

A woman with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a black apron over a black top, stands in a store aisle. She is smiling and pointing towards a display of products. The aisle is filled with various bottles and containers, including white, pink, and purple ones. A sign on the display reads "60% CLEARANCE".

6 MISTAKES TO AVOID USING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Social media has made marketing in today's business world a much easier proposition for small businesses. Social media is cheap, effective and easy to use, which is why it is changing the way businesses market themselves to customers.

These days, every business should have a strong social media presence.

But even businesses that have a strong presence in social media can make mistakes in the way they use it.

Because the world of social media is so new, there are very few hard and fast rules when it comes to its application but common sense dictates that there are a number of pitfalls to avoid and possibilities to accentuate, if you know what you're doing.

Experience teaches people how to do things, just as education does, but experience also gives business owners an actual visceral reaction that remains after the words learned have left. Making mistakes gives business owners the knowledge of what not to do by learning from their own mistakes.

So how can you avoid failure while employing the proper tools to gain experience?

You can do it by avoiding big mistakes and learning as you go. Here are some of the biggest mistakes business owners make and how to avoid them.

1. THEY INCLUDE TOO MUCH PERSONAL INFORMATION

It is important to note the difference between a business website and a business page on a social media site like Facebook or Twitter.

A company website is normally static and shows what a given company does and sells, while giving some information about the company. Ideally there are squeeze pages, crawlers and other lead capture generators on the site, as well as places customers can actually purchase products. On a company website, for the most part, interaction with the customer is limited to purchases and basic question.

That is a far cry from social media sites.

A company page on Facebook, Twitter or even location sites like FourSquare and GoWalla is more of a way to interact with customers and leads. It is also a great way to generate buzz about your company, offer value and build referrals.

Social media is all of these things because it is a new way of looking at marketing.

Businesses don't go in search of customers in the world of social media. Businesses create a message that can be found by potential customers. Today, social media marketing means businesses make it easy for customers to find them.

That is why businesses that use social media are walking a fine line between business and personal.

Social media is a great way to connect with old friends, make new ones and show the world what you did last Saturday night.

But that is personal social media. Your personal profile on Facebook or Twitter can have that kind of information, but your business page should not.

Small businesses can be especially vulnerable because the owner is often somebody who everybody recognizes.

If you own a small business and you are constantly posting information on your company's Facebook page, you have to always consider what is appropriate and inappropriate.

You may have strong political leanings, have had a great weekend with old friends or be the biggest Red Sox fan in the world, but your customers don't want to know about that kind of thing.

More importantly, you don't ever want to say anything that might offend a customer, and it's impossible to know what might offend someone else.

A picture of you having a few beers on a Saturday night might be innocuous enough, but someone might find a reason to be offended and you've lost a customer and possibly a number of referrals.

One rule of thumb business owners can follow when it comes to what is and isn't appropriate for their company's social media is "The Mom Rule". If you wouldn't want

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your Mom to see it or hear you talking about it, don't post it.

If you had a particularly difficult day and one customer was the reason, don't post about it. If the contractor that was remodeling your office has been slacking, don't post about it.

Don't air your dirty laundry, ever, on your company's social media sites.

No matter how angry you may get, remember, it is a conscious decision to post something. It is incredibly easy to NOT post something and if you post the wrong thing it can have serious ramifications that you may not have considered.

That's why, in addition to The Mom Rule, always wait a few minutes before posting something to your social media wall.

It's like that old rule about writing an angry letter and then waiting a day before mailing, but for the information age.

Information is sent too quickly at times, and that can be very dangerous for small businesses, especially if the owner doesn't constantly filter the message.

Social media is like fire. It can be the most powerful tool your business has ever had if used correctly, but used improperly, it can burn you.

2. THEIR MESSAGE IS BORING.

While you don't want to have a social media presence that is all drunken pictures and stripper poles, you also don't want to bore potential customers to death. You want to give customers something interesting so they keep coming back.

Remember, social media isn't a one-time visit thing.

You want your customers to follow you, watch what you do and give you feedback. You want them to be an active part of your social media presence and the only way to do that is to keep your presence interesting and relevant.

You do want to be personal on your social media, you just want to watch the line when being personal.

The personal touch is often enough to build your presence. If people think they are talking to an actual person on the other end of the social media line, they are more inclined to keep the conversation going.

The person on the other end has to be someone that customers like and want to interact with and showing them as a person, enjoying work is a great way to do it.

You might post pictures of your team having fun, interesting things that happen during the workday or anything interactive and interesting that customers and leads might want to know about.

It's also important to remember the days of internet browsing are long in the past and this is a very important reason to keep your online presence fun and vibrant.

