



Seven Ways You Can Use Social Media

Social tools can be applied to many areas of the business, ranging from product development to sales to customer support. We cover lead generation, the Holy Grail for business-to-business (B2B) companies, in Chapter 12. Here are seven other ideas.

Market Intelligence

By now, nearly everybody knows how to set up a Google Alert, but that's only one way to listen to conversations. Google's coverage is vast, but it isn't total. For example, the search engine indexes almost none of Twitter and very little of what goes on in gated social networks. Search engines are also structurally limited in their ability to understand images, audio and video. A variety of tools are available, ranging in price from free to thousands of dollars per month, that listen to, quantify, analyze, and even attempt to translate the vagaries of language into customer sentiment.

The bigger opportunity in market intelligence is developing a holistic picture of your competitive environment and your market. Searching for mentions of your own brand is a start, but you'll learn

much more if you expand your criteria. The information you get back is only as good as the keywords you search. Among the search phrases to consider are:

- Competitors
- Customers
- Channel partners
- Regulatory agencies and commissioners
- Legislators
- Influential authors, journalists, and bloggers
- Individuals within the organizations mentioned at the start of this list
- Topics relevant to your market

In addition, there are many more sources to track today than just a couple of years ago. These include:

- Blogs
- Twitter and other microblogs
- Video and audio
- Photo-sharing sites
- Regulatory filings
- Facebook, LinkedIn, and vertical social networks
- Wikipedia
- Discussion forums
- Social bookmarking sites

A good practice is to set up a social media dashboard, which you can do with services like My Yahoo!, iGoogle, and Pageflakes. Another free online service called Google Reader allows news, blog and other search results to be tracked via RSS feeds, which can be monitored, shared, and stored indefinitely online through the service. When you refresh the dashboard, the latest search results are displayed. This feature is particularly useful with Twitter, which indexes only a few days of conversations in its search engine. However, when saved as an RSS feed, messages are available until deleted. In Chapter 6, we walk you through the process of building a social media monitoring

dashboard with Google Reader to catch almost anything that moves online about your company, your competitors and your business segment. In addition, there are other services that search Twitter history, including Google and Microsoft Bing.

Market intelligence dashboards have value across the company and can be a useful way to demonstrate the effectiveness of social media as a barometer of customer opinion, as well as an early warning of changes in the market or competitive activity. We recommend you always follow your competitors and your largest customers on Twitter. In both cases, you want to keep up with what's on their minds.

Identify Opportunities

Dashboards can also help you scope out opportunities to expand existing business or find new markets. For example, many business opportunities are now aggregated through Twitter hashtags, which are unique identifiers like #RFP or #jobs that can be used to group conversations. You can also learn a lot about changes at current customers or companies you're pitching to. For example, the web site Listorious.com lists hundreds of chief financial officers who use Twitter. Mine these lists for people to follow at companies that matter to you. If you can answer one of their questions, you can often get their attention in ways that would be difficult or impossible to do by more traditional means of communication.

LinkedIn can be a fantastic resource for finding influential people. This business networking site looks at companies from the bottom up by listing the people who work there. Much of LinkedIn is public, so it can be a useful way to get past the traditional gatekeeper departments like sales, support, and public relations, who often try to restrict access to decision makers. You can use LinkedIn company profiles to find people with connections to your own network or simply as a starting place for more detailed research. One of the more useful features of profiles is that they link to groups to which the member belongs. You can use this information to scope out issues that are of interest to them, creating additional opportunities to connect.

You can also use social networks to identify new product opportunities. These days, even B2B customers express their frustrations in public venues, creating opportunities for savvy listeners to identify solutions. The no-nonsense professional groups on LinkedIn are a great place to find out what professionals are talking about. Small business networks like Startups.com, Anita Campbell's Small Business Trends and Biznik.com can clue you into new businesses that are emerging to address opportunities that others have identified. These can be sources of inspiration, partnership, or acquisition.

Twitter is also a great place to go fishing, because people often express needs or vent frustration to their followers. In this case, you'll want to listen for keywords that indicate need. For example, if you sell accounting software, search for that term in the context of other words like "does anyone know?" or "can anyone recommend?"

You can also use the web to "crowdsource" solutions to business problems. This rapidly growing phenomenon has launched more than 50 companies that farm out projects to networks of individual specialists.¹ Several specialize in solving the kinds of very complex problems that commonly bedevil B2B companies. We discuss this topic in more detail in Chapter 13. Many common business problems can be solved by searching message boards or inviting feedback from Twitter followers. These results can then be used to convince internal skeptics of the value of participating in online communities.

