

Hiring Out Social Media Tasks

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Today's business owner is facing an uphill battle in growing business. Economic pressures and diminishing returns on traditional marketing have many businesses scrambling for alternatives. This is leading more businesses to think of adding social media to their marketing arsenal, but it's a new and changing environment--what's the best way to incorporate it?

For many small business owners, keeping track of social media marketing efforts is a seemingly impossible task. Even traditional marketing efforts often take a back seat to day-to-day operations, so adding social media to their pile of tasks can seem like the last straw.

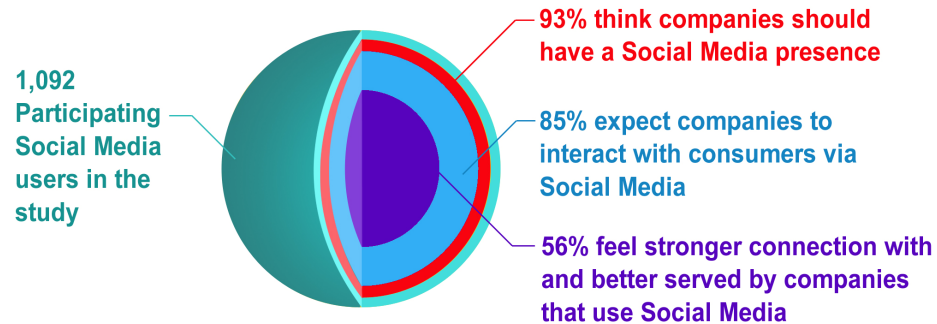
Many companies new to social media are asking themselves how they can best use this fast-moving technology to their advantage when they barely understand it themselves.

Fortunately, there is a way to get help implementing social media marketing without losing control of it. Hiring a social media consulting service can be a good way to match your goals with a plan that gets measurable results. However, outsourcing the wrong things to the wrong people can cost your company money, time, and lost reputation. This paper will explore the challenges faced by businesses seeking help with social media and the benefits of hiring a qualified virtual consultant or service to simplify the process.

Trends Driving Social Media Marketing Today

According to census projections, Generation Y will soon outnumber baby boomers. Their familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies is one reason for the push towards social media. However, there are other factors at play as well: a sluggish economy, higher print and postal costs, and a general lowering of consumer response to television, newspaper and other mass media platforms. This has resulted in a "perfect storm" scenario for the rapid expansion of social media.

A 2008 Cone-Omicron consumer study¹ revealed some telling trends among social media users as outlined in the following diagram:



Although slow to catch on to this trend at first, companies are starting to pay attention. In fact, according to a US Interactive Marketing Forecast Online Survey² of marketing firms conducted in 2009, Forrester analysts predict that interactive marketing (which includes social media) will represent 21% of all marketing spend by 2014.

According to Forrester, almost 86% of marketers currently have or are building social media applications. Companies know they can no longer afford to ignore it as a passing fad. It is indeed a fast-moving revolution, representing a fundamental shift in the way humans prefer to communicate. However, jumping aboard this moving train has its risks—and success depends on overcoming some key challenges.

Small Business Challenges in Social Media Marketing

Many small business owners find it difficult to find time to devote to learning how to use Social Media

There are three primary obstacles that small business owners face in deciding how to move forward with social media:

- Understanding how to use it to build business
- Time management issues
- Knowing which tasks are safe to delegate

1. Understanding how to use social media to build business

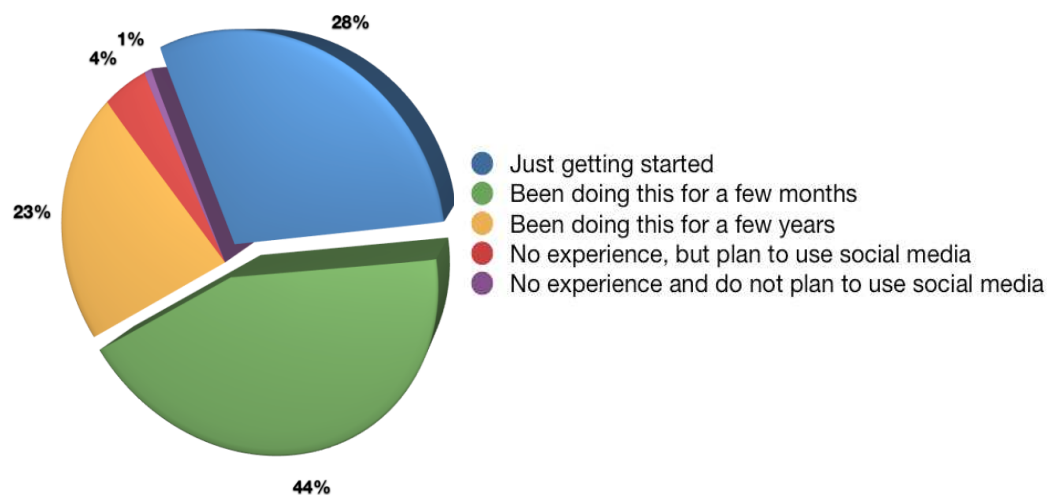
Keeping up with new platforms and changes in technology can feel like information overload for small business owners. Business networking sites like LinkedIn and Plaxo, and social networks such as MySpace,