Today, people use applications, better known as apps, to navigate the web.

There's a dedicated app for Facebook on your smartphone and one for Twitter as well. There are apps for news feeds, weather, sports and anything else you can think of. That is why you have to make your social media presence an exciting stop for potential customers as well as existing customers.

At the same time, you don't want to cross the line into bad taste and poor customer service. That is why you should have multiple people check on your social media sites. With different eyes checking up, you shouldn't have a problem with offensive or inappropriate content.

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3. THEIR ISN'T ENOUGH FRESH CONTENT.

In the world of social media, content is king.

Do you know why ESPN comes up at the top anytime you search for anything related to sports? The thousands of pages of content on the site certainly have to do with it.

There are many different criteria that go into Search Engine Optimization, but content on a given website is one of the most important.

If you have hundreds of pages of content about your plumbing business, but your competition only has two or three, your site is sure to rate better with search engines.

Also, sites that consistently have fresh content do better in searches. Fresh content keeps your site up to date and lets customers know that there is somebody paying attention to the site and the business in general.

This is especially useful for companies that sell products exclusively over the internet.

Have you ever wanted to buy a product, but the website looked like it hadn't been updated in weeks or months? What was your impression of that business? Did you buy from them?

With more content, your site also has more information. You should answer questions that customers might have in your content, as well as telling customers about exciting new things coming up.

The content doesn't have to be literary in nature, but it does have to be up to date, useful and interesting for the reader. And never stop updating it.

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4. THEY SPAM THEIR CUSTOMERS.

Whether it's in the virtual world or the real world, nobody likes a pushy salesman. There are words for salesman that don't take no for answer in the real world. In the virtual world, it can be known as Spam.

Spam filters have made the world safer for internet browsers, but filters don't mean spam doesn't exist.

It's everywhere and with the plethora of mailing lists and squeeze pages, it has never been easier to get constantly spammed. For example, put your name on the wrong list and you're getting Viagra ads in your inbox five times a day.

That is why it is vitally important that businesses treat their customer list like gold and don't start spamming.

Obviously, the customer already feels a level of trust with any business they've given their contact information to, so why would businesses disregard that trust by paying customers back with useless emails?

Since they already buy from you, it isn't necessary to bombard them with information. Personal notes, thank you cards and special offers are all great to send to customers. Customers should be happy to get those things, but generic spam can have the opposite effect.

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Spamming can cause customers and leads to get upset and not buy from you based on principle.

If your emails are jamming up their inbox with the same offers hour after hour, day after day, they are far more likely to be turned off than turned on.

Instead of spamming, find other ways to reach customers and leads, but be sure to not come off as pushy. Friendly and professional always works in these situations.

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5. THEY LACK A CONSISTENT MESSAGE AND IMAGE.

What is the image your business portrays to the world? Is it consistent or scattered? When you check your social media sites, are you portraying the same image throughout or is your image all over the place?

In many ways, business success is based on success in marketing and one of the cardinal rules of marketing is to portray a consistent image in all marketing materials.

For instance, websites that have different logos but are featuring the same company are not only confusing but unprofessional as well.

Articles that convey one message but are at odds with other articles on your site can cause confusion and lose customers.

Remember, one of the basic rules of the new social media age is that businesses want to make themselves as easy to find as possible for customers.

That includes having a crystal clear image and message that tells customers who they are buying from.

If your image is convoluted and confusing, it will certainly have a negative impact on your bottom line.

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6. THEY DIDN'T TEST AND MEASURE.

Testing and measuring is the most important aspect of marketing, no matter the campaign or the business. If you don't test and measure, you'll never know what really works and what doesn't.

You'll always be guessing and guessing in the rigid, real information world of business is a recipe for disaster.

Like any marketing campaign, any work that you do in social media to grow your customer base should be tested and measured. Many businesses just assume because they are using social media, it must be effective, but they couldn't be more wrong.

The one difference between traditional marketing and social media marketing is social media marketing shouldn't cost you a lot of money, so it is far easier to have an effective campaign. At the same time, you don't want to waste time on campaigns that aren't as affective as others and the only way to know what works best is by testing and measuring.

Keep every lead you get from your social marketing campaign separate from your other leads.

For instance, if you have both a website and a company Facebook page, measure which brings in more customers and focus your energies on that method.

If you have multiple pages and sites, figure out why some do better than others. Maybe the message is different or maybe one has a better offer or better copy.

Whatever the answer is, without testing and measuring you'll never know, which is why it is always so important.

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WRAPPING IT UP

Social media is a terrific resource for business to use in building their customer base, so long as it is used correctly. By following these six simple rules, any business should be able to grow their social media presence.