



# A Social Media Guide for the Skeptical Small-Business Owner



RatePoint

Reputation is Everything



Brought to you by:



RatePoint<sup>sm</sup>

Reputation is Everything

## Table of Contents

The new rules of customer acquisition . . . . .	3
Making customer connections count. . . . .	4
Sorting through the noise: Which social network do I start with? . . . . .	5
Twitter for SMBs . . . . .	6-7
Facebook for SMBs . . . . .	8
Blogging for SMBs. . . . .	9
Tying your virtual business profile together to boost search results. . . . .	10
Social networking and customer feedback . . . . .	11
Networking the networks . . . . .	12



## Customer acquisition gets social

**As a small-business owner**, you know the value of a steady flow of new customers. Finding, attracting and retaining customers are essential to any successful business. Advertising in your community, direct mail and email marketing are all common ways to promote and extend sales.

When it comes to the Internet, you may consider your business too small to make an impact on the vast worldwide community. With location-based searches, Internet users who identify themselves by location and the “hyperlocalization” of online news, what seems like a never-ending sea of users is actually a geographically targeted group that’s receptive to connecting and doing business in their local communities.

One of the primary advantages of social media for small businesses is the low capital cost associated with finding, connecting and communicating with consumers online. The time investment often can be repaid immediately with customer conversion and return.

At the same time, social media can be an instantaneous focus group to discover customers’ wants, needs and latest trends.

MarketingSherpa, a research group specializing in monitoring marketing efforts, reports that most industries are increasing social media marketing budgets in 2010. Social media has created a smarter consumer who uses technology to exchange information, make informed buying decisions and shop via multiple channels, such as in as a store and online.

More than two-thirds of small-business owners, 63 percent, say word of mouth is the most effective way to market their business, yet 81 percent do not use social media, according to a recent survey by Citibank. Social networking is word of mouth; it’s the online version of recommendations.

While some small businesses remain skeptical of the power of social media, savvy businesses are realizing that convenience and conversation lead to online conversions.



**Coach's tip: Tell customers how they can find and connect with you online. Add a sign in your retail location and/or add links from your website.**



## Stronger customer connections count

**Consumers complain about information overload** with overflowing email boxes, social networking and mobile phones all vying for attention.

With marketing and advertising messages everywhere – from traditional advertising to messages on the sides of vehicle to advertisements on the bathroom door – a small business needs to figure out how to cut through the clutter and get in front of a future customer. When you have someone's attention in an email newsletter or in an update from a social network, you only have seconds to make that time count.

It can become increasingly difficult for businesses to add new email newsletter subscribers and social network connections to continue customer relationships. However, opening up those email newsletters via social networks can attract potential customers as well as serve as a reminder to current customers about your products and services.

Customers can easily share Web-based versions of newsletters with friends, family and social network connections, instantly adding reach and awareness to your business, as well. Through services such as RatePoint, businesses can create an instant Web version of an email newsletter and link it to social networks including Twitter and Facebook.

Not only do these social networks provide updates to friends and followers, but the words used in the content that you write for social network updates also serve to help with search engine optimization. That means that countless consumers starting purchase decision research at a search engine can find the link to your email newsletter when the word they enter as search terms match that of your update.

In addition to email newsletters, extending social media integration with business and product reviews can also enhance search engine optimization and draw increased attention to your business.

With RatePoint, small-business customers can add a customized tab to their Facebook profiles so customers can browse and submit reviews directly via Facebook.

In addition, RatePoint also includes a custom Twitter feed to aggregate and promote reviews from all of its customers. This feed aids in the online promotion and awareness of small businesses across the U.S. and Canada, bringing a greater awareness to businesses that are working hard to build a positive online reputation.



**Coach's tip: Make email newsletters go beyond email. Invite potential customers in with a Web-based version.**

## Sorting through the noise. Where do I start?

**Nowadays, there's a social network for everything** – from health concerns to dogs and cats, senior citizens and travel enthusiasts.

