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# How social media can benefit small businesses

Have you ever wondered what Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Pinterest can bring to your company? Alison Coleman meets the firms that have used social media to their advantage

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Alison Coleman  
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Even dentists are making the most of social media to win new business for their practice. Photograph: MBI/Alamy

After years of avoiding social media, small businesses are starting to embrace it – but are they really reaping the benefits?

Not according to Business Network International (BNI), whose latest survey found 75% of business owners have been "put off" a particular company due to their poor use of social media.

How do small companies ensure they turn those likes and follows into customer engagement and increased sales? There is plenty of advice online, but it's largely generic and offers little practical value for business owners who needs more tailored advice.

An alternative option is to look at those firms that have got their social media strategy right and are winning new business as a result.

When Anthony Lloyd and his wife Peta bought Fallowfields Hotel near Abingdon in Oxfordshire in 1993, neither had any industry experience.

Catering for a largely corporate market, Lloyd stuck to traditional marketing channels,

including tourist guidebooks and face-to-face business networking. But in 2008, with recession looming and business starting to slow, he turned to social media.

"We had to cut marketing costs and win new business, and joining Twitter has enabled us to do both," Lloyd says. "I'd never used it before and it took me several months to see any results, but within 18 months I had 1,000 followers and bookings were up, generating £150,000 of new business."

His strategy has been to tweet regularly and engagingly; menu items, hotel news, blogposts, the head chef's guest tweets, and the popular did you know? series are among the posts that lure many of [@Fallowfields](#)' 25,000-plus followers to the hotel website.

"It has replaced our face-to-face networking and guidebook listings, saving me time and money," Lloyd says. "You have to watch the metrics, for example, Klout, the online influence indicator, suggested I was over promoting the hotel URL, so I increased the did you know? You must be prepared to adapt as newer platforms emerge."

[Southport Road Dental](#), a private dental practice in Chorley, Lancashire, wasn't using any social media when dentist David Hickey took over in 2010.

Recognising the potential it offered to raise the practice profile, and engage and educate existing patients, he established a presence on Twitter and Facebook and monitored activity through call tracker numbers. Linking both feeds to the website has kept the practice consistently high in dentistry-related searches for the area.

However, the real key to practice's social media strategy has been its use of YouTube video.

Hickey explains: "It allows potential new patients to see previous clients and their experiences, and to see me before they pick up the phone, which has made a huge difference for those who are nervous or fearful. Trust is a large part of my business and the videos of me on the website are a start to building trust."

The other benefit of using video is optimisation; fresh video content boosts SEO rankings. However, hitting the right tone is crucial. The key, says Hickey, is spontaneity.

He says: "We use a simple flip cam, usually a single take, without much preparation. If you coach the patients it sounds staged, as it does if I repeat takes for my pieces to camera too often."

Hickey's strategy has delivered on its objective of converting increased website traffic into patient enquiries.

He says: "Sixteen months ago we were getting, at best, one or two new enquiries a day. Today, we get at least six a day, 75% of which are from visitors to our website."

Central to Liverpool-based business coach [Cath Daley](#)'s social media strategy are her online blogs, linked to LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook, which target different user groups.

She says: "Blogs are a way of establishing your professional credibility and expertise to a wide audience while giving added value to my subscribers. Original online content raises brand awareness, improves SEO, and engages with existing and potential clients and referral partners. LinkedIn is the channel of choice for professionals and because of the nature of the business services I provide – communication and presentation skills training – more enquiries and referrals come from LinkedIn than any other platform, which I monitor via email.

She adds: "In a LinkedIn search for presentation skills I'm currently number one in over

half a million results. Facebook and Twitter are less formal, but reflect more of my personality, while still providing opportunities to promote my online training courses and blogs, often via automated posts. Around half of all enquiries, many of which become new clients, come via social media."

She recently launched a new venture, Beginning2Winning, which provides online learning resources for businesses, and may extend her social media strategy to include Google+ and Pinterest.

She says: "Google+ will become more important for our SEO later in the year, as will Pinterest as it matures over time and finds its commercial feet with business to business audiences."

Bookbinder Susan Green has been selling her handbound journals, and guestbooks through [her online shop etsy.com](http://heronlineshop.etsy.com) since August 2008. Working from her home in Bournemouth, without a studio to showcase her products, social media enhances her connections with the public. She says Twitter, which she joined in 2009, wins hands down.

"That year, sales through the Etsy shop, which I link to from Twitter and my other social media feeds, went up tenfold," she explains. "Twitter has also brought me some valuable exposure. In December 2011, Dragons' Den's Deborah Meaden chose me as her 'Seventh Tweet of Christmas' in her #BuyBritishHelpJobs Twitter campaign for quality goods made in Britain."

If Twitter is her primary social media platform, Pinterest is a close second.

She says: "It's highly visual, and as I rely on the impact of my images to attract interest – it is a key part of my strategy. I have four pinboards, including a gallery of my work and one purely for my wedding guestbooks. The others are designed to inform and engage with people about the bookbinding process, its tools and materials. I only joined Pinterest six months ago, but it is already the fifth largest traffic source for my online shop and sales this year are up."

These are four businesses from different sectors, employing different strategies, however there are some basic rules that all businesses should follow if they want results, says Lancaster-based social media consultant Jane Binnion.

- Be selective and focus on the platforms where potential customers are likely to be.
- Be social; don't just announce, engage.
- Be responsive. Establishing a presence on social media is an invitation for people to communicate with you. Ignore them and your efforts will be wasted.
- Be adaptable. Social media is evolving rapidly and businesses must constantly monitor and measure activity and responses and adapt their strategies accordingly.

"Business is all about relationships; be generous, be interested in other people, invest the time and effort, and it will pay off," adds Binnion.

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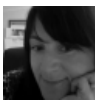
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**[MichelleCarvill](#)**

14 August 2012 1:03PM

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Your article illuminates a number of ways which showcases just how businesses (of all shapes and sizes and sectors) can be leveraging the social channels to engage with audiences and ultimately generate positive outcomes for their businesses.

I regularly train people and organisations on how to optimise social media platforms within their business (indeed a number of BNI members have been along too).

What is common with the businesses I train and with new clients we work with is that they 'dive in' to social without doing all the usual thinking and planning. Eager to set up Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Google+, Facebook, LinkedIn etc - they set up accounts without any clear objectives and really understanding how they are going to leverage them.

My mantra is Plan, Listen, Analyse before you Engage. That way, there is a clear and objective view as to what you are looking to get out of the channels. Plus once you've done your research and better understand where you're going to find your audiences - then rather than trying to be all things to all men - you can focus attention.

Another challenge for businesses is the 'always on' element of social. Once you open the door to conversation, that conversation is 'continuous'. What's your plan if someone makes a comment on your Facebook page over the weekend? Again, these elements go into the planning side of how you are going to engage.

Far from being simple channels - being social presents huge opportunities for businesses that really 'get it' - however, building relationships, trust, loyalty and followings can take time - you have to be committed, be ready to be open and converse, be compelling and share newsworthy and share able content (video,

blogs etc).

Social works - the challenge is, not many businesses are doing it well.

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