

Social media an essential tool for small businesses

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Small business owners know how important it is to reach their existing customers and attract new ones. The Internet has made it easier than ever before for small businesses to do just that, but the days of relying on a Web site alone have largely fallen by the wayside.

Social media is one of the foremost reasons many people now go online. While engaging in social media won't turn a failing business into a successful enterprise overnight, it can help business owners in a number of ways.

—Increase visibility. In early 2012, the digital marketing firm iCrossing estimated that Facebook would reach the 1 billion users plateau by August of that year. Twitter, another popular social media platform, has more than 100 million registered users.

Simply put, social media is more popular than ever before, and its popularity is growing by the day. Businesses can take advantage of this by joining social media and immediately increasing their visibility. And that visibility is constant, as social media sites don't close at 10 p.m., and social media allows businesses to reach customers far and wide.

—Promote products. Social media can be used as a promotional tool. Blog about a product to help potential customers better understand the product, and customers won't feel as if they're being delivered a sales pitch. Business owners can easily produce how-to videos to explain the product, and any questions customers have can be simply sent via social media.

Business owners won't have to spend as much time trying to convert them from potential customers into actual customers, and the informal nature of promoting a product via social media can make customers feel more comfortable about their decisions.

—Promote the business. Though it can sometimes feel like the days of the successful small business owner is a thing of the past, social media is making it easier for small business owners to promote themselves and entice customers along the way.

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Buying from large corporations tends to alienate consumers, and small business owners can use that to their advantage. Use social media to tell the business' story. When consumers know who is behind a product, they tend to trust the company more and feel a more personal connection than they're likely to feel with a larger company or corporation.

—Better serve customers. Social media users enjoy using social media because it gives them a chance to share their thoughts on a variety of things, including the products they buy. Small business owners can help their business by encouraging those who follow them on social media to share their thoughts about certain products or promotions.

Employ social media to understand what customers like and dislike about certain products. This market research might once have cost small businesses a substantial amount of money, but now social media allows business owners to access this valuable information at relatively no cost.

—Build a network. Small business owners know that running a small business is not a one-man operation. Other small business owners and business consultants are valuable resources, and social media makes it easy to consult them for advice on how to turn a small business into a success.

But a network of fellow professionals isn't the only network social media can help companies build. Satisfied customers who take to social media to speak positively about a product can help the company build a network of satisfied customers.

Word-of-mouth has long been a friend to small business owners, and now social media enables satisfied customers to share their experience with friends and family members who might one day become the next satisfied customer.

Small businesses often need all the help they can get to establish and maintain success. Social media can be a significant ally to small businesses in a number of ways.

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