Of course, it doesn't make sense to invest time and effort in a particular social network if your clients are not there. How do you determine where they spend their time?

The easiest way is to ask. Add a survey to your next email newsletter and ask customers if they are active on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn.

Another way to find customers and potential customers online is location-based searching. If you have a brick-and-mortar location or multiple locations, you can search most social networks by city and state. Having a sense of how many people are in a metro area can help you determine if it would be worthwhile to spend time promoting your business there.

For an e-commerce business, location is not essential. However, it is possible to search various social networks for keywords, such as an individual's bio on Twitter. For instance, if you have a pet products business online, you could search Twitter bios for "dog lover" or "cat lover" and find potential customers who talk about their pets.

Consumers can be found, targeted and communicated to in an environment where they already spend their time. When you find them talking about your service, product or area of expertise, joining and adding to that

conversation is much more effective than trying to get them to open your direct mail piece.

For example, let's say you've started a Twitter profile for your salon and are following Twitter users that list your city in their profiles. A consumer updates with "I always forget that my hair salon is closed on Mondays – really need a haircut." You reply with "Salon le Sol is open on Mondays – and we take walk-ins – [www.salonlesol.com](http://www.salonlesol.com)" and now you have a customer that may not only use your service but will also share that news with their friends.

Forums are an early form of social networks and many still exist today, drawing users interested in a particular pastime or need, such as automotive accessories, location-based activities and home improvement sites. Many require a login but users acknowledge helpful, informative links.

Multimedia sites such as YouTube (video) and Flickr (photos) may seem filled with teenagers pulling pranks and videos that make the evening news, but businesses from Fortune 500 companies to sole proprietors are utilizing these sites for a major business advantage: search results.

Because social networks and multimedia sites are updated constantly with new content and are designed to be tagged with keywords, search engines place a high value on information placed there. According to ComScore, YouTube now ranks second only behind Google as the largest search engine.



**Coach's tip: Listen first. Find out where your customers are online before deciding you need to be on a specific site.**

## Twitter for small business

A cross between blogging and texting, Twitter is a social network where users communicate with each other in 140-character increments.



Twitter is a communication platform that helps businesses stay connected to their customers. As a business, you can use it to quickly share information with people interested in your company, gather real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners and other people who care about your company.

An early perception of Twitter was that people were using it to share mundane things such as what they had for breakfast or “sitting on the porch” like the TV commercial. Now, many businesses use Twitter to update customers on specials and availability of products.

### Getting started on Twitter is easy. There are five main steps:

**Setting up** To set up an account, go to [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) and click on “join the conversation.” Enter your name and create a username for yourself. This could be your business name if you’re creating a corporate account. If your company name has been taken, variations can be made such as “zapposCEO” or “BestBuyCMO.”

**Profile** Once you have an account set up, log into Twitter and click on the ‘Settings’ link at the top of your Twitter homepage. You can add a link to your home page and a 160-character description about you and/or your company. The ‘Picture’ tab lets you upload a picture to your profile. Another option would be to use your company logo for a corporate account.

**Following** Try searching at <http://search.twitter.com> for your company name, products, services and industry terms. The list of potential things to search for goes on and on. Then, click on a user’s name to view their profile and their “tweets.” If it looks like someone that would interest you, click the “follow” button under their icon. The tweets from people that you follow are aggregated into a stream of updates. [Twellow.com](http://twellow.com) is another site that categorizes Twitterers by industry and allows you to search users’ profile descriptions.

**Ways to post** There are many, many Web sites and desktop applications you can use, and you can even post to Twitter using instant messaging or SMS messages. Start by using the Web site ([Twitter.com](http://Twitter.com)) to determine your preferences. Tweetdeck, HootSuite and Twhirl are popular applications.

**Start Talking** To post a regular message to all of your subscribers (followers), just type it into the website/application and hit ‘post’/‘send.’

