

Social media & email: from conversations to conversion

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For those who want to stay connected to their customers, social networks offer special possibilities. Ranging from monitoring the buzz around your company or brand, advertising, creating engagement with your brand, powering online communities to generating web traffic and providing customer service. And yes, even the recruitment of sales leads and maintaining direct customer contact are possibilities. The use of social media goes beyond merely maintaining communication with customers and prospects: through conversations within social networks you are laying the foundations for subsequent conversion.

Phenomenal growth

In recent years, social networks have shown an explosive growth. Facebook has about 750 million active users worldwide, LinkedIn reports a total of 120 million users and Twitter does account for over 200 million users. These numbers are still rising. Growth rates are phenomenal. We are massively *connected*.

If you want to stay in touch with your customers, you will probably wonder which social networks offer the best business opportunities. There are two possibilities:

- **Social Media Monitoring:** watch and listen carefully, identify what is being said about your brand on social networks and selectively respond to conversations. Purpose: monitoring the image of your company or brand and adjusting it where necessary.
- **Social Media Marketing:** strengthening existing customer relationships and creating new customer relationships through social networks. Purpose: getting (and keeping) in contact with (potential) customers and strengthening relationships with them.

Sharing

On social networks users share their knowledge, experiences, feelings and opinions. Consequently, they share their experiences and opinions about you. People also appear to have a strong desire to publicly express their appreciation too. Adequate customer service is an excellent catalyst for positive customer experience in marketing and takes up an increasingly important role. You can leave the conversations between customers as they are or you can participate in those conversations and positively influence them. Social media offers the ideal platform for this purpose. You can get into contact with people who previously would have remained unknown to you and begin with a social customer dialogue towards a

subsequent one-on-one customer dialogue. In this social customer dialogue you can set different goals:

- Increase visibility, awareness and reputation of your brand;
- Community building, fan pages;
- Working on brand commitment (engagement);
- Powering online communities with relevant content;
- Generate traffic to your website and sales leads;
- Sales and special offers;
- Providing customer service;
- Maintaining customer relationships (CRM).

To successfully participate in the conversations between your customers, it is important to provide relevant content. On social networks it does not matter what you want to say but what your customers want to know.

Strengthen

Email plays a central role in the growth of social networks. Once someone is invited by a family member, friend or acquaintance to become connected on a social network, that person will receive notifications thereof via email message. Changes in personal profiles and personal messages are also shared through email. The inbox is the central place where group messages, newsletters, updates, birthdays and other updates from social networks come together.

Social media and email complementing and strengthening each other has not gone unnoticed with professional marketers. The results published in the January 2011 issue of the DM Barometer, a periodic survey of DDMA, OMG/MailMedia and Journal of Marketing, show that two thirds of marketers combine social media and email to:

- Increase the reach of email campaigns;
- Get more fans and followers;
- Collect more opt-in email addresses.

Access

The latter is of importance, because access to the inbox of an individual (potential) customer offers options for customised content, timing and other forms of personalisation of your message. You can increase the reach of your email campaigns by encouraging the recipients of your email to share the content of your emails through social networks. For specific content, you can post links to social networks, such as 'liking' (Facebook), 'sharing' (Facebook) or 'tweeting' (Twitter). This is also referred to as 'content sharing'.

Welcome email

You can include links to social networks on which your company operates in your default emails. If someone signs up for your email newsletter, send a welcome email in which you point to the possibility to follow you through social networks. This ensures that contact is not lost if someone later unsubscribes from your email newsletter. If someone unsubscribes from your email newsletter that you have not yet connected with using social networks, you can give them the opportunity, in the unsubscribe process, to stay connected through social networks. That way you can keep in touch. You can also offer email recipients the option to follow you on social networks in your email order confirmations, invoices and white papers.

Encourage

If you possess opt-in email addresses of (potential) customers, you have made an important step towards a long-term one-on-one customer relationship, because “42% of subscribers say they're more likely to buy from a company whose emails they signed up for.” (Exact Target 2011). Encourage interaction on social networks, and obtain an opt-in email address. It is therefore important to continually encourage the interaction between different channels - email, website and social media - by:

- Posting a Twitter stream on your website to encourage traffic to your Twitter account and generate more followers.
- Referring to your website in your social media content to direct traffic to your site.
- Referring to your email newsletter in your social media content to encourage registrations on your website and collect opt-in email addresses.
- Referring to your email newsletter on your website to encourage registrations.
- Referring to social networks in your email to encourage the sharing of content.
- Referring to your website and presence on social networks in various media, including print.

How to find your customers on social networks

To be connected to your customers through social media, it is necessary to know where they are located. Social media strategist Jay Bear describes four ways to find out:

1. Rent a spy: tools such as Rapleaf, MailChimp and websites such as Peekyou.com and Pipl.com can tell you which of your customers is active on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networks, what their 'likes' and other important details are, by simply using their email addresses.
2. Ask the customer: the most obvious way to find out whether your customers make use of social media is to simply ask them. If you ask for their name, address and email address, ask them whether they are active on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn too and whether they would like to 'connect'.

3. Leverage your emails: have you included links to your social networks sites in your email? Do you encourage your email recipients to share content via Twitter or Facebook? Integrate those possibilities into all of your emails. Then, analyse which of your email recipients has shared content via Twitter or Facebook and you will immediately know who is active on social networks.
4. Gmail stalking: social networks like Twitter and Facebook allow you to see which of your Gmail contacts is active on these social networks and to invite them to 'connect'. Here's how:
 - Export the email addresses of your customers to a CSV file.
 - Create a new Gmail account on gmail.com for this specific purpose
 - Import the CSV file into your new Gmail account.
 - Create a new Twitter account with the new Gmail email address. During the registration on Twitter choose "Find Your Friends", then choose Gmail, Twitter will now automatically check your email addresses in Gmail and show you who is active on Twitter. It will then directly give you the option to follow these customers on Twitter.
 - Create a new account on Facebook, using the new Gmail email address. During registration on Facebook, please specify in "Find Friends" that you have a Gmail account and follow the simple instructions. Within seconds you can see who of your customers is active on Facebook and with a single click you can be their friend. All this won't cost you a dime and will take up at most one hour of your time.

Create a social media marketing plan

In her book *'Social Media Marketing'* Liana Evans describes four key issues for a social media marketing plan:

1. Research: start with thorough research into your target audiences and customers. Otherwise, you can only guess where to start and you will be wasting time and money. Try to find answers to the question where your customers are and what content you can offer them to really make a difference.
2. Strategy: come up with a well thought out plan with realistic goals so you know what you want and how you want to get to that. Would you use social media to follow what others say about you (social media monitoring), to increase the visibility of your brand image (social branding) or to maintain the relationship with your (potential) customers (social CRM)?
3. Involvement: Involve everyone in your organisation with your plans. From the customer service employees on the phone who communicate with customers to the employees of the financial administration who deal with customers and suppliers and thus affect how people talk about you.

4. **Measurability:** There are several ways to measure the effect of your social media activities. From measuring traffic to your website to measuring the *retweets* on your content.

The 10 'commandments' of social media management

1. **Listen and ask questions**
Listen to what your customers say about you, to you and to each other. Do not hesitate to ask questions. As long as a question is relevant, your fans and followers will be happy to respond.
2. **Be relevant in content and timing**
If you want to keep your fans and followers, you must constantly prove your value. The information you share with them, must therefore be relevant. In terms of frequency as well as in terms of content. Not too often and not too little. Good timing can determine success.
3. **Don't sell, but help buying**
Your fans and followers are in control and can decide at any time to stop following you. Remember that 'like' is not the same as 'permission to push'.
4. **Provide some decent content**
Feeding of social networks with content can happen through various networks, e.g. via email, your website and via the social networks on which you operate. Feed your fans and followers with content that they will find worthwhile to share with others.
5. **Collect email addresses**
First, you will need to know where your target fans and followers are located: on which blogs, social networks, forums and professional sites are they active? What motivates them? If you know this information, you can dialogue with them. You can progressively work towards obtaining opt-in email addresses.
6. **Call to action**
When collecting opt-in email addresses you need a good call-to-action. "What's in it for me?" is the question your fans and followers will need answered.
7. **Cherish your permission**
Once your fans and followers have granted you permission to communicate with them, it is important not to lose them. Do not choose purely for personal gain, but look to add value for your fans and followers.
8. **Advertise in moderation**
It is okay for you to advertise your products or services, but do it in moderation. You can apply a general rule that 1 in 5 messages may be a promotional one.
9. **Editorial plan**
Nobody is waiting for 34 of your tweets in their Twitter-stream. Or for 12 of your posts on their Facebook *wall*. Think carefully about the frequency and content of your messages. Put these in an editorial plan.

10. Look at the numbers

For Twitter, clicks and retweets are an important indicator for the value of your messages. Such as likes and comments for Facebook.

Authors

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