

Social media: Marketing hype or business imperative?

 By [Anton Ressel](#)

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Social media for business is exploding. Everywhere one turns, it seems there is another online marketing specialist extolling the absolute necessity of a comprehensive social media strategy. A Facebook page, Twitter account, LinkedIn profile, Pinterest page...the list of requirements goes on and on.

Is this simply marketing hype from the social media industry, or an absolute imperative for business, and especially small business, in South Africa?

Before jumping in boots and all, the burning question should be "Is the return from social media investment justified?" The starting point for a smaller organisation, consisting of a simple page across the 'Big 3' business platforms - Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn - will cost in the order of R5000 to R10 000 depending on complexity, with an additional (optional) fee for on-going management and maintenance of content of around R3 000 per month. This excludes time for in-house staff to manage the social media platforms, planning time, and costs for inevitable upgrades.

With this in mind, is it all worth it? What real business benefit is social media bringing the average small organisation?

Cutting through the hype

Understanding the cost: benefit of social media was a hot topic amongst entrepreneurs and small business owners at a recent interactive "Understanding Social Media" conference for small organisations, hosted by the Old Mutual Legends business development programme.

"We ran this conference because every business needs to understand how to stay ahead of the pack, and because the concept of marketing is reinventing itself through social media almost daily. We believe that one must first understand the basics in order to get the job done effectively, because without this it is too easy to be swept up by the hype and excitement of new technology and new social platforms," explains the workshop facilitator Catherine Wijnberg, CEO of enterprise development specialists Fetola.

"It is clear that many organisations are feeling a pressing need for a social media strategy, but remain uncertain how to proceed, or how much time and money to invest in this channel. There is a real need to help people cut through the hype and get true value," adds Wijnberg.

Conference attendee Phindile Mkhize, MD of Zan Zan Décor, concurs: "I have been aware that I need to integrate social media into my marketing, but was unsure where to start and what platforms were best for my business. I believe I now have

a much better understanding of the do's and don'ts, and more importantly how to use social media in the correct way to grow my business."

Integrated approach

Experienced social media providers such as Lianne Byrne-Hammacott of Digital4Good, understand how to tackle digital media and mould it to benefit small businesses and non-profits. "People think that they can simply set up a Facebook page and post a few things here and there, and the sales will come flooding in. In truth, social media needs to be seen as an integral part of your overall marketing strategy and activities for it to deliver to its full potential," she explains.

She believes the rise of mobile technology, niche social networks, the 'fan-sumer' and increasing customer influence through online platforms are trends that all SMMEs and non-profits need to take into account when assessing a social media strategy.

Dorian de Klerck, sales manager at digital media specialist agency Active Ice, agrees. "The mistake many people make is believing that their social media efforts will lead to the phone ringing off the hook and sales rolling in. This is simply not the case. Social media should not be seen as a quick return on investment scenario, but rather a medium to long term marketing and brand development solution. We reckon that a good social media strategy is 85% marketing and only 15% sales focussed," he explains.

"This makes a proper online marketing strategy an absolute imperative. We advise clients to plan and think about every post, tweet or other communication, as well as the look and feel of their pages and platforms, for maximum impact."

Beyond the Big Three

Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter are only part of an online marketing strategy however, and ensuring that your website is readily found by search engines still forms the foundation of any serious online marketing.

"There are two kinds of websites - those that deliver, and those that do not. People need to know how to structure their sites and take the necessary steps to ensure that they are found by major search engines, or the site can become a bit of a white elephant," explains Jason New, search engine optimisation (SEO) consultant and rounder of Click Metrics. "This includes linking to other well-optimised and respected sites, and ensuring your content is fresh and compelling."

"Websites must be developed as part of an integrated online marketing strategy, making maximum use of the automated search tools, and if necessary using specialists to boost success. Almost nobody bothers to look beyond the first page on a Google Search, and often if you are not in the top three search results, you might as well be invisible," he adds.

When to call in the cavalry

Social media and online marketing still remains a grey area for many smaller organisations, and a common question is 'how much can be done in-house, and when should one bring in a specialist?'

Wijnberg offers the following advice: "With any marketing or brand development, it is usually necessary to bring in experts for certain elements, such as logo design, copywriting, even assistance with overall strategy. Social media is no different. Just because it is free to set up a Facebook page does not mean you should go ahead and wing it yourself.

"Managing social media badly, or simply 'dabbling' in it, can often be more damaging than having no online presence at all. My advice is that one should seek expert help to develop a strategy and get started, and then make it your business to learn what you need to know in order to manage things for the long term."

Putting Facebook in its place

Everyone is talking about Facebook timeline as an absolute must-have for business (this week at least), but it is important to put Facebook in its place. Like social media itself, Facebook is just another marketing tool to get your message to your client. Don't be fooled into letting social media override your core business prerogatives - integrate it into a properly designed and fully integrated marketing and media plan, and remember that at the end of the day your clients are not your contacts on LinkedIn or your fans on Facebook, but those who actually buy your products and services.

For more on the Old Mutual Legends programme and the support it offers small businesses and non-profit organisations, visit www.fetola.co.za.

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