### Send a message to someone publically



Type “@” followed by their username, then the message. So, if you wanted to say hi to Frank at Comcast, you’d type “@comcastcares hi there!” Click the @replies section to see who has responded to you.

### Send a direct (private) message to someone

Choose the direct message section and select a user from the drop-down. Note: you can only send direct messages to people who you follow, and who follow you. This is where you can see received direct messages, too.

## Twitter glossary and shortcuts

**Adding a URL to your message:** use [www.tinyurl.com](http://www.tinyurl.com) or <http://bit.ly> or <http://is.gd>. Once you click on one of these, enter your URL you'd like to share and these sites will give you a tiny URL so you can fit your message and link within the 140-character limit.

**Replying:** use @ (twittername) where twittername is the person's Twitter handle that you are replying to. Example: "@jetblue Had a great flight experience last week. Thanks."

**Reposting/copying someone else's message:** Copy and paste the message into your update box on Twitter. Then in front of the message, add RT (meaning "retweet") and an @ symbol before the user's Twitter name. Example original message: jetblue: April fare sales are now on our site, [www.tinyurl.com/jetblue](http://www.tinyurl.com/jetblue). Example reposted message: RT @jetblue: April fare sales are now on our site, [www.tinyurl.com/jetblue](http://www.tinyurl.com/jetblue).

When you start to tweet for your business, remember that building an audience takes time and consistency. You'll need to do some work upfront to find and connect with your customers and potential customers. Once you provide information to them that's valuable and useful, you'll begin to see results through interaction, responses and click-throughs to your website and eventually sales.

However, don't expect Twitter to provide instantaneous sales. If a business comes in expecting to only sell in a social network, the sense of community will not be built and customers will remain at arm's length. Social networks take care and feeding but the rewards can be great for a business of any size.

Like any business function, reassess after a few months and determine if customers and potential customers are finding and identifying with the business.

## Tweet Sheet

**Tweet:** single message seen on Twitter, and the act of posting to Twitter

**OH:** Overheard.

**RT: Retweet:** tweeting content posted by another user

**# (hashtag):** Used to "tag" a tweet for tracking topics or events.

**Example tweet:** What are you doing for Earth Day this year? #EarthDay10

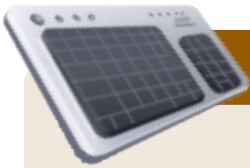
**@(name):** Addresses a tweet to a specific user or mentions them

**FTW:** For The Win, conveys enthusiasm or recommendation

**twitterverse:** The body of Twitter users or community, similar to "blogosphere"

**tweople/tweeple:** Twitter + people

**tweetup:** Twitter + meetup: a gathering of folks based on a twitter conversation (often impromptu)



## Blogging for small business

**Most companies that have blogs** either have one dedicated writer or only post occasionally because they're not sure what to write about or don't have the time.

If you are tasked with a blog post for a company, fear not! Blog posts should be short, sweet and to the point. Here are the main points to keep in mind:

Shorter is better: less than 200 words is great, less than 100 words is acceptable.

Pretend like you're talking to your neighbor or your friends. Make your tone conversational yet professional (no LOLs, please). Include links in your writing. Link to the definitions or Wikipedia article of any words or phrases that might be technical or not commonly known

Links are gold to search and to bloggers. Link to other blogs instead of news articles when you can. This demonstrates "link love" and bloggers check to see what sites are linking back to them.

When you write, it's about the reader. Work your business message in but remember to add value. Try to solve a problem, answer a question or share some news.

Remember to talk to individuals in a blog post; don't cut and paste content from a press release. Create the blog post in a conversational tone using I, we, etc. Rather than staying "on message," focus on staying "on search." Use words and phrases that an everyday person might put into a search engine. (This cannot be simplified enough. Remember, one of the top search terms of all time, on Google, is "Google.") Even if readers are not commenting, increasing a company's profile by building search results can have an impact on website traffic.

