



## Using Social Media in the real world

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*Social Media tools and technologies have the potential to provide many benefits to SMEs. Actually using all of this potential when you have a business to run is another matter entirely. Gareth Edwards, eMarketing Specialist at the National B2B Centre, provides some practical tips on using Social Media on a day to day basis.*

### What You Can Do

There are so many ways to use and benefit from Social Media tools and technologies – a term that includes everything from websites, blogs, bookmarking sites to video sharing ( [check out our Social Media list](#) for some specific examples). It is hard to know where to start and difficult to create an exhaustive list of benefits. Here's a flavour of what you could get out of using the tools;

- Expand your network of contacts - Get referrals. Engage with experts
- Research your market - Ask questions. Get feedback.
- Collaborate - With colleagues, associates, suppliers & customers
- Customer service - Capture requests. Distribute solutions and FAQs.
- Project your profile - Show credibility, personality and expertise
- Improve your website optimisation - Inbound links. Increased traffic.
- Promote your business to target audiences - Locally, nationally & globally. Companies, groups, individuals.

This article focuses on the last 3 headings because they relate to winning new business. As you start to experiment then you'll quickly find out whether the other attributes are of specific value to your business.

### Key Issues

The benefits of Social Media are easy enough to list out but actually making it happen is something else. In conducting assists and holding workshops the B2B Centre has gathered feedback from a variety of small and medium sized businesses to determine what the obstacles are to overcome.

- Should I use it?
- Don't know what to say
- What should I use?
- How do I use Social Media?
- How do I know if it is working?

### Should You Use Social Media?

Although the B2B Centre is an enthusiastic advocate of Social Media you may be surprised that our answer to this question is "definitely maybe". We wouldn't often tell people not use social media at all but we would suggest that you think about what priority you give it in relations to other promotional activities.

Spending time blogging or on LinkedIn ( [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com) ) can sometimes be an easy option compared to picking up the phone and calling a prospect. However the easier it is for you to identify specific target companies, job titles or even individual prospects then the more likely it is that direct contact is a better approach. In this instance having support material, such as an instructional video, hosted on YouTube might be a good idea.

If the benefits of your product or service are more difficult to explain, the target market is harder to define or even if the opportunity is greater than your direct sales resource then Social Media based marketing will achieve a higher priority.

The key is to think about products, price, the state of the market, customer requirements, the competition, your marketing plan etc. to help build a picture.

If Social Media tools don't add value to your business – after you have tried them out properly – then don't use them. The main thing is to keep checking because the tools and the attitudes of your marketplace change all of the time.

### What Should We Say?

Once people have got a handle on what context should they use Social Media in the next question is invariably “before we go any further what are we going to talk about?” I am not sure what brings on this sudden lack of confidence. The truth is that everybody who I deal with has something interesting to say...once I have teased it out of them.

I have started to use a process called a “**Success Audit**” to help people out. There is no big secret to it. It is essentially a brainstorming session that helps companies to think through different aspects of what they do. To make it more relaxed I ask people to recount stories about how they developed products and services, what they are used for, what benefits are forthcoming, what their clients are like and what happens when products are put to use or projects implemented.

What this does is unlock experience, knowledge and expertise. It also seems to generate a very long list of interesting stories – and remember you could be pulling out video clips, presentations or photos as part of your story telling. We can then qualify this list by looking at it from a customer perspective. If it helps do what I do and actually wear some different hats to represent people from different companies or even different roles within the same company (if for instance there are a number of stakeholders involved in purchasing from you).

My colleague Mark Bonnett and I worked through this process with Jim Reah at Heritage Polish ([www.heritagepolish.com](http://www.heritagepolish.com)) to help him make his blog ([heritagepolish.blogspot.com](http://heritagepolish.blogspot.com)) more effective. We uncovered loads of stories about Jim’s experiences and his knowledge of how to clean leather and wood. Interestingly we also discovered that putting the blog title in question form has the potential to make it very search engine friendly (e.g. “How do I clean teak garden furniture?”)

### What Should I Use?

In answering the question “Should I use Social Media” I suggested that it is worth thinking about the market(s) you operate in and the types of customers you deal with. Let’s bring that list forward because knowing who you want to tell your stories to is an essential part of understanding what mix of Social Media tools to use.

In essence you need to choose the place where those people visit or that they might find when searching for information. There are lots of generic Social Media sites that could give you access to the right audience (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Flickr or YouTube) but the question you may want to ask yourself is can you use those tools in a more focused way or find more specialist sites.

