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Social media: what's best for your small business?

Thoughts from Cynthia Lambert, head of adult services at SCLSNJ's Mary Jacobs Memorial Library branch

Cynthia is a business and technology librarian and head of adult services at SCLSNJ's Mary Jacobs Memorial Library branch. She has a passion for teaching and technology instruction, with a focus on Google tools, social media, and apps. Prior to becoming a librarian in 2008, she was a Financial Analyst at Dow Jones Indexes. Her combined public and private sector experience give her a unique perspective on the information needs of businesses. Cynthia regularly teaches classes on social media, research databases, and the wide variety of electronic resources available at SCLSNJ.



In the nearly ten years since Facebook first opened its doors to anyone over the age of 13 with a valid email address, many business owners have used social media on a regular basis. By 2009, when Facebook rolled the first official business pages, there were already over 100,000 businesses using the platform. Back then, at any business gathering, you likely heard the question: "Should my business be on social media?" Since then, the number of social networking sites has exploded, along with the number of active users. While most small businesses now know they should be using social media, many questions persist. One of the most common: "Do I really need to be on *all* of these sites?" The answer: maybe not.

What's best for your small business will depend on what your business does, who your target audience is, and what your social media strategy is. Some platforms, like Facebook, have so many engaged users, it can work for most businesses. Others, such as LinkedIn or Pinterest, have more targeted audiences. If those audiences don't match your target audience, there may not be a need for your business to use them. Likewise, some platforms will take more work and maintenance, so if your strategy doesn't provide enough time, you might want to choose alternative networks to use.

Social media use in America

According a 2015 Pew Research Center report*, 84% of American adults use the Internet, with 85% of adult males and 84% of adult females reporting they are Internet users. Individuals with a college education are more likely to use the Internet, as are those with a household income over \$75,000. For the first time, more than 50% of adults over the age of 65 report being Internet users.

Of the adults who use the Internet, 71% use Facebook. This is far more than other large social media platforms: 28% of Internet users use LinkedIn and Pinterest; 26% use Instagram; and 23% use Twitter.

Facebook also leads the pack with active engagement: 71% of its users access the site daily, 45% use it multiple times each day. Comparatively, the percentage of daily users on other large social media sites is much lower: 46% for Instagram, 36% for Twitter, 17% for Pinterest, and 13% for LinkedIn.



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Multiple platform use is quickly becoming the norm, with 52% of users reporting they use two or more social media sites. Of those who use only one site, 79% report using Facebook.

How to pick what social media site is best for you

It can be unrealistic for a small business to expect to effectively use every social media site every day. While some users will simply take their Facebook post and stick it up on every social media site they can, that is not a recommended practice. What works for one is not necessarily going to work for another. In fact, this can backfire and alienate users who are looking for unique and engaging experiences across various platforms.

When considering which platform to invest your time and creativity in, keep in mind:

- Who uses this social media platform? Do they match your target audience?
- What do you want to get from using this platform? What do your target users want when using this platform? Can you both benefit from your business using the site?
- When is this medium used? How frequently do you need to post? Will you have time to meet the platform's demands while meeting your business' demands?
- How can you effectively use the platform to get your message out and interact with your target audience?

The four largest social media sites: overviews and updates

Social media is ever evolving and small businesses need to pay close attention to the changes as they form and carry out a social media plan. Remember, since social media changes frequently, your strategy and participation may change frequently, too.

Facebook remains the largest and most widely used social media platform in the world. According to the company website, in March of 2015 there were 936 million daily active users. Because of the size and scope of Facebook, it works well for a variety of small businesses. Plus, it is easy to use and understand and provides you with basic analytics you can use to measure your success.

If your target audience includes adults over the age of 65, Facebook is the place to be: 56% of online seniors have a Facebook page*, which is far more than any other social media platform. They are also more likely to use only one social media site and that site is Facebook.

Women tend to use Facebook more than men, a trend that has been in place for many years, but both use Facebook more than any other social media.

To maximize your business page on Facebook:

- talk to and with your customers, not at them.
- do not make all of your posts about you.
- interact with other Facebook pages to expand your reach and engage more users.
- post photos and videos; they are rewarded with more views than simple posts.
- try posting some behind the scenes content. People love to see how their favorite businesses work!

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- don't forget to use it to showcase your other social media and web content. Link to your website, share content from your Instagram and Pinterest accounts, as well as your blog posts.