Build Thought Leadership Through Blogging

One of the fastest ways to score points with prospective and existing customers via social media, and to build visibility within your company, is to create a blog around an area of expertise. Blogs are quick to set up, relatively easy to use, and perform well in search engines. For those who excel at written communications, blogs quickly communicate news and updates to the market and demonstrate thought leadership.

Choose a topic about which you have considerable interest and knowledge in a niche where there is little competition. Don't be frustrated by the large number of blogs that may already exist. Many

people experiment with blogs and then abandon them. Others tend them only lightly. A blog that hasn't been updated in a year is as good as invisible, so you can gain ground quickly by simply maintaining an active posting schedule.

Blogging for thought leadership isn't the same as blogging to update your customers. Take off your marketing hat and think like an editor or analyst. Concentrate on the issues that interest others in your field, such as developments in technology, new research, or interesting insights from others. You can even interview other thought leaders and include an audio or text transcript. Remember, your goal is to educate and inform, not to sell. Believe us, the sales will come as people researching your market find your thought-leading insight at the top of their Google search results.

For some regulated businesses, blogs about public policy issues such as nutrition, health, infrastructure, and science are a way to speak to important business issues without drawing scrutiny from overseers. But for publicly traded companies, be forewarned that allowing people to comment on a blog your company maintains obligates you to set the record straight whenever information that could affect the trading value of your stock is posted there. Brian Lane, a former director of corporate finance at the Securities and Exchange Commission, describes how selective responses can backfire. "The company denied [the allegation] when it was false. They didn't deny it this time. Therefore it's true. And the stock gets hammered," he says. "If you're going to engage, you can't engage for just one day; you have to be engaged every minute."

These days, you can use a free tool like Twitterfeed to automatically convert your blog headlines into tweets. You can also use applications like Seismic, Ping.fm, Posterous, TweetDeck, TubeMogul, blip.tv, FriendFeed, and Google Buzz to move messages from one social media network to another.

Reuse content whenever you can, angling it for different audiences or markets. "A white paper can become several blog posts that can each be promoted through Twitter," says Deirdre Walsh, community and social media manager at National Instruments, a test and measurement firm.

You can also syndicate content through other industry blogs and publishing web sites, often by doing little more than filling out a short form. Popular syndication sites like Alltop grab RSS feeds and organize them by topic. This is bonus visibility with zero additional work. The more outlets you use, the faster your online presence grows. If the content is original and useful, the calls from reporters and speaking invitations soon follow.

Be specific. Writing about big issues like the environment will throw you into the stew with established competitors and make it more difficult for you to gain visibility. Instead, write about environmental issues in your market niche. You won't get as much traffic as TreeHugger.com, but that isn't the point. The more specific you are, the better you will perform on keywords that matter to you and the people you want to reach. Although the search volume for those keywords may not be large, the probability of those clicks turning into leads is greater if you own the keywords. (See Chapter 7 for details.)

If several people will be contributing to the blog, identify authors who are eager to participate. Create Twitter accounts for each contributor and be sure everyone who contributes to the blog also tweets about new entries. Use your business Twitter account to tweet entries, too.

In Hard Focus is a blog by San Francisco entrepreneur Stephen Russell. He uses it to educate and evangelize about advances in video surveillance. Russell's topics include essays on new technologies that improve facial recognition or that tap into armies of smart phone users to identify public threats. He often gets on the phone with academic researchers, asks smart questions, and shares their insight with his audience as blog entries.

It happens that Russell is also the founder of 3VR, a company that sells a line of video search tools for use by security professionals. You wouldn't know that from Russell's blog, however, where he identifies himself simply as "editor" and mentions his company affiliation only in passing. The purpose of In Hard Focus isn't to sell products, but to position the chief executive officer (CEO) as a visionary.

And it works.

With more than 1,000 daily visitors, the blog has established Russell as a thought leader in an industry he very much wants to influence.

The 3VR web site has its own company blog that refers visitors to Russell's latest insights. However, Russell intentionally keeps In Hard Focus on its own domain so that his role as visionary is kept at arm's length from his role as CEO. It turns out that thought leadership is very good for business. "I talk to prominent security directors, city planners and government officials all the time, and I'm always amazed at how many have read our blogs," Russell says.