¹ Cone LLC: "Business in Social Media Study"; Sep. 2008

² Forrester Research: "US Interactive Marketing Forecast": Jul 2009, updated Jan. 2010

Facebook and Twitter all have differing rules and terms of usage. The recent advances in mobile technology add another layer of complexity. Business owners often ask: “What sites do I use? What are their purposes?”

If these questions sound familiar, you’re not alone. According to the Social Media Marketing Industry Report³, which surveyed almost 900 businesses, most respondents reported being new to using social media. The following diagram taken from the report shows that most are either just getting started, or at best, only have been using social media for a few months.



To business owners used to employing marketing concepts that have been proven over time, the fast-moving pace of social media marketing causes anxiety. Manuals and guides are cropping up everywhere—but in a medium this young, how do you know which is right?

To add to the confusion, the new media concepts of **transparency**, **community building**, and **interactivity** seem alien to many small businesses. Even measuring return on investment (ROI) is a different animal in this realm. People new to social media are often puzzled by the differences, and can end up making mistakes that cost them time and money when they respond to pressure to jump in without learning their way around first.

2. Finding the time

Gayle Buske, President of the virtual staffing agency Team Double-Click®, says that the small business owners she talks to know that social

³ Michael Stelzner: “Social Media Marketing Industry Report”: 2009

Business owners often ask: “Is there someone on my staff that I can assign this to? What will I be taking away from them? Do I need to hire somebody?”

media needs to be done and done well. However, they often have staffing concerns. According to Buske:

“Top questions are: ‘Is there someone on my staff that I can assign this to? If so, what will I be taking them away from? Do I need to hire somebody?’

“If the business owner decides to hire someone, there are concerns about the time needed to train that person in the business as well as the business’s social media strategy. If a business already has a marketing plan, they need to know that the new hire can implement it. They may need different levels of people depending on the business’s positioning.”

So where should businesses look for qualified help with social media? That often depends on the level of help they need, and their available personnel resources. It takes time to come up with a social media marketing strategy—and implementing it requires an ongoing commitment as well. This creates a dilemma for small business owners already squeezed by the clock.

3. Knowing what is safe to delegate—and to whom

Businesses concerned about being left behind their faster-moving competitors in the social media space often make a critical mistake. They respond to panic by jumping in feet first, thinking it’s better to act immediately and learn as they go.

Reacting to panic can have unexpected (and unpleasant) results. There are many horror stories circulating on the web of companies who handed off the wrong social media tasks to the wrong people—and paid a stiff price in poor reflection of brand, lost revenue and time. The following examples from several small businesses illustrate just a few of the problems that have caused headaches (and worse):

Bad Tweets

Assistant mistakenly tweeting an article written by the competition...complete with competition’s bio box and contact information.

Lost Accounts

Requesting too many connections at once in violation of platform terms, resulting in permanent revocation of the account (and lost contact with established connections).

The Disappearing Act

Assigning all social media tasks on established accounts to one individual within the company, who changes the passwords and leaves without notice, creating a months-long effort to re-build the company's platforms and reconnect with followers.

Other problems that can occur when handing off tasks include plagiarized content, posting unprofessional material, violated SPAM rules, and ignored or mishandled customer complaints—all of which can be expensive to fix.

Many business owners new to social media voice concern over these issues, and feel overwhelmed by the changes taking place around them. However, a brief look at history can give some insight into moving forward toward a solution.

From Traditional to Social Media: A Historical Perspective

The graphic below illustrates some interesting media statistics⁴:

Social Media has forever changed how both marketers and customers view advertising

From these numbers it's easy to see how advances in technology create momentum—and how that momentum picked up speed over the years. The Internet has been around for almost two decades, but the advancements in social media in just the last few years have exploded Internet use worldwide. And as new technologies like mobile are introduced, they accelerate social changes to the marketing dynamic even more.

Instead of passively receiving information the way advertisers want to present it, consumers are now calling the shots. They

Years to Reach 50 Million Users



... Radio
38 Years



... TV
13 Years



... Internet
4 Years



... iPod
3 Years



facebook
100 million users
in less than 9 months

⁴ Data from Socialnomics.com

are telling business how they want to receive information, what type of information they're willing to absorb, and where they want to find it.

The birth of social networks made it much easier for people to interact and talk about their experiences with brands. However, this is a two-edged sword for businesses. On the one hand, you have more opportunities than ever before to connect with your audience. On the other hand, your business needs to stay on top of the conversations happening around your brand—much of which is out of your control.

Fortunately, there is help for the small business owner who doesn't have time to keep up with all the changing technologies and techniques, but still needs to use social media for marketing. A new breed of professionals is settling out of the industry to help time-challenged marketers incorporate social media into the mix.

The Small Business Solution: Virtual Social Media Consulting Services

Hiring out social media tasks can reduce pressure on employees, but businesses should seek professionals with marketing knowledge as well as social media experience

Successfully incorporating social media into your current marketing takes time and resources to accomplish. Many small organizations don't have the budget to hire employees dedicated to this task, and are reluctant to burden existing employees with new responsibilities.

Businesses can address these time-management and resource issues by getting help from a virtual assistant or consulting service that specializes in social media. However, not all services are created equal, and not everyone who calls themselves an "expert" has the qualifications needed to implement a successful plan.

Dr. Rachna Jain, CEO of Mindshare Corporation, a social media marketing and consulting firm, says that entrepreneurs (especially women) sometimes feel uncomfortable outsourcing marketing initiatives:

"Saving time and money are important, but entrepreneurs feel they have more control if they have direct access to the solution provider. They need to be able to reach the provider and discuss what's happening in real time as opposed to outsourcing to India or the Philippines, for example, where you may never get to speak to the person who's actually running your account.

"That's why it's important to choose your solution provider carefully. You want to be able to have real-time adjustments along the way—not

a cookie cutter approach. Plus, the marketing solution should be tailored to your particular business type.”

So what are the characteristics of a qualified, professional consultant? For starters, they should have an in-depth knowledge of the social media industry and marketing in general—not just a working knowledge of each platform. A professional service should be able to show you quantifiable education in the social media industry as well examples of actual experience.

Contracting with an experienced service reduces the need to take current employees away from important tasks. It can also be less expensive than taking on new staff dedicated solely to social media efforts, and can eliminate the laborious process of sifting through employment resumes looking for people with the right skills.

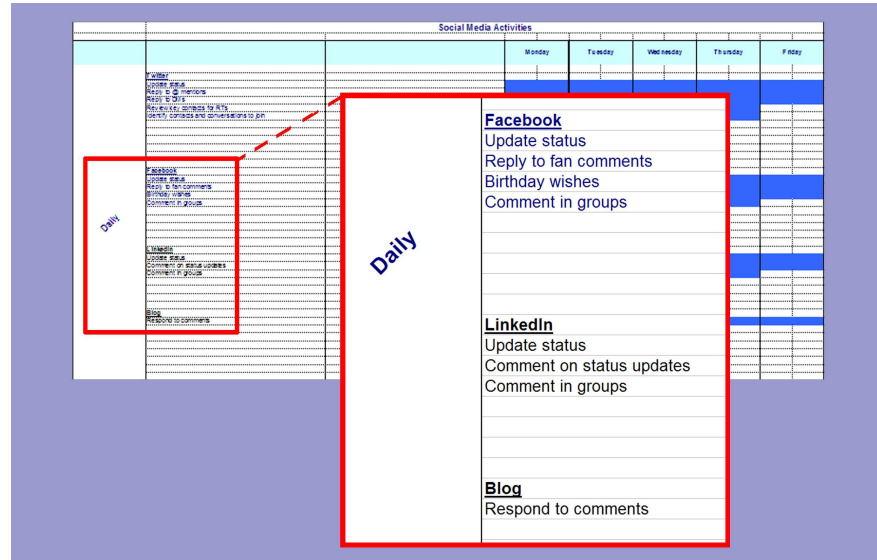
Benefits of Using a Virtual Social Media Consulting Service:

For the small business client, hiring a virtual social media consultant offers several key benefits:

- ***Shortening the Learning Curve:*** A qualified consulting service can substantially lessen the amount of time a business owner needs to spend on getting up to speed on the various social media platforms and technological changes. Time is money, and a consultant knowledgeable on the ins and outs of all the platforms as well as overall marketing strategy can hone in quickly on what will work best with a particular business.
- ***Comprehensive marketing review:*** A qualified service will review a company’s existing marketing plan and select strategies consistent with their individual goals and market preferences. This type of targeted review, combined with concrete knowledge of each medium and observance of best practices keeps the business owner from wasting time in the wrong platforms.
- ***Effective dedication of resources:*** Many businesses unfamiliar with social media best practices underestimate the amount of time necessary to achieve optimal results. A qualified service will create a written strategy for moving forward that includes a daily, weekly



and monthly plan of platform-specific tasks for implementation such as the spreadsheet example below:



Social Media Activities						
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
Daily						
Facebook						
Update status						
Reply to fan comments						
Reply to DMs						
Review and respond to fan's posts, comments and conversations to join						
LinkedIn						
Update status						
Comment on status updates						
Comment in groups						
Blog						
Respond to comments						

A knowledgeable consulting service not only creates a comprehensive, step-by-step strategy and timeline, but should also get to know your business well enough to be able to suggest delegation of specific tasks according to your internal resources and budget.

What to look for in a solution provider

When looking for a virtual social media consulting service, it can be helpful to keep these important considerations in mind:

Ask for specifics: Does the service have references? They should be able to give you documented results of what they were able to achieve for other companies. What detailed steps do they take with a client to discover their needs?

Experience with your business type: Ask for examples of how the service solved specific problems your business faces, and whether they have documented experience in implementing these types of strategies.

Education: Although social media is a new industry, look for evidence of education and ongoing training. If the service holds a certification,

For a good match, ask enough questions to make sure your provider has proper training and marketing expertise

ask when they achieved it and what they have done to stay on top of trends since then.

Do they walk the talk? Look at the consultant's social media profiles and make sure they look polished. Observe their connections and how well they've integrated their own profiles/positioning.

Extensive network: An ideal provider will have an extensive network of qualified experts and the ability to outsource if necessary. They should be able to make recommendations if you need services in conjunction with theirs, such as web/graphic design.

Full-time availability: The best providers have full-time businesses...not part-time jobs they "do on the side." To be assured of responsiveness when you need it, make sure your provider can be reached during your business hours.

Turnaround time: Look for a service with time on the books to handle your strategy or implementation. Ask in advance how long it will take them to implement your plan and get it going. Ask for milestone dates, such as when can you have the first draft, and pay attention to how long it takes them to respond to your questions and emails.

Implementation plan documentation: The ideal consultant will offer a written operations guide for your social media strategy, and be willing to train you and your staff on its implementation.

Payment options: Especially for start-up companies on a tight budget, be sure to work with a service that bills in actual time versus the more expensive paid retainer model. Stay away from guaranteed hours requirements, and seek a consultant who offers flexible payment options.

Extensive Business Background: Ideally, your provider should have previous business experience in marketing, sales, setting up systems, and project management—not just social media certification.

Virtual experience: Look for a provider with at least two years of experience working virtually. Inexperienced providers may not have the equipment or software required to work virtually from a home office.

Experience managing teams: Seek a provider who has managed both physical and virtual teams. In managing your Social media business solution, your provider should be comfortable working with your staff members as well as other vendors.

The BizMSolutions Advantage

BizMSolutions caters to small business owners who need virtual solutions for their business, and meets all the criteria outlined in this paper. With more than 19 years in systems management, owner Janice Clark has coached and developed teams of sales, marketing and operations professionals.

Using strategies she's developed over the past two decades, Clark created an organization designed to offer customized strategies and step-by-step virtual solutions via a network of virtual assistants nationwide. Since 2005, BizMSolutions has worked with dozens of companies and entrepreneurs, including speakers, business coaches, insurance companies, legal and accounting practices, direct sellers and public relations firms.

Clark was certified in 2009 as a Social Media Strategist by the International Social Media Association (ISMA), and continues her education by participating in ongoing training with leaders in the industry. She works with small businesses to show them how to leverage tools such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to differentiate themselves and create strategic conversations around their businesses.

BizMSolutions offers a free 7-day email course: **Seven Things You Can Do to Connect with Your Clients and Engage Your Prospects Now**. Each module offers expert insights on how to use social media effectively, such as:

- Deeply understanding your audience
- Knowing what tools are available
- Listening to your markets' activities
- Getting your audience involved
- and much more.

To access the 7-day email course or more information, contact BizMSolutions on the web at: <http://www.bizmsolutions.com>.

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