

To Like or Not to Like: Social Media as a Marketing Tool

Abstract

Social media can be a solid marketing tool for Extension personnel and their stakeholders. It is inexpensive, has the potential to reach many individuals, and can be used to target certain groups. Yet the challenge with using social media is identifying those strategies that work best in the marketing of programs and/or products. To address this challenge for Extension audiences, this article focuses on insights from a rural business' approach to using social media as a marketing tool.

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Introduction

With the rise of social media, Extension personnel have expressed interest in using it in their programming. Kinsey (2010) and Cornelisse, et al. (2011) identified a number of social media tools (blogs, Twitter, social networking, video sharing, and photo sharing) and discussed ways that these tools can be used in Extension. In a survey conducted by O'Neill, Zumwalt, and Bechman (2011), Extension family educators stated that the social media tool they used most was Facebook. In addition, one survey respondent stated that more social media training is needed, especially simple to follow "cheat sheets."

Based on this need, the objective of this article is to discuss a rural business' strategic approach to social media. Extension personnel as well as other businesses will benefit from this discussion because it is a straightforward strategic plan for launching and maintaining a social media presence. In short, the plan discussed in this article provides insights into a method for how to use social media to market programs and/or products and ultimately build brand exposure.

Strategic Marketing of Social Media

Social media does offer a number of benefits. Grinberg (2012) states that these benefits include enhanced dialogue with customers, increased sales, and reduced advertising costs. Ultimately, these benefits can add value to a stakeholder or customer base through the individual's, company's, and/or product's brand.

Focusing on the brand helps quantify the social media marketing strategy. That is, it is easier to

track the growth of the brand through additional fans, likes, follows, and/or subscriptions. Also, there are multiple ways to enhance an audience's engagement with the brand through video, blogs, comments, and even sharing related stories. However, how does one go about implementing such a strategy? That is, what social media plan will work?

A Plan for Social Media: Lessons Learned from KFSA

Kansas Farmers Insurance Association, or KFSA, is an insurance agency based out of Hutchinson, Kansas. In 1947, KFSA was formed by a group of Kansas cooperatives to provide cost-effective commercial insurance for agribusiness. Today, KFSA has expanded throughout rural areas in Kansas, Colorado, and the upper Midwest by providing personal and commercial insurance as well as risk management, safety, and human resources consulting.

As a growing company, KFSA has turned to social media as a cost-effective way to enhance the value of their products and services. Social media is clearly a popular and low-cost alternative to other marketing strategies such as print or media advertisement. Thus, KFSA set out to increase its presence in social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Google+.

Still, the impact of social media for any business' value proposition is complicated and difficult to quantify. A primary frustration for many businesses and institutions is that social media may not show a direct correlation with increased sales or company profits. To circumvent this issue, KFSA decided to develop a social media strategy that included quantifiable measures illustrating that social media was enhancing the marketing of the business.

More specifically, KFSA's focus was to increase their brand exposure through a set of five logical steps for their social media marketing strategy.

1. Determine objective of social media. KFSA's objective was to enhance brand exposure because posts, likes, follows, etc., can be tracked easily.
2. Research your target audience. Before building their brand, KFSA identified key companies as well as individuals, all of whom could be potential customers, and then followed or liked their potential customers' social media sites.
3. Make posts targeted, even if they are "random." Every post should relate to the objective. KFSA posts about office events, such as health/wellness events; tags and shares articles related to their target audience; shares fun pictures to keep the audience engaged; and promotes social media to the target audience through promotions. Have fun and be creative!
4. Be involved with your social media sites as well as your target audience's sites. KFSA strives to post routinely (three to five per week), but does not flood their social media sites or their target audience's sites with too many posts because that is overbearing and counterproductive.
5. Track your progress, and adjust accordingly. KFSA found that meeting strategic objectives via social media requires tracking progress and making adjustments continuously.

Tracking Social Media Progress

To illustrate the impact of building KFSA's brand through social media, a number of statistics from KFSA's Facebook insights page were collected from October 2011 to November 2012. These statistics are shown in Table 1, and the key takeaways are summarized as follows.

1. Engaging social media users with "eye-catching" material is key. Picture posts received the highest average view per post, or the user stopped scrolling down the page and took the time to open up the picture. Extension personnel should focus on these types of posts.
2. Promotional posts created the most engaged users. An engaged user is someone who has clicked, liked, shared, or commented on a post. It is desirable to have more engaged users because the post will appear on the user's Facebook page, thus boosting the posts potential reach to other users. Promotional posts clearly led to the most engaged users. For example, this KFSA promotional post led to more than 40 new followers: "KFSA is giving away a \$50 gas gift card! We will draw from all of the new "likes" from last Tuesday through next Friday. Tell your friends & help us grow our exposure!!"
3. Sharing posts of businesses/individuals that KFSA follows generates additional interaction. Unfortunately, it is difficult to track the new interactions or engaged users that can be created from sharing other posts. However, sharing other posts is necessary because it shows that KFSA is an engaged social media user.

Table 1.

KFSA Facebook Insight Statistics Related to Building Brand Exposure

Type of Post	Total Number of Posts	Average User View per Post	Average Engaged User View per Post
Status Update	82	73.73	3.60
Promotional	9	106.2	21.22
Link	161	67.62	1.79
Picture	125	106.67	21.18
Share	56	70.04	3.02
Video	14	75.43	6.07

Conclusions

Social media can be used to enhance a marketing plan, especially with respect to expanding brand exposure. While this article focused on a specific social media strategy for a business, lessons are applicable and replicable for Extension personal. The five strategic steps and ways to track progress presented in this article represent a framework to build a sound and successful social media

marketing.

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