**B**logs can have a large impact on search optimization.

Blogging platforms, like

**WordPress, TypePad and others, generally have some the following features**

**built in or have them available where you can check them off to include on your site:**

- Make sure it has RSS (Real Simple Syndication, the technology for search engines)
- Run your RSS through FeedBurner ([www.feedburner.com](http://www.feedburner.com))
- Make sure readers can tag posts (Digg, Del.icio.us) – an easy way is to grab code from [www.addthis.com](http://www.addthis.com).
- When writing posts, include links to other sites and to other blogs
- When commenting on other blogs, include your blog URL (most comment systems include this option)
- Consistent content generation – at least one new entry each week
- Create a profile on Technorati and claim your blog (when you create a profile, there is a spot to claim your blog. This is where you can add several tags and keywords to associate with your blog.)







## Facebook for small businesses

**Facebook is known as a social network where younger people communicate to each other constantly**, and other demographics connect with past friends, family and colleagues. Yet, according to InsideFacebook.com at the beginning of 2010, only 40 percent of Facebook users are under the age of 25, 60 percent are 26 or older, and nearly 20 percent are 45 or older.

Businesses of all shapes and sizes are finding ways to connect and promote business with Facebook fans. In fact, according to Facebook, more than 700,000 local businesses have active pages on the network.

### Here are some tips to getting started on Facebook:

**Create your page** This must be done through an individual's account, so someone at your company must have a Facebook page first. When logged into Facebook, click on the "f" icon on the bottom right for "ads and pages." In the pages section, click on "add a page." Add the business name, industry and relevant contact information. Upload a photo of the business or logo.

**Add content** Add any information about your business copied from your Web site, press releases and marketing material. Add photos if you have them and links to your business.

**Promote your page** Add a Facebook icon and link to your Web site and print the information to display at your business. Add the link to Twitter, LinkedIn, the company blog and any other social networks where you're active.

**Special offers** Update fans with special offers, coupon codes and printable coupons. Make it easy for them to shop with your business.

**Provide updates** Update fans when you have new shipments in, new product lines or extended services. If you provide a specialty, say mobile phones for example, tips and tricks are always appreciated by customers.



**O**ftentimes, a business Facebook profile will appeal to current customers, friends and acquaintances of a business in the beginning. Then, customers and friends will share the site and information with like-minded contacts, eventually creating a larger network.

Some businesses can increase Facebook connections with special offers, such as exclusive coupons or offers to donate to a charity or cause when they reach a certain number of connections.



## Social networks working together for search results

### Every social network has search engine optimization

**benefits.** When you write about your company, its products and services on sites such as Twitter, Facebook and on blog posts, those words can match up with what a consumer types into a search engine. When search engines find matching terms, that content ranks higher in the results. There are many nuances to search engine optimization, but one important factor is that greater emphasis is placed on social networking content because search engines want to provide the latest, most relevant content to its users.

For example, if a potential customer is searching for accessories for a BlackBerry or wants to know how to add a memory card to a BlackBerry, that customer can easily find your business when the search results appear with your content that talks about BlackBerry solutions.

To enhance search engine optimization through social media, called social media optimization, create mini presentations and documents about your business and add them to sites like slideshare.net and

docstoc.com. These sites rank high in search results and can have an impact on driving additional traffic and business to your website.

Now that many consumers have broadband Internet access or get online through Internet connections at work, multimedia is increasingly important. Photo sites such as Flickr and video sites such as YouTube increase search results through tagging. Tagging is where an individual adds keywords to an image, video – and blog posts – so other individuals can find the information based on the same interests.

Again, if your business is mobile phone accessories, a simple YouTube video showing how to insert a memory card can create great traffic to the video and then link to your business site. A growing number of small businesses have developed how-to and informational videos to connect with consumers, primarily those in the consumer electronics space. By providing the audience with something useful, it creates a connection and encourages trust between a business and consumer.



