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Navigating the Social Media Landscape

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You know what Facebook and MySpace are. You've heard of people twittering. You read a couple of blogs now and then, and you must admit, you already know that your company's firewall prevents you from watching YouTube videos at the office. What you don't know is how these social sites might connect to your marketing plan.

Exploring social media - such as blogs, social networking sites, image hosting sites and social bookmarking sites - is becoming increasingly essential for businesses. Social media marketing (SMM) allows you to build your company's reputation as an authority in your field while engaging your consumers in an open dialogue. Most importantly, it helps you drive up site traffic, meet conversion goals and bolster search engine marketing results via links and quality content - all while supporting your traditional marketing efforts.

Although SMM may not require a huge budget, it takes long-term planning and dedicated resources.

Be a Detective

Before you start a social media campaign, find out who's saying what about your business across the Web. Do a search for your company on the top three search engines to see what comes up. Next sign up for [Google Alerts](#) to receive real-time notifications when your organization makes the news. Then visit [Google Blog Search](#) to see what bloggers have to say about your brand. If a blog shows frequent posts about your company, sign up for its RSS feeds.

Once you know what's being said, and on what sites you're mentioned, it's time to devise a plan. Your plan should look both backward and forward, as you look to respond to existing comments and also determine the best venues for spreading the word in the future.

Devise a Plan

Define a process for responding to messages already posted about your organization. Don't be overly aggressive about squelching negative comments, as social media is driven by individual opinions, and be sure to leverage any positive mentions.

Also determine which new channels are most appropriate for giving your business the exposure it needs by scouring the Internet for the most relevant social sites. Draft a list of them, noting the requirements and information you'll need to create profiles, Web pages, etc. Some of these virtual destinations, such as social bookmarking sites, require only a URL and tag specifications, while others, such as your own blog, require a domain name, hosting, content and a plan for gaining exposure. Take note of how often you'll have to update and review the content.

Prepare for Launch

Once you have the plan in place for posting new messaging about your organization, prepare for





launch. In the days leading up to it, be sure to comment on other blogs, stories and social sites, encouraging two-way communication within your social space. Invite friends, colleagues and others in your industry to view your content once live and provide insightful commentary.

Listen and Respond

It isn't time to sit back and relax. Staying participatory once your social media has launched is critical. Maintain an informative, authentic voice for your company and brand while staying transparent and honest. If social users feel you are being insincere in your use of the community, you'll be exposed.

The Internet has the ability to retain information forever. If you put a stop to any aspect of your plan, post a closing message, delete your profile, make comments private and remove any data that you can. A dormant blog or broken URL creates a negative impression of your brand.

Lastly, remember that the social landscape is ever evolving, and staying active in your online community is one of the best ways to stay aware of and respond to its changes.

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