Malene Stanley at KSBKids ([www.ksbkids.com](http://www.ksbkids.com)) uses Facebook because she knows that her target audience of young mothers are already there. Most social networking sites allow you to participate in or even create user or special interest groups (there is a National B2B Centre LinkedIn group, for instance). You might find your target audience in one of these places.

It is very likely that target audiences will have particular Social Media sites set up to cater for their specific interests, for instance;

- TES Connect ([www.tes.co.uk/](http://www.tes.co.uk/)) is a forum for the education sector that has 778,000 members
- Manufacturing Talk ([www.manufacturingtalk.com/](http://www.manufacturingtalk.com/)) is a news site dedicated to the manufacturing industry,
- Aviation portal FlightGlobal (<http://www.flightglobal.com>) has a blog that covers every aspect of how aircraft are built and what they are used for – maybe it would be appropriate to comment on it.

The trick is then to reformat your stories to fit the channels that you have chosen. With cut and paste facilities on most social media sites, text at least is pretty easy to shape appropriately. With Twitter create a headline and add a link back to a good landing page. If you want to create a blog maybe set yourself a limit of 5 or 6 paragraphs (and remember to put in some keyword rich links back to your website). Online and offline press releases require more structure, a good headline and maybe a strong photo, so you may want to consider getting professional help.

### How Do I Use It?

If you are new to Social Media then the key is to use a manageable number of tools. Enough to give you access to potential clients and practice adding content but not so many that you get overwhelmed. You might want to start with LinkedIn, a blog and Twitter – choose what fits your needs.

People ask how much time they should spend using Social Media or how they stop themselves getting sucked into interesting but not necessarily business generating activity. There is no right or wrong answer – the key is to dedicate some time, schedule it in and be strict about stopping when the time is up. If Social Media is showing benefits and you don’t feel you can do it justice then consider paying somebody else to develop content and distribute it for you.

Set yourself some achievable targets such as;

- 3-4 Tweets (Twitter posts) per week
- a blog a week
- a couple of LinkedIn updates a month

Then keep it up for 6 months to build your activity into a habit and allow statistics and feedback to build up. This will tell you what is and isn’t working and give you the opportunity to change things.

Something else to bear in mind is the need to promote what you are doing. Social Media tools are partly self promoting but you need to do some work letting contacts and clients know too. Make sure that you invite contacts into social networks (and most

of them will work off contact lists from Outlook to check if people you know are already there). Add links to your email signature and your website and even "badges" to printed matter,

### How Do I Know If It Is Working?

One of the great things about Social Media as with other eMarketing technologies is that it is much easier to measure results than it was with traditional marketing techniques because you can record so much activity.

The first thing though is to establish what the right metrics are. Depending on what Social Media tools you are using it could be the number of comments on a blog, the number of followers that you generate on Twitter, the number of visitors to your website, new leads or better still actual sales.

The tools themselves often have inbuilt measures of success. Social networking sites tell you how many connection you have made or how many recommendations people have made about you. Video sharing sites like YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) and photo sharing sites like Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) will tell you how many people viewed material and provide the opportunity for people to leave comments, add you to a favourites list or refer you to friends.

External measurement is provided by tools such as Google Analytics (or other stats packages) and Google Alerts. Google Analytics ([www.google.com/analytics](http://www.google.com/analytics)) can be used to track usage of both websites and blogs and provides loads of useful information about what keywords people searched on to find your content or where they clicked on a link in another website, directory or Social Media site. Another useful tool from Google is the Google Alert service ([www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)) which allows you to track new references to you or your company in news sites, blogs and on webpages.

If you have your business processes set up effectively then you will also be able to measure activity in other "manual ways". Perhaps you will people contacting you by phone they got to you or set up a separate contact number for Social Media use.

### Summary

The noted marketing writer Seth Godin said in a blog post ([http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2009/05/your-world-vs-the-world.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2009/05/your-world-vs-the-world.html)) that "you are not the customer for your product." That sentiment applies to Social Media too. You may need to suspend disbelief and accept that Twitter or Facebook are as essential to some people as they are dispensable to you.

Choose the right place to engage with potential clients, if it's the right thing to do. And then go for it. Check what works and change what doesn't.

To find out more;

Join our LinkedIn group (<http://twurl.nl/qyp5xt>)  
Check out our blog ([blogs.warwick.ac.uk/b2bcentre/](http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/b2bcentre/))  
Follow us on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/b2b\\_centre](http://www.twitter.com/b2b_centre))  
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