

Take Steps to Social Media Literacy

If you've been putting off starting that blog, Facebook or Twitter account then this year it's time to make the leap. Avoiding social media is no longer an acceptable response for a small business owner to take.

When customers are asked how they learn about businesses and new products they overwhelmingly say they turn to the Internet and search engines to find what they need. Susan Gunelius, a social media expert, said "I'll tell you, out of the hundreds and hundreds I've spoken to, I'd say probably two raised their hand and said they used something other than Google or whatever their favorite search engine is."

By committing to spending small blocks of time online each day, even the most timid computer user can improve their online visibility. Gunelius recommends 10 minutes when you arrive at work, 10 minutes before leaving for lunch and 10 minutes before leaving the office.

Every minute you can spend on line on the social web can only help your business and every minute you are not there your competitors are more than happy to take that opportunity. Here are six steps to improve your social media literacy:

1. Play first. Choose a social media tool such as a blog, Facebook page, Twitter page or LinkedIn profile to get familiar with and create a personal account. Gunelius said she encourages new users to create a personal blog on www.wordpress.com.

Learn how to use the tool. Create a personal account, something not associated with your business. Play around with it for a few weeks to learn more about the product and the usage options. Once you know how things work, you can create a blog for your business that will improve your search engine rankings, making it easier for customers to find you.

2. Look for help online. Make a habit of visiting websites designed to help you get the most out of your social media efforts. Suggested sites include www.socialmediaexaminer.com and www.socialmediatoday.com.

3. Pick something you like. Choose a platform that appeals to you. If you are uncomfortable writing each day, then a blog on WordPress might not be the best choice. Choose something you can use and have fun with. Pick something you enjoy first, you can always expand later.

4. Focus on long-term goals. Once you find a platform you wish to use focus on long-term goals of building relationships, and creating quality content. The point of social media marketing is building relationships that turn into conversations, turning people into brand advocates, finding customers who are going to go out and talk to others about your brand.

5. Follow the 80/20 rule. Eighty percent of the time, focus on providing quality content to your customers. Twenty percent of your conversations can be self-promotional. To illustrate, if you meet a potential customer offline you can work to befriend them by talking and sharing information with them, or you can walk up and hand them a 15 percent off coupon suggesting they come to your store.

Which one are people going to respond better to? They might like that 15 percent off sale, but for that long-term sustainable growth, you have to be working more on building relationships and getting people to believe in your brand, your promise, what you stand for. They come to know what to expect from you and they know that you're going to deliver on that promise in every interaction.

6. Reality check. If the above steps still sound frightening, consider calling SCORE for free help or for \$15 you can buy and read a copy of the paperback "Social Media Marketing for Dummies."