



H-Paper

From Mass Media to Media of the Masses
Social Media is a New Branding Opportunity

The H Agency www.theHagency.com

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In this H-Paper, we recommend exploring the world of social media networking. This new media venue can help you expand your customer relationships, develop and personalize your brand voice, and connect with customers and prospects in ways that traditional advertising and public relations cannot.

The Internet can be both a friend and a resource to network, communicate news, answer questions and address concerns about your products and services to existing and potential customers. Through the phenomenon of social media websites, you can connect to a worldwide audience cost-effectively and create impressions that can build your brand muscles in new and different ways.

Changes in online technology in recent years have created web-based applications and sites that make it even easier for the average online user to share information. You don't need to know or understand complex coding to create web pages or participate in one of a multitude of new communication options that make the Internet friendlier and more accessible.

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SOCIAL MEDIA

The term “Web 2.0” is often used to describe these new Internet technology trends. According to Wikipedia, “the term first became notable after the O’Reilly Media Web 2.0 conference in 2004. Although the term Web 2.0 suggests a new version of the World Wide Web, it does not refer to an update to any technical specifications, but rather to changes in the ways software developers and end-users utilize the Web.” (Wikipedia is a perfect example of this Web 2.0 technology – using simple text tools, different users create an ever-evolving information database on a multitude of subjects.)

Web 2.0 technologies and applications have created a new culture of web communities and hosted services that include what are called **social networking sites** (like LinkedIn and FaceBook), **video sharing sites** (like YouTube), **wikis** (like Wikipedia), and **blogs** (you’re reading this H-paper within a blog). These information-sharing resources are all relatively easy to use and maintain. Your only cost is that of a staff person’s time to implement and update postings.

Interactive media

According to *BusinessWeek* online, “the Internet has become an information hub where people spend a large part of their time learning, playing and communicating with others globally.” According to a study conducted by Netpop Research, LLC, approximately 43 million Americans contribute regularly to social networking sites.

Do the math. If you’re in the communications business, you can’t ignore these numbers and the opportunity that social networking offers to reach potential customers. *BusinessWeek* online also said this massive exodus to online communication has turned mass media upside down and created what they call the “media of the masses.”

On the Internet, ideas circulate faster than any other medium. Your potential customers are online everyday, looking for products, opportunities, news and entertainment. While you’re waiting for the “right time,” your competitors are gathering and developing creative new ideas from blogs, plugging their ad messages in wherever they can, and even mining for clues about what you and other competitors are doing.



SOCIAL MEDIA

The evolution of social media:

1. First there were e-mail and websites and people going online, surfing websites to see what was there and sending e-mails to stay in touch.

2. Then, there were search engines – (like Google and Dog Pile) This online tool searches for information based on reference words that you would request it to find. (A sort of card catalog to see what's in the library.)

3. Next, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) was the big thing – By using lots of specific words that reference your website's content, search engine spiders can locate and classify your site, raising your standing in a search engine word search and making your site easier for people to find.

4. Then, came Adwords – These are words that you select because they appear frequently in your ad or website. When someone searches using that keyword, your website address would appear at the top of the search engine's list. Then you are charged a fee by the search engine for every person who clicks on your listing.

5. And along came Blogging - and it blew the doors off the whole thing. There are something like 10 million blogs out there, and the number of bloggers doubles about every 8 months.

6. Now social media and social networking are the latest thing (like FaceBook MySpace, Twitter and YouTube). With social media, people make connections. People with similar interests are drawn together. They share information and ideas. They share stories and make recommendations on products or services they use. According to one study, there are approximately 40 million active users of social networks, and this number has grown 93 percent since 2006. For a simple explanation, see the video "Social Networking in Plain English" posted on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a_KF7TYKvc



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Here's a brief description of some of the most popular social media sites and formats:

- **FaceBook** was begun primarily as a free online social network for Harvard students, but then, based on its popularity, it quickly expanded to other Boston-area universities, then nationally and internationally. Users can now join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. Facebook users can also add friends to their personal network, send them messages, and update their personal profile to notify friends about news in their lives. It currently has more than 150 million active users worldwide.
- **MySpace** is a free social networking website where users do much the same as its main competitor, FaceBook. People share personal profiles, connect with friends, create blogs, join and create social networking interest groups, post photos, music and videos.
- **LinkedIn** is an online social network that caters to business people and professionals. On its website LinkedIn claims that more than “30 million professionals use LinkedIn to exchange information, ideas and opportunities,” through its network of professional groups and professional contacts.
- **Twitter** is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read other users' updates (known as tweets) about activities in their lives. Tweets are short text-based posts (up to 140 characters in length) give users an insider's view of the small, sometimes insignificant events that comprise a person's activities throughout his or her day.
- **YouTube** is a video hosting website where users upload, view and share video clips at no cost. Using Adobe Flash video technology, YouTube allows users to display a wide range of video content that includes movie clips, TV program clips, music videos and original amateur-generated content like video blogs. Most of the content has been uploaded by the general public, though businesses and major media organizations are now posting news-related content, commercials and infomercials. Unregistered users can watch the videos, while registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos.
- **Blogs** (short for web logs) are sites that typically feature postings, written comments and articles by an individual or group. Most blogs allow readers to respond with comments or questions. Blogs vary widely in subject matter. Their strength (or weakness) is that they provide a totally personal perspective on a particular topic.
- **Forums** and content communities are online websites or blogs where multiple users can create topic content and then comment on these topics. They are often used as a resource for those interested in a specific topic. These sites may allow users to post and share videos and photos, stories and links. For example, owners of vintage Airstream trailers may share information about their experiences restoring their trailers, sharing tips, material sources, etc.



SOCIAL MEDIA

How can social networking help your business marketing?

Social media doesn't make money directly. It makes friends. And as most people in business are aware, relationships are the basis of business. Social networking is relationship building. Your promoters, friends and referrals are all sources of new customers. Social media is non-intrusive to consumers. It gives your customers and prospects a means to interact with your company on their own time and conditions. Simply by providing insider expertise on a product or service, companies are finding they generate increased website traffic and enhance interest in their products and services.

What are the benefits of using social media?

There are several benefits to using social media networks for you and your business.

- Expands or supplements your existing public relations efforts (you can post video and text content on YouTube or on networking sites on specific timely topics).
- Improves the experience that consumers have with companies, and improves the cost efficiencies of making that improvement.
- Builds your professional network. You can join professional discussion groups, network with others in your field, become a spokesperson and valuable source of business- or consumer-related information through a blog or network group.
- Offers a quick and effective way to distribute communications on public issues (posting information on blogs and networks spreads quicker than traditional media).
- Builds brand awareness and enhances word-of-mouth marketing and referrals.
- Offers an inexpensive and fast way to create an online focus group to gather opinions about products or services.
- Provides you with a means to respond quickly to business or technical questions.
- Puts you in touch with fast-breaking news.



SOCIAL MEDIA

Is there a down side?

The nature of the Internet is that you give up some control of your message when you post it online. That has to be gauged against the benefits you stand to gain.

- Social media can spread bad news just as easily as good news.
- It's considered bad form to pitch or promote products or services openly. Instead of selling, you offer help, advice and guidance, much like an online newsletter. You attract business by being a friendly expert in your field and by building trust for what you say.
- It takes time and effort to build your network. Like anything else with technology, there's a learning curve.

Where do I start?

Your strategy should be customized for your organization or business purposes. Though there are a few basic guidelines you can follow to help with your new media planning:

- Have a purpose – know why you're doing something and work towards your goal.
- Give before you expect anything in return.
- Create valuable content and optimize it for search engines.
- Link your social media activities back to your blog or website – show people who you are and what you do.
- Build your list of readers.
- Direct your efforts to maximize your time.
- Experiment. Keep learning.
- Find out what works for you and do more of it.

Remember, whatever other marketing you are doing that's generating results, don't stop doing it to focus on social media marketing. Find ways to integrate the new with the old and reliable to create the best of both worlds.

WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?TM

The H Agency is a strategic branding firm founded in 1990 by owner and creative director Winnie Hart and now with offices in New Orleans and Houston. The company has grown from a local New Orleans design firm into a regional strategic branding company that specializes in developing marketing programs and brand strategies for health and wellness, financial services, and consumer and retail companies.

The “H” in The H Agency stands for the things that make us unique — heart, horsepower, helpful, high-flying and heroic. Defining the core values we practice each day in our work and relationships helps us refocus our perspective, rethink our strengths, and refine our continued path to success.

For more information about how to make your next direct marketing project more successful, contact The H Agency, 504-522-6300.

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