





**FIVE EASY,
ECONOMICAL STEPS
TO A SIMPLE,
SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL
MEDIA PROGRAM FOR
YOUR BUSINESS
BY KRISTEN CARD**

Social Media: Get Used to It, Get Using It



Feeling blogged down? Facebook-planted? LinkedIn-out? Utterly Twitter-pated? You are not alone. Between the onslaught of new social media and ongoing coverage of them by the traditional media, many folks are feeling a skosh anti-social nowadays. But regardless of the overwhelm, you may not be able to avoid joining the party for much longer, as social media is quickly getting down to business. Yes, blog posts and updates and tweets—oh, my!—are becoming the latest gadgets in the *business* toolbox. And it looks like they're more tenacious than trendy—online tools with staying power.

“What we’ve seen is a progression,” says David Booth, founding partner at WebShare LLC (www.websharedesign.com), a search- and online-marketing firm that specializes in helping businesses create and make the most of their presence on the Web. “A while ago, everybody had a Web site, but if you asked them why, they said ‘Because we have to; because everybody else has one.’ But they didn’t really have a strategy behind it. Then, we got into e-commerce and other ways a Web site can positively impact an organization’s bottom line. Now we’re seeing something similar with social media. People are saying, ‘Yeah, I love it, but why should I do it?’ Everyone’s scrambling to get their Facebook accounts, but still not getting the point of it. The good news is, social media is beginning to evolve from being just ‘really cool’ to being useful for business.”

So, how do you use social media effectively and efficiently to benefit your rent-to-own business, without busting your budget or committing yourself to 24/7 coverage?

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING 2.0

What does “social media” mean, anyway? Technically, social media are Web sites where users (that’s you) upload their own content—words, photos, videos—to share publicly so that others can learn from it, be entertained by it and/or comment on it. According to Nielson Online, two-thirds of online users visit social media sites, with the greatest growth over the past year among people 35 to 49 years old.

Not as technically, social media provide online opportunities for conversation. And just as if the conversations were happening at a coffee shop or a cocktail party, you’re expected to listen, contribute and present your perspective—respectfully—to the communities with whom you choose to engage. But don’t let the word “social” throw you; this communication phenomenon is not just for chatting teens and aspiring rock bands. Increasingly, businesses are getting into the act and logging on to enhance customer service.

“You’re building relationships on the social Web—that’s why they call it ‘social,’” says Dave Evans, author of *Social Media Marketing: An Hour a Day* (www.digital-vooodoo.com). “People who begin talking to me online—through my blog, on Facebook, on Twitter—we build relationships, with all of the real-world dynamics of a relationship. So when you start your social Web strategy, understand that you’re in it for the long run. Always begin with listening and take small steps, so you can build the relationships slowly, taking time to realize when things are or aren’t working for you.”

So step one is to listen in on what’s being discussed, introduce yourself and, once you’re comfortable, join the conversation. By listening first, you can learn what’s being said about your company, competitors, the rent-to-own industry and its issues, who’s leading the conversation and, most important, discover your prospects’ and customers’ likes, dislikes, wants and needs. Using their input and feedback to shape the way you do business is the foundation for a successful social media program.

BEGIN WITH A BLOG

Both Booth and Evans recommend stepping into the social media arena by creating a blog, which can be attached to your Web site or, Evans says, can even *replace* your Web site as your primary online presence. A Weblog, commonly called a blog, is a Web site with journal-like entries or posts that can contain text, photos and videos. Posts are displayed in reverse chronological order, with the most recent at the top of the page and visitors can interact with the blogger (that’s you) by submitting comments on your posts. Readers can “subscribe” to blogs, which means that they’re notified of blog updates via e-mail. Today, there are almost 200 million active blogs from which to choose.

“On a typical business Web site, you write one or two fairly generic paragraphs and it stays that way for three years,” Evans says. “What the blog does is it not only extends your content capability—it’s easier to add content, so you tend to refresh it more—but also adds conversation capability. It can improve your rental-

purchase company’s online visibility dramatically and it’s just a really easy way to keep your Web site current.”

Creating a blog is simple with user-friendly blogging software such as WordPress or Blogger (*see the Click-it to Ride sidebar*). But first, don’t forget to “listen” and learn by reading other blogs. Use Google to search for blogs related to rent-to-own; read up and feel free to join the conversation by submitting comments—bloggers *love* comments. Once you feel ready to launch your own blog, think about what you want to say. You might post an entry about new merchandise and invite reviews or about bigger-picture subjects, such as credit issues or consumer legislation.

Blog tips:

- ▶ There is no rule for how often to post, but three to five times a week is average;
- ▶ About 150 to 300 words per post is typical;
- ▶ Use a combination of words, photographs and videos if possible;
- ▶ Link to other pertinent online sources as much as possible;
- ▶ Allow comments to your posts, but moderate them and respond to comments within 24 hours.