## Social networking and customer feedback

**Many small-business owners fear social media** because the unknown factor of negative consumer feedback. With processes and plans in place, small businesses can embrace and respond to any issues, creating a reputation of a caring, trustworthy business.

With RatePoint's dispute resolution process, negative online reviews are not public until the business and customer have an opportunity to work together to resolve the issue. If the customer is still not satisfied after the process, the review is publicly posted. The process is designed to be private to open up a direct communication between the business and the customer. No communications that are part of the dispute resolution process are posted to RatePoint. (For more on RatePoint's dispute resolution process, see our eBook "The Small-Business Owner's Guide to Building a Great Reputation.")

If the issue is resolved to both the satisfaction of both parties, the negative review is not posted as a review, nor does it impact the company's overall rating in the RatePoint system. If the business does not respond at any point within the designated time period, the review is posted.

RatePoint found that 90 percent of disputes end up being resolved, and the customer is happy because their situation was addressed – the end result is businesses aren't burdened with a review that is not reflective of their brand and service.

Ignoring online consumer reviews will not make issues go away, and the trend is continuing for consumers to read reviews prior to purchases. Almost three quarters, 71 percent, of online

shoppers read reviews, making it the most widely read type of consumer-generated content 1.

What happens when you find something negative about your business online? The first step is to take a deep breath. Don't start typing in frustration. A knee-jerk reaction may add fuel to the fire instead of turning a problem into smoking embers.

Next, take a look at where the customer posted the comment and ask the following questions: Is it a third-party review site? Does that site allow for businesses to respond? Is the customer complaint valid? Can you help that customer and turn that negative into a positive?

After assessing all possibilities, determine the best course of action for your business and its online reputation.

Savvy business owners are embracing customer reviews, gathering customer testimonials and creating consumer evangelists who praise and promote their businesses. With a cache of favorable product or service reviews on your website, customer testimonials become a powerful way for you to build customer trust and increase loyalty.

In addition, small businesses that communicate regularly with customers via e-mail campaigns and surveys are strengthening customer connections with reviews and feedback to boost awareness and drive repeat sales.



## Networking the networks

**Once you get started on social networks, you don't have to reinvent the wheel for your business every time.**

For example, if you have news about your business and want to write a press release, rewrite that press release as a conversational blog post and then shorten it into a sentence for a Facebook update. Then, summarize the news in 140 characters and link



**Recycle your content!**

to the release or blog post from Twitter.

When a small business has an email newsletter it regularly sends to customers, repurposing that content and extending its reach through social networks can provide a wider audience with not too much extra effort. Businesses such as RatePoint automatically create an online version of your email newsletter and integrate updates to Twitter and Facebook, seamlessly extending a business's reach to potential customers.

**W**ith RatePoint's Facebook tab for example, small businesses that have their Facebook business page connected to RatePoint simply click to add a tab in Facebook and choose the "RatePoint" tab. Instantly, business reviews through RatePoint are available for new and potential customers to see, and current customers have the ability to add a review directly from the Facebook tab.

RatePoint's Twitter feed, <http://twitter.com/ratepointbuzz>, provides reviews for all RatePoint customers and does not require the business to have its own Twitter account. Once a shopper creates a review for any business using RatePoint, that review is added to RatePoint's buzz feed.

These new enhancements complement RatePoint's one-click integration into Twitter and Facebook and a custom URL shortener (<http://r8t.us>) for social-networking updates.

One way to share information across sites is to cross promote. If you have a special offer in your email newsletter or on your site, be sure to tell your online consumers, too, even – and especially – if they have to print a coupon to bring into a store.

Showing potential customers what current customers have to say about your business is a great way to build trust, especially when a customer is viewing you through online channels before doing business online or in a store.

It's OK to start out on one social network until you become comfortable with how it works and how your customers are using it. Then, take that knowledge and expand into other sites, creating a comprehensive online presence so customers can find you when and where they're looking for an answer.



**Coach's tip: Use technology that allows you to update more than one site at the same time, saving time for your business.**

1. Forrester Research