

Leveraging Online Social Media for Marketing Purposes

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What is online Social Media?

Social Media is an umbrella term that defines the various ways social interaction takes place on the internet using technology to help individuals or groups share and discuss their content (for example: images, text, audio or video) with the world.

Social Media can take many different forms and uses many different technologies, including discussion forums, blogs, podcasts (audio and video), photo & video sharing, and social networking.

In this document, I'll cover some of the more popular services and technologies to leverage Social Media, explaining what they do and then how they can be leveraged for online promotion.

Discussion Forums:

Discussion forums, also known as discussion groups / discussion boards / message boards / newsgroups, are web-based applications for hosting discussions and posting user-generated content. Usually, a virtual community develops around discussion groups that have regular users. Most forums cover a specific topic, although some are much more general and cover a variety of topics.

How they work:

Posts are displayed in chronological order, often threaded to present discussions as conversations or visual groupings.

Frequently, forums offer full anonymity to their participants, and are managed by administrators or monitors who have the ability to edit or delete other people's posts, or remove rogue users.

Different than a mailing list, which uses a model by which content is pushed to subscribers through email, forums require the users to pull for information either by visiting the site hosting the forum, or by subscribing to a feed and checking the forum on their feed reader. Many subscribers prefer this model as it gives them more control of receiving content.

"Okay, but what is a feed?"

Feeds use an aggregation technology (like RSS, which stands for Really Simple Syndication) that reduces the time and effort needed to regularly check websites for updates, creating a unique information space or "personal newspaper." Using RSS technology, users subscribe to a "feed," which is a collection of whole or partial pieces of content from a site. Once subscribed to a feed, an aggregator service is able to check for new content at user-determined intervals and retrieve the update. The content is sometimes described as being "pulled" to the

subscriber, as opposed to "pushed" with email or IM. Unlike recipients of some "pushed" information, the aggregator user can easily unsubscribe from a feed. Examples of aggregators are [Google Reader](#) or [Bloglines](#).

Examples of discussion forums:

1. [WritersNet](#)
2. [Poets.org](#)
3. [BookTalk.org](#)

Such examples use a service whereby you host your own forum by installing software on your web hosting server, using something like [phpBB](#). This allows unlimited branding options, since you are in full control of the site.

In addition, Yahoo! and Google both offer out-of-the-box hosted discussion forums through [Yahoo! Groups](#) and [Google Groups](#), but these offer limited customization and formatting options, and both Yahoo and Google have ultimate control of your content.

Blogs:

A blog, an abridgment of the term web log, is a website with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning *to maintain or add content to a blog*.

Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of most blogs, and many have great success when the blogger participates in the discussion in the comments. Most blogs are primarily textual, although some focus on photographs (photoblog), videos (vlog), music (MP3 blog), links (linkblog), or group interaction (group blog) among others. Group blogs are particularly interesting, and their percentage of the blog population is on the rise, because they allow not only many voices to be heard on a particular topic, but also allow the audience to witness and participate in the interaction between the group blog members.

Micro-blogging is another type of blogging which consists of blogs with very short posts. HYPERLINK "http://twitter.com" [Twitter](#) is a popular site for hosting a micro-blog. Twitter allows bloggers to share quick thoughts and feelings instantaneously with a social network, and is much faster than e-mailing or writing.

How they work:

Using a blog engine, like [Blogger](#), [Typepad](#), [Movable Type](#) or [Wordpress](#) (among others) you create an account, choose a template, and create your entries using the provided user interface. Things like comments, the ability to "tag"/categorize, and archives are taken care of automatically by the blog engine, and the author only has to worry about their content.

Most blog engines will host your blog for you, using a URL like, "myname.blogger.com," or, you

can host the blog on your own web server by changing the publishing settings to point to your own URL.

On the simple side, you can have a blog up and running in a few minutes if you choose to host it with the blog engine service and use a widely available template. However, many professional bloggers, or bloggers who are marketing a product or a skill, choose to customize their blog through the creation of a custom template, add-on functionality, and publishing to their own URL. Blogs published to your own URