employee use their real voice and even sign their social media postings with their name.

Collaborate with your customers.

A few years ago, a man woke up with a burning desire, a desire for Entenmann's Banana Crumb Cake. Yet, to his horror, he couldn't find it at any store. The pastry had been discontinued. Hungry and distraught, he took to the internet.

Every day, he posted on Entenmann's Facebook page, asking the company to resume Banana Cake production. At first, it was reluctant to engage with him. But, finally, it made a deal. It would post a poll. If a thousand people voted in favor of more cake, it would resume producing the confection.

The challenge went viral and an overwhelming number of people voted in favor of Banana Cake. So, cake production resumed. Today, Banana Crumb Cake is among Entenmann's best-selling products.

The key message here is: Collaborate with your customers.

So, what can we learn from the astounding comeback of Entenmann's Banana Cake? Well, for one, people love their desserts. But, more importantly, companies and customers can use social media to work together. Customers can directly petition businesses for what they want. In turn, businesses can directly ask customers for their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. The result is a powerful synergy where everyone benefits.

Consider this: In 2010, the beverage company Glacéau wanted to release a new flavor of Vitamin Water. Rather than merely guessing at which flavor would perform best, it used social media to gather information. It posted a poll on Facebook so people could vote on their preferred variety. The company even solicited suggestions for packaging and design. The result was Connect, a black-cherry lime drink that boosted Glacéau's sales by more than 10 percent.

This information-sharing dynamic works in reverse as well. Companies can use social media to provide useful knowledge to customers. For instance, the popular restaurant chain Applebee's posts short videos where its chefs show off how to make some quick and easy recipes at home. Counterintuitively, this doesn't cut into the restaurant's sales. Rather, it makes customers more loyal, because they feel a personal connection with the brand and their food.

As these successes show, there's real value in creating a collaborative back-and-forth relationship between companies and customers. Moreover, as customers interact with your brand, they'll talk to each other as well. Eventually, your Facebook page may turn into a thriving community where people socialize and share stories. We'll take a closer look at the importance of stories in the next blink.

Share stories to connect and inspire.

Every love story is unique, but how many couples can say they tied the knot at home plate? At least one. Before they started Likeable Media, the author and his wife were busy planning their wedding. Since they're both a bit showy, they decided to really swing for the fences and get married at a baseball game.

So, they contacted the minor league team the Brooklyn Cyclones and arranged to have a ceremony on the field after a game. They even got a few companies to help sponsor the lavish event.

In the end, the wedding was such a hit that it was covered in the *New York Times* and on several late-night news shows. The wild story gained so much attention, it even helped the young couple launch their new social media marketing company.

The key message here is: Share stories to connect and inspire.

Sharing stories is one of humanity's oldest and most cherished pastimes. A good story can bring people together, create strong social bonds, and communicate deep and personal ideals. In fact, one of the main reasons social media is so popular is that it allows users to swap stories with people all around the world. A savvy company can use this to its advantage to keep customers engaged, interested, and coming back for more.

The case of lawyer Matthew Weiss is a great example of how this works. Weiss is a New York lawyer who specializes in fighting traffic tickets. When he's not in the courtroom, he's posting stories about his work to his blog *Confessions Of a Traffic Lawyer*. The blog is so popular, it's like free advertising. Business has increased 22 percent since he began writing it.

You, too, can build an audience through telling stories. Really good yarns are all around you. Just think: How did your company get started? What inspired you to enter your industry? Which customers were the most memorable and who have you been able to help over the years? Reflect on these types of narratives and you can find the right stories to tell. These stories will also help you understand what makes your business unique.

Once you start sharing, your customers may open up, too. Always be on the lookout for tales people share on social media. When you find one, give it a boost through your own social media channels. You can also ask people to submit stories in return for coupons and goodies. You never know what tales people have to tell!

Integrate social media into every aspect of your customer experience.

It's around noon and your stomach's starting to rumble. You see an advertisement on Facebook for Dave's Grill. The food looks tasty, so you decide to give it a shot. When you enter the restaurant, a sign tells you to like Dave's Grill for a free appetizer. How could you say no?