Danny Schaeffler is an expert on sheet metal formability, which is the capacity for different kind of sheet metal to be molded into shapes. There are dozens of different grades of steel that are used to make everything from fenders to railroad tracks. Choosing the right kind for the job is critical to getting the proper result.

Schaeffler started blogging in 2006, shortly after setting up shop as a formability consultant. About one quarter of his business now comes from people searching terms like "sheet metal stress analysis." In an international marketplace, "if companies don't know that you're out there, you never get the opportunity to be considered," he says. He spends 5 to 10 hours each week blogging, mostly in half-hour increments. He uses Twitter to solicit questions from his audience and has built a newsletter list compiled from visitors to the blog.

The community of people who care about sheet metal formability isn't large, he says, but social media has brought those experts together. "It's surprising how many of us end up knowing each other," he says.

Market Research

Why would anyone would want to do focus groups anymore when such a treasure trove of market insight exists for free online? We've sat behind the glass wall munching on M&M's more times than we can count and have always been struck by the artificiality of paying people to share opinions in group settings. People are easily influenced, and in our experience, a focus group quickly comes to reflect the opinions of its most vocal members. At best, it's only the opinions of a few people.

The easiest way to use social media for market research is simply to start listening. Build a Google Reader dashboard like the one outlined earlier in this chapter and described in detail in Chapter 6

and start looking for trends in your market. Monitor positive and negative mentions of your company, as well as your competitors, and track changes over time. Pay particular attention to new products and to common customer gripes, for they yield the best opportunities. Many services are now available that monitor customer conversations; these services range in price from less than \$100 per month up to \$10,000 or more. Our advice is to start by building a dashboard of your own and seeing what value you derive from it. B2B companies that serve small markets may find that they can do a perfectly good job of listening to markets without spending money on a commercial service because the volume of content is relatively low.

You can gain even more insight by participating in conversations as a group leader or by asking questions of your Facebook friends or Twitter followers. CME Group, the big Chicago-based futures and options exchange, has accumulated an impressive 750,000 followers on Twitter. Corporate Communications Director Allan Schoenberg says customer feedback is one of the most valuable benefits of having a Twitter presence. “We can track what the competition is doing, monitor key messages and identify key themes,” he says.

The company also maintains a handful of private LinkedIn groups for professional traders and customers. “I look at these as private focus groups,” Schoenberg says. “The groups are all less than 200 people, and they’re all customers. You can ask these people anything and get a reaction.” LinkedIn is particularly useful from a B2B perspective because members of the group can be identified through their professional profiles. There’s none of the anonymous rabble-raising that goes on in public discussion forums.

Vico Software requires each of its sales representatives to set up or join LinkedIn groups related to commercial construction in their geographic territories. The purpose isn’t to sell the company’s suite of construction management software but rather to become involved in the local community and build relationships. “There are 108 LinkedIn groups devoted to construction; we participate in 39 of them,” says marketing vice president Holly Allison.

For regionally focused monitoring, Twitter advanced search or third-party apps like Twittrvision allow you to specify a radius around

a city or zip code. This feature lets you monitor broader, categorical B2B keywords such as “machine shop” or “labor attorney.” If your business relies on physical proximity, this is a terrific opportunity to find prospective customers. One of our favorite examples of this is the auto repair shop owner who monitors Twitter for keywords such as “crash” or “accident” within a 50-mile radius. People who tweet about their auto mishaps get a tweet from him that links to a Web page with advice about how to choose a repair shop. Not surprisingly, the owner’s shop meets all the recommended criteria.

You can take research to the next level by signing on with a professional community management firm like Communispace or LiveWorld, which bring professional moderation and audience development to the process. The costs are quite a bit steeper than running your own LinkedIn group, but these services add value in managing the community and delivering results that match your needs. The Ford Motor Company uses a combination of both, outsourcing content creation to agency partners and relying on their own staff for day-to-day community management.

Support Customers

Businesses are using Twitter to respond to customer inquiries and complaints. Comcast pioneered this tactic with @ComcastCares, a Twitter presence created in 2007 by Frank Eliason, who joined Citicorp in mid-2010. At the time, Comcast’s customer service reputation was so low that a Google search on “Comcast customer service” returned as many negative results as positive ones. Eliason conceived of a new approach to customer care: search for online complaints on Twitter and resolve problems publicly so that every resolved issue becomes a public relations opportunity. In choosing Twitter as the primary channel for the experiment, Eliason made a bet that openness and speed would be a differentiator. By responding with a calm and helpful demeanor, Comcast was able to capture media attention and make rapid progress in its efforts to improve its image.