Twitter probably has the best name recognition of all social media sites other than Facebook. According to the company web page, in March of 2015, there were 305 million active users and 500 million tweets sent a day. Pew Research Center reported* that 23% of American adults use Twitter, but of those, 62% are under the age of 50. So if your target audience skews younger, Twitter is a platform to consider.

Twitter is great for answering questions from your customers and releasing news about the business. It also provides great opportunities for you to easily learn about what others in your field are saying and doing.

Small businesses need to be aware that, unlike Facebook where posts can bubble up long after you post, Twitter is a continuous stream. Therefore, simply tweeting out your Facebook post is not enough to engage an audience.

To maximize your Twitter presence:

- use #hashtags. Keep them simple and consistent, and be careful not weigh down your posts with excessive hashtags.
- follow users that your target audience would be interested in and retweet their content often.
- tweet, retweet, and respond regularly. Twitter is all about quantity.

Instagram is an image-based social media site. It was built for and is designed to work with mobile devices. In fact, posting from a non-mobile device is difficult and not recommended. As the "Insta" portion of the name suggests, posts are intended to be instant: fast, on the go, and eye-catching. Users can like your photos and leave comments.

According to its website, there are 300 million users monthly who post about 70 million photos daily. The Pew Research Center reported* that the percentage of American adults using Instagram skyrocketed in 2014 to 27% - a nearly ten percent increase from 2013, the largest year over year gain of all the major social media sites. Users tend to skew younger than Facebook.

Very little text is used on Instagram; it is all about the images. If your business lends itself well to photos and using photos to tell a story, this is a great place to be. Plus, Instagram makes it very easy to post your photos to Facebook, where images are also rewarded. The two platforms work seamlessly together. Given the explosive growth Instagram is experiencing, if you are already on Facebook, using this platform makes sense.

To maximize Instagram:

- use targeted hashtags. Like Twitter, Instagram uses hashtags to search and sort images. Keep them simple and consistent.
- follow users who your target audience would follow and answer comments as you would on Facebook.
- link to your other platforms. Many social media platforms rely on images more than text - and photos tend to translate well - so your Instagram feed is a good one to link to any other social media accounts your business has.

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- share behind the scenes shots of the workplace. Peeking behind closed doors is always popular and is a great way to engage with users.

- don't worry if your images are not professional quality. The point of Instagram is to take a picture or video with your device and share it instantly.

LinkedIn is the largest professional network and one of the oldest social media platforms. It is used primarily as a way to find jobs or network with business professionals. According to the company blog, there are over 300 million members on LinkedIn as of March 2015. The bulk of the users are college graduates and those in higher-income households. User age tends to skew older than most other social media sites. If you're targeting BTB, college graduates, or business professionals, you will want to consider being on LinkedIn. Unlike other social media sites, LinkedIn has a unique audience and culture; LinkedIn users are more focused on business.

To maximize your impact on LinkedIn:

- create a resume of your business. Highlight what you have to offer.
- feature a photo of a person. Unlike other social media, where a cute profile picture or a cat or a flower might be acceptable, LinkedIn is for networking. You need to show the person behind the page.
- reach out and ask for connections - not just to people you know, but to people you want to know. Contacts are the name of the game here. Send them a thoughtful request explaining why creating this connection will be beneficial to you both. If you think you will benefit more than the other person, use the Get an Introduction tool to help smooth the way to connection.
- be active. Network, network, network. This takes a time commitment far beyond snapping a photo or posting it.

Ever Evolving Social Media

Ten years ago, the term social media was barely a blip on the radar for most small businesses. Today, your brand, your public interaction, and your internet footprint depend on a strong social media presence. As platforms grow, evolve, and multiply, it becomes increasingly important to understand who uses what platform. By identifying which platform works best for your target audience, small business owners can become more efficient and maximize their social media impact. SCLSNJ is here to help you learn more.

* Perrin, A., & Duggan, M. (2015, June 26). Americans' Internet Access: 2000-2015. Retrieved June 30, 2015, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/06/26/americans-internet-access-2000-2015/> and Duggan, Maeve, Nicole B. Ellison, Cliff Lampe, Amanda Lenhart, and Marry Madden. "Social Media Update 2014." *The Pew Research Center*. The Pew Research Center, 9 Jan. 2015. Web. 30 June 2015.
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