After the meal, the server asks you to leave a review online. Thanks to the encouragement, you write a short post praising the food and ambiance. By the time you get home, your post has a response from the manager: "Glad you enjoyed the meal! Come back next time for free dessert."

You definitely will, and chances are, a curious friend will, too. Clearly, Dave's Grill knows how to run a smooth and effective social media operation.

The key message here is: Integrate social media into every aspect of your customer experience.

There's a tendency for companies to keep their social media operation separate from the rest of their business. Maybe they'll have one person or department responsible for posting ads and replying to comments while the rest of the organization remains completely removed. This may seem logical, simpler even. But you'll have more success if you have input from every level of your company.

Consider how each division of your organization can contribute to and benefit from social media. Your advertising and marketing teams can use it to reach new customers and disseminate novel promotions. Your research and development team can use it to gather valuable feedback and insight on products. Your sales team can use it to locate leads.

You'll want to leverage social media outside your office, too. The more often customers are reminded of your social media channels, the better. Follow the lead of major companies like Oreo and place a reminder to visit your Facebook page right on your product's packaging. If you own a store or restaurant, place reminders around your physical location as well. Many businesses will even have a small reminder printed on every receipt.

You can even use your customers' own social networks to get the word out. For instance, buy a promoted tweet advertising your company. If it's memorable or clever, users might favorite, comment, or retweet the ad into their feed so all their friends can see it. This not only spreads your message but also adds the legitimacy of a friend's endorsement!

Use social media to surprise and delight potential customers.

The author loves to tweet, especially at business conferences. While attending these events, he posts small updates about every little encounter that catches his attention. So, when a friend recommended he check out the book *Built to Last*, he noted the title and sent out a tweet: Has anyone else read it?

Almost immediately, he received a reply from an online follower. Despite being a stranger, the man offered to ship him a copy overnight, free or charge. Impressed and charmed, Kerpen accepted the offer. He also noted that the user ran a human resources consultancy. When it came time to expand Likable Media, this friendly stranger received Kerpen's business.

And, just like that, an unexpected social media interaction resulted in a solid sale.

The key message here is: Use social media to surprise and delight potential customers.

Sometimes, a little unexpected joy can go a long way. Now, businesses should definitely use social media to advertise their products and make announcements. But they can also use these platforms just for fun. After all, giving people an unexpected thrill or small hit of glee is a great way to stand out from the crowd.

One way to spread some lighthearted joy is to engage in social media interactions purely for fun. Twitter is a great platform for this because replying to strangers is the norm. When the electronics retailer Best Buy wanted to up its social game, they created Twelpforce. This pool of employees scanned Twitter for vaguely tech-related conversations and chimed in with jokes, advice, and friendly banter.

Another strategy is to reward social media users for engaging with your brand. The convenience store Cumberland Farms wanted more followers, so it made a contest. If its Facebook page got 50,000 likes, it would treat everyone to a free Chill Zone, its signature icy drink. Within a few days, it reached its goal. The fans got their drink and Chill Zone sales rose in the following weeks.

Your dash of unexpected joy can be a direct advertisement, too. Many companies use social media to surprise customers with sudden deals that are too good to pass up. For instance, the computer company Dell and the airline JetBlue both post deeply discounted sales through their Twitter feeds, along with a link to buy. Usually, these deals are snapped up in seconds. Now, that's something everyone can like.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

The days of traditional top-down advertising are over. With the advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, businesses have an exciting opportunity to connect directly with potential customers. Savvy companies should use these platforms to listen to consumers' desires, create better products, and engage people in productive two-way conversations. Add in a dash of fun and friendliness, and you'll find new opportunities all over the web.

Actionable advice:

Don't be afraid to apologize!

Sometimes, you'll make a mistake. Whether it's a big one or a small one, social media provides an excellent outlet for admitting your screw-up in a productive way. If a customer complains on social media, own up to your fault and offer a solution. She'll feel listened to and digital onlookers will be impressed with your candor.