Comcast had no illusions about transforming its customer service operation with Twitter. Although the company had more

than 40 representatives tweeting at the time of this writing, the total number of customer issues that they address is a drop in the bucket compared with the overall volume of service calls the company handles. What's important is that these are Comcast's most *vocal* customers. They are the ones who are most likely to make noise and attract attention. That's why rapid response is so effective. Vocal customers typically constitute about 1 percent of a company's overall customer base, but they can do a lot of damage. They can also do a lot of good. The brilliance of Comcast Cares was that it measurably improved the *perception* of the company's customer service without requiring a structural overhaul or massive retraining. "The folks that man the phones and monitor e-mail feedback tend to have the best skills at managing volatile customers," says Pete Blackshaw, author of *Satisfied Customers Tell Three Friends, Angry Customers Tell 3000*. "That skill set is transferrable to Twitter and Facebook."

Many companies are now following Comcast's example, including B2B companies that serve large customer bases in time-dependent situations. Twitter can be a godsend to these companies because it provides an alternative communication channel when primary channels are unavailable. E-mail marketing service provider iContact of Raleigh, North Carolina, turned to Twitter when it was hit by a major denial-of-service attack in 2009. The company was offline for almost 2 days, but was able to tap into its Twitter followers to deliver updates on recovery efforts. Those people told others, and word quickly spread that iContact was on the case. For an e-mail company to go dark for that long could be a cataclysmic failure, but iContact was able to stay engaged with its customers even while its web site was unavailable.

Although using Twitter for public troubleshooting clearly works for some companies, we have some reservations about buying in fully to this strategy. For one thing, Twitter is not a good medium for dealing with complex problems. For another, we question the advisability of rewarding customers for complaining in public. The approach we recommend is to use Twitter to listen and respond but to ultimately drive the conversation back to private channels such as e-mail and the call center if necessary. Although some complainers want to use

the crowd to their advantage, most just want to get their problem resolved.

B2B companies may also get equal or better results by using long-form channels like blogs or video for customer support. That's because business customers often require more customized or detailed support than users of a commodity service. One of the great values of blogs is that they bring subject matter experts into direct contact with those who advise on and purchase their products and services. These experts can use direct communications to support early users and large accounts to improve quality and generate new ideas.

Crisis Management

We don't wish a crisis on you, but it's a smart idea to have a social media plan in place in case one develops. Consider what happened to Boingo Wireless.

Boingo sells Internet access worldwide to a customer base that is about 80 percent business travelers. These time-pressed people frequently need to get online in the few minutes they have between airport connections, so availability is critical. Boingo learned early that Twitter was an effective early warning system to identify problems with its access points, as travelers frequently used their handheld devices to consult each other before calling customer support. About one quarter of the company's support requests come in over Twitter.

That early warning system came in handy in April 2010, when a test e-mail message meant for just a few people was inadvertently sent to all Boingo customers. Recipients were told that their subscriptions were being canceled and they were being shifted to a pay-as-you-go plan. Worse was that about 20 percent of Boingo customers got more than one copy of the message. Even though the e-mail was identified as a test, panicked and angry customers took to Twitter to vent.

Fortunately, Boingo had social media manager Baochi Nguyen. She's online all the time, and she picked up the first complaints a little more than an hour after the errant e-mail went out. Nguyen immediately alerted the company's e-mail manager, who shut down

transmission before further damage could be done. Corporate communications director Christian Gunning was quickly brought into the process to assuage customers, some of whom were already speculating about devious company motives. The response team answered as many tweets as they could, aware that because Twitter is a public medium, Boingo customers could easily tap into the conversations.

Within four hours after the e-mail was sent, nearly a dozen Boingo employees were involved in crisis containment. “We didn’t hide or wait till we could circle our wagons; we just started talking to customers,” says Gunning. “You could literally see the tide change from ‘Why the hell are you spamming me?’ to ‘We all make mistakes.’” A follow-up blog post with the tongue-in-cheek title, “A Big Fat Apology” explained the mistake in more detail.

It’s impossible to quantify the payback of Boingo’s rapid response, but it’s likely that the team headed off a far worse situation.

Many companies first recognize the value of social channels during a crisis, when time is of the essence. It’s a good practice to start a corporate Twitter account, even if it’s only used lightly, because it may be an asset when conventional communication channels are slow or unavailable.