JUST ADD VISUALS

To build a better blog, photos and videos should be included in the mix—using photo-sharing and video-sharing platforms is another way to include other people in your online conversation. Photo-sharing sites such as Flickr (*see the Click-it to Ride sidebar*) let you upload photos—up to 200 for free—easily from your computer, the Web or mobile devices, tag them with a descriptive keyword, sort them into groups and share them through the site, blog posts, e-mail, etc. So you might post photos of new merchandise displays or a recent promotional event, while your customers might post photos of the game-watching party they hosted featuring their new big-screen television or before-and-after photos of their living room with its new furniture. Because they’ve tagged and publicly shared them, you can post them as part of your blog.

Video-sharing sites such as YouTube (*see the Click-it to Ride sidebar*) do the same with videos—you can upload, tag and categorize videos and link to the videos from your blog or Web site, all easily and all for free. At YouTube, which hosts more than 70 million unique users monthly and gets hundreds of millions of hits daily, you can even create your own brand channel, which is like a YouTube Web page just for your rent-to-own business. You might develop quick videos of products in action, customer testimonials or solutions to common customer problems.

Booth suggests one example of a video that a rental dealer might consider uploading, “where an attorney gives a three-minute talk about the rent-to-own transaction: ‘these are your rights when you enter into a rental-purchase agreement; here’s how to read a contract; here’s how to make sure you’re getting what you pay for, etc.’ [Providing a video like that on your blog] can go a long way in defeating some of the misperceptions out

there and can gain significant ground with someone considering a rental-purchase decision.”

Photograph and video posting tips:

- ▶ Engage your audience by urging them to add comments, share photos and rate videos;
- ▶ Update your photographs and especially your videos frequently, to keep it fresh and keep people coming back;
- ▶ Cross-promote—be sure to link to your blog from your brand channel and to your videos and photos from your blog, your e-newsletter or other e-marketing materials.

TWEET IT

Twitter is actually a microblogging site—a way for users to send and receive brief (140 characters or fewer) text-based posts, known as “tweets.” You choose whose tweets you want to subscribe to, or follow, and other people can choose to follow your tweets. Opening a Twitter account is free and easy, but remember to “listen” before leaving the proverbial nest. First, search for other people who may be tweeting about your company or the rent-to-own industry and its issues. Follow them, reply to their tweets, then try flying solo.

“You can be as inane as tweeting every single thing you’re doing all day long,” Booth notes. “Individuals do that, but as a business, you’ve got to put out useful information; the more you talk about mundane things in your tweets, the less important people will expect them to be. But if you tweet once a week and it’s a great piece of information—a great special or coupon—then people will wait for that and pay attention when they see it.”

“You can use Twitter to sell stuff,” Evans agrees. “The caveat is that if you’re posting only when you’ve got something to sell, then it may be perceived as spamming. Keep in mind, particularly on Twitter, no one is under any obligation to follow you and they’re just one click away from never having to hear from you again.”

In addition to sales or promotions alerts, you might tweet about company news, link to media coverage, offer updates from events or conferences, or solicit suggestions to get real-time feedback from customers and prospects.

Twitter tips:

- ▶ Tweet regularly, but don’t overdo it—once or twice daily, but not more than 10 times a day;
- ▶ If someone chooses to follow you, then follow them only if you have shared interests. You want to follow those from whom you can learn and offer ideas to those who follow you;

- ▶ Make sure you add a link to your Twitter profile on your blog or Web site as well as in your e-mail signature.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

At almost a quarter of a billion accounts and counting, Facebook is the world’s fastest-growing social network. With a mission of providing people with the power to share and making the world more connected, Facebook brings all of the social media features into one huge platform. “Any business owner is under a duty to him- or herself to explain why he or she shouldn’t be on Facebook,” Evans effuses. “It’s not necessarily for everyone, but you should understand what it’s all about. It’s a fantastic set of tools for minimal out-of-pocket cost.”

Facebook originated as a way for college students to get to know each other. Today, it has become a personal and professional social networking site millions visit every day to keep up with friends (or businesses or favorite celebrities), share photographs, videos, links and blogs. Once you’ve opened up your free account, there are three key ways to begin using Facebook: pages, advertisements and insights.

Facebook pages: As an individual, you can create a personal page, where you build a network of friends. Likewise, as a company, you can create a business page, where you build a network of “fans,” people who visit your page and opt in. Your business page can feature standard information about your rent-to-own

Click-it to Ride



Blogging

WordPress: wordpress.org
Blogger: blogger.com

Photo sharing

Flickr: flickr.com
Picasa: picasa.google.com
Photobucket: photobucket.com

Video sharing

YouTube: youtube.com
Vimeo: vimeo.com
Howcast: howcast.com

Microblogging

Twitter: twitter.com
Pownce: pownce.com
Tumblr: tumblr.com

Social networking

Facebook: facebook.com
MySpace: myspace.com
LinkedIn: linkedin.com

Helpful resources

How and when to leave blog comments:
barefeetstudios.com/2007/12/19/how-and-when-to-leave-blog-comments

How to start a blog:
ehow.com/how_2045008_start-blog.html

How to blog: ehow.com/how_2028994_blog.html

How to create a business blog:
wikihow.com/Create-a-Business-Blog

How to upload photos on Flickr:
ehow.com/how_2031218_upload-photos-flickr.html

How to put a video on a Web Page:
wikihow.com/Put-Video-on-a-Web-Page

How to use Twitter: wikihow.com/Use-Twitter

A newbies guide to Twitter:
chrisbrogan.com/newbies-guide-to-twitter

Creating your Facebook business page:
facebook.com/business/?pages

Facebook how-to articles:
wikihow.com/Category:Facebook

company, as well as links, a blog feed, photographs and videos, discussion threads and much more. And from your business page, you can send messages to your fans (all in one fell swoop), invite customers to write a review for your page, promote an upcoming event or join and participate in groups.

Facebook advertisements: Facebook ads are displayed along the right side of all Facebook pages as users browse through them. To advertise your business' "face" on Facebook, simply produce a compelling ad, select your target audience and set your daily budget, paying either by number of clicks on your ad (CPC) or by number times your ad appears (CPM).

"The cool thing about Facebook advertising is that for a small monthly fee—there is no minimum—you can hand-pick your demographics and they determine which pages will feature your ad," Evans explains. "It's like extreme targeted advertising—direct-marketing nirvana."

Facebook insights: Facebook insights are the site's measuring tools for activity regarding both pages and advertisements. You can view information on page visits, posts, fan demographics, advertising performance and trends, and much more.

By the way, MySpace, which preceded Facebook in the social networking world, is still around and remains a popular site for parts of the youth market. Creating a MySpace page may be beneficial if you want to market toward a younger audience.

Facebook tips:

- ▶ Make the most of Facebook's myriad capabilities—give yourself some time to play around with its many applications and features;
- ▶ Online content lives forever, so be mindful of what you post on social networking sites—it can have real consequences on your professional life;
- ▶ Promote your Facebook presence beyond Facebook—add a line to your current marketing materials and add a share button to your blog or Web site.

BEING YOUR VIRTUAL BEST

The Web-presence strategies we've outlined costs very little to implement, although you will have to spend some time setting it up. Give yourself a day to get familiar with the different platforms and a few hours a week to maintain. Whether you're blogging, tweeting, uploading, updating or linking, there are some golden rules to follow in order to be successfully social online.

Measure: Social media is highly measurable. By tracking online activity, you can make smarter marketing decisions and ensure that your money and time are spent delivering the highest possible return-on-investment. "One of the first things you should do is install Google Analytics or something similar—it's free, easy and there's no excuse for not having metrics," Evans says. "If you're not measuring where people are coming from and what they're doing [on your Web site, blog or Facebook page], then there's no way to know whether any of this stuff is working for you."

"Once you begin to analyze your metrics in aggregate, you can see the real impact of your social-media efforts," Booth says. "How much money you made, how many new users visited your Web site or how many e-addresses you gathered. Identifying and using trends to market to audience segments, then being able to measure return-on-investment down to the penny, is pretty powerful stuff." Review analytics regularly, so you can adjust and improve your social media plan as you go.

Participate. Participate in the online conversation—don't dominate it. While traditional marketing communications, such as advertisements and commercials, go only one way, social media is about two-way, casual conversation with customers and prospects.

Be interesting and relevant. In the online world, content is king, so don't just talk to hear yourself talk (or, more accurately, write to see yourself write). Provide useful and appealing information and it will help you establish your brand, connect with customers, promote your products and build strong networks.

Be transparent. In online conversations, always identify yourself by name and indicate the role you play at your company. "If people catch you lying, shilling or being otherwise untruthful on the social Web, it can cause painful backlash," Evans warns. "It can damage a brand quickly and completely. If you try to position yourself as a customer or somebody you're not, eventually, someone will figure it out—and as a business owner, you'll have a serious credibility problem."

Be responsive. Whenever you come across negative comments, tweets or posts about your rent-to-own business, respond rapidly and genuinely. If the criticism is valid, then offer an immediate apology and propose a solution for the problem; you'll earn "props" for being honest and helpful. Likewise, respond to positive input with a prompt and heartfelt thank-you.

Be brave. "The biggest thing people are doing wrong is not doing [social media]," Booth says. "You need to be doing it in some way, shape or form and the best time to begin was a year ago. Every day you delay, it gets harder and harder. You want to get in there and begin building up your following, because by the time you really know what you're doing, you'll have a little following you can work with. The connections are what make social media valuable."



Social media is quickly becoming an integral part of the savvy business owner's everyday work world—a new way to build relationships, generate positive word-of-mouth, demonstrate thoughtful leadership, manage crises, gain insight into improving products and services and put a human touch on your rent-to-own company. Companies that take the time and make the effort to communicate thoughtfully on the social Web will eventually see the broad-spread benefits in their bottom line. ✧

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