

Social selling: Sales in the digital era

 By [Ruth Steyn](#)

25 Jan 2013

Many things have changed as a result of social media. The way we share our news, the way we interact, and the way we engage with companies. And now, companies are using social media as an effective way to sell their products. The motivation behind this is simple: the customers are already there, so why not take sales to the customers?

The digital landscape is in a constant state of flux. Online selling is not a new concept - it has in fact been around since 1979. However, the internet itself has undergone vast changes since then, most significantly the creation of the World Wide Web by Sir Tim Berners-Lee in 1990. As the landscape has changed, tactics and techniques have had to be adapted in order to keep up with new capabilities and consumers' wants. The key to successful social selling lies in understanding the social media user and their expectations.

Gaining the trust of wary consumers

An essential element of effective online selling on any platform is creating trust. Customers are still wary of being conned, and they need to know that the company is trustworthy. This is not about telling them so, it's about showing them, by establishing a good reputation for the company both online and offline.

Today, there are over 1 billion active Facebook users and over 500 million Twitter users worldwide, giving companies access to a vast market for sales via social media. Furthermore, there are opportunities for social selling across a variety of social media platforms, including LinkedIn and Pinterest, which are the fastest-growing social networks to date.

Here are a few tips on how you can leverage social media as part of your sales strategy:

Target, tailor, test

Establish who your target market is, and pay attention to trends in how that market uses social media. Different age groups, for example, use platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in different ways.

In addition to tailoring to your target market, tailoring your pitch to each platform is an important part of your social selling strategy. Each platform has advantages and limitations: Twitter is widely used for B2B marketing and only permits 140-character posts, but retweeting is common and posts can reach a wide audience. Pinterest, on the other hand, is image and lifestyle-focused, while Facebook enables successful multimedia integration and significant community building opportunities. The most successful campaigns engage users in interesting and exciting ways on a relevant platform, creating the sense that the user is getting something extra out of the bargain.

Testing your message is the best way to establish its likely success. Google AdWords allows users to test different combinations of keywords to see which receive the most search engine hits. Polls and surveys will give you insight into what customers are looking for.

Ask, listen, respond

Social media is all about engagement. Interacting with audiences is the best way of establishing what is important to them, and has the added benefit of creating the impression that the company cares about more than just profit. If you wish to successfully target customers via social media, you need to offer them something of value, and how better to do so than by engaging in online conversation with them.

Use platform-specific tools

Facebook offers Promoted Posts, allowing advertisers to pay for increased visibility. Similarly, Twitter offers Promoted Tweets, which appear at the top of Twitter search results, as well as Promoted Accounts, which appear in the "Who to Follow" section and at the top of search results. Pinterest is not intended to be used as a tool for self-promotion, but the image-driven social bookmarking site can be used very effectively as a tool to connect users back to your site where they can buy your products.

The golden rule

Finding innovative ways of engaging the online consumer is the surest route to success. No social media user has signed to be bombarded with sales pitches. A soft sell is far more likely to be successful than a hard sell, as users may see overt sale tactics as invasive and unwelcome in the social space. Make sure, however, that it is easy for users to click through to the offer and place their order.

If you want to learn more about sales management in the digital era, consider the UCT Sales Management short course or the UCT Social Media short course, presented by online education company, GetSmarter. GetSmarter offers online certificate courses approved by the University of Cape Town. Visit www.GetSmarter.co.za to find out more.

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