After a winter storm that left two thirds of the state without any power in late 2008, Public Service of New Hampshire (PSNH) realized the benefits of social media for crisis management in the trenches. Luckily, prior to the outage, PSNH spokesperson Martin Murray had already established a presence on Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook. PSNH was able to communicate status updates to consumer and business customers, many of whom had no working electronic devices other than the mobile phones they charged at work.

Since these services all support mobile posting, Murray, who also had no power in his home, was still able to monitor communications after hours. In a crisis of scale, PSNH leveraged social media to maintain communication with its community under truly dreadful circumstances.

At the very least, make sure you own your company name and variants thereof on popular social networks before the cyber-squatters do. You never know when you will need them. BP was publicly humiliated by a critic on Twitter who registered the name @BPGlobalPR and was

using it to savage the company over its response to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. There was little BP could do but watch in embarrassment. The company launched its own official, verified Twitter account. But the @BPGlobalPR Twitter account quickly amassed more than 10 times the number of followers.

Solicit Feedback

Business customers spontaneously form special interest groups around products or topics that matter to them. Use the search function in Facebook, LinkedIn, or niche social networks in your market, and you'll probably find your company's name, or at the very least a topic around the market you serve. Why not tap into these groups for advice?

Many B2B companies use customer advisory councils for this purpose, but the process can work informally online as well. LinkedIn is a particularly strong platform for customer feedback because the community is focused and professional. Start by joining relevant groups and just listening to the conversations for a couple of weeks. It's best if you get your product people involved and let marketing serve as a coach. Professional customers prefer to engage with the people who build the products they use.

When engaging on LinkedIn or other professional communities, be aware of the ground rules. LinkedIn groups have a designated administrator and some require prospective members to apply for admission. In all cases, it's a good idea to introduce yourself to the administrator and explain why you're there. Some groups expressly prohibit vendors from participating. Don't try to argue your way into the conversation in this case. Chances are there are other groups that would be happy to have you.

You don't have to reveal secrets to play. Simply asking for feedback on your products or seeking input on common challenges can spark a useful conversation. Do not, under any circumstances, try to sell to people in these communities. That's a fast track to banishment. Be curious, respectful, and deferential to their opinions. Only a minority of them will want to share, but a core of 10 to 20 percent will be eager to engage.

You need a strong stomach to do this. If members of the community have problems with your product, they will be open about that. Don't respond defensively, but promise to route complaints to the appropriate people and then follow up. If possible, take contentious conversations to a private channel such as e-mail for resolution.

Some companies with strong engineering cultures encounter resistance to these feedback channels from developers who believe that they know best what customers need. In that case, it's better to adopt guerrilla tactics such as listening to existing conversations and forwarding useful information to people on the product side. Engineers, after all, are rewarded based on the success of their products. If they see opportunities to make customers happier, it's in their best interests to respond.

The process of soliciting feedback can range from simply listening to conversations to actively participating in online discussions to building branded communities around companies and products. One useful tactic is to set up surveys and invite members to fill them out. Low-cost survey services like SurveyMonkey are quite flexible and cost just a few dollars a month. There are even free alternatives like FreeOnlineSurveys.com, SurveyPirate, and Kwik Surveys. Another good free option is Google Forms, which permits you to build quick, functional feedback forms at no cost. No-cost services are limited in capability, so if you want to use advanced features like demographic segmentation or conditional branching, you're better off paying a few dollars for a professional tool.

If your budget permits it, consider creating your own branded community. SAP Networks uses customer feedback on its e-commerce site to improve product performance. Low ratings provide incentive for product managers to either improve product performance or encourage happy customers to share positive opinions. If ratings are low across the board, it's probably an indication that the product needs work. The public nature of the online store becomes an extra incentive to fix the problem.

There are literally hundreds of options for customizing a branded social network, ranging from enterprise software suites like Oracle Beehive and Telligent to open-source community platforms like

Drupal to hosted communities offered by Jive, SocialText, Lithium, and Awareness Networks, among others. In Chapter 9 we talk about how to narrow down the possibilities to the software category that's right for you. Chapter 13 tells how to administer your own communities. You can gain tremendous insight this way, but be prepared to staff your effort appropriately. You'll need at least one full-time equivalent to manage an active community.

We'll explore many of these opportunities in more detail in later chapters. But first let's get the basics in place: selling the value of social marketing to the skeptics.