

Social Media and Your Agency: Incorporating Social Into Your Marketing Strategy

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Want to increase visibility in your community? Whether you are an agency that has been in business for 50 years or one that is just starting out, finding ways to connect with local clients on the top social media networks can help build customer loyalty, uncover referrals and make your local agency part of the social fabric of the community where you do business.

In the past, the primary way a prospect could get information about a local business was by engaging directly with the business owner or staff. Agency marketing focused on brand building and awareness by using your brick and mortar location, networking events, advertising, PR and print media. Direct mail and cold-calling made up most of the targeted interactions. With the arrival of Google in 1998, the number of agency websites started to climb, along with the rapid growth of the online channel. Today, social media sites are driving a large portion of interactions on the web.

With the Pew Research Center reporting that 69% of Americans use a social network, social media can (and should) become an extension of the networking and engagement already happening from your physical location. Your

clients are embracing social media as a normal part of their lives and often trust a review or recommendation over an advertisement when making a buying decision.

Through the many connections social media creates, savvy insurance agencies are evolving from a company-to-buyer marketing model to a peer-to-peer influence model. With a few straightforward tactics, commitment and patience, you can reach more local customers and create your own brand ambassadors on social media.

Start With What You Know

With over 100 social media sites online right now, and more popping up, it can be overwhelming to think about having a presence on every channel or deciding on which channel to focus.

The problem for most big social media sites is each serves a different purpose for people. Facebook is usually a place for friends; Twitter is mostly a sharing outlet; YouTube is a video-sharing site; LinkedIn is for business relationships; the function of Google+ is still to be determined, but having a presence there will benefit your agency, if for search engine rankings alone.

You don't have to be an expert on or have a presence on every channel. Begin where the learning curve is likely the shortest. If you are using Facebook regularly and know your way around, set up a company page, get familiar with posting company content and ask your friends and family to support you by following and sharing your page.

Expand into other social networks, selecting the ones where your clients and prospects are most likely to be active. If you are targeting a younger demographic, consider adopting a Twitter strategy. If you are looking to build your agency's commercial lines, LinkedIn is the ideal network for B2B networking and target marketing.

Also, factor in the skill sets you or your staff possess. With the advent and popularity of video, many unpolished, raw, but clever videos have made their way into YouTube and social feeds. With a minimal investment in equipment and/or a smartphone, any small agency can deploy this important online marketing strategy.

TIP: Before you set-up multiple social media profiles and pages, make sure your own website is in good shape to handle the attention.

Join Local Groups and Communities

Facebook and LinkedIn groups, and Google+ communities are often very active online depositories of local and regional information, conversations and support. Engaging in these forums will keep you informed and involved in what matters most to your business and clients.

Posting your business page's news and events in groups will boost your online presence over time. Don't overdo it on the promotion. Share information about your product or business when it's relevant, but not so often that it feels like spam.

TIP: Find location-based groups by using your city or region name in the search area of social media platforms.

Tag Other Businesses and People in Your Posts

Cross-linking to other businesses, @ mentions and using #hashtags can help expand the reach of a post as well as advance your local business community. While the mechanics across platforms will vary, tagging other pages and individuals is a powerful way to encourage engagement. While giving a quick shout-out to another business may seem counterintuitive, it sends a clear signal that you value them and are willing to have a conversation that isn't all about YOU. Over time, others may return the favor, and you will see your engagement grow.

Tagging someone personally on your business pages can be a good strategy if

it does not appear forced, and you are not tagging a whole list of people just for the sake of tagging. Also use good judgement when tagging a client and ask permission when appropriate.

TIP: Try cross-linking across social media channels — share a Facebook notes post in LinkedIn or other combinations to integrate between them.

Engage Your Employees

Your employees are your best brand advocates. Instead of banning social media in the office, encourage them to add their current position to their own social media profiles and contribute to your agency's social strategy. This involvement can come in many forms, from adding social links to their email signature, to sharing and engaging with content.

Some agencies opt to share administrative rights to company pages with trusted employees to moderate the work of managing social pages and keep a fresh stream of content flowing. Utilizing social calendars or schedulers can help coordinate multiple contributors and may offer different levels of authority. Additionally, staff can often contribute a different, meaningful perspective on which agency owners may not have a good read. By allowing your team to help formulate the agency social strategy, they share in the success and reinforce their value.

TIP: Agency owners should always maintain the primary administrator rights to all the social media platforms. Regaining access can be extremely time-consuming and difficult.

Don't Forget the Ask

How many times have you provided a client with exceptional value? Gone above and beyond with a difficult claim? Offered discounts they didn't know about? Regardless of your stellar service, clients are probably not going to volunteer a testimonial, favorable review or five-star rating on their own. As more and more consumers use online ratings and customer feedback to make decisions, online reviews are now one of the most powerful ways of promoting trust and confidence in your business.

Communicating the importance of this feedback to your clients and making it easy for them to provide a review can help boost the number of reviews and your overall ranking. Reinforce this messaging on your website, social media accounts and in-person. Show them how by linking to the review pages on your social posts.

TIP: Work on the timing of your request for a review. Asking too soon can appear pretentious and off-putting and waiting too long after the good feelings have waned can be less effective.

Final tip: Don't sound like a robot.

Social media is an opportunity for your agency to convey its brand and the collective character of its staff. Social media users can spot the authentic from the disingenuous. While the content and tone of your agency's social media voice should match the platform, don't be afraid to showcase your agency's unique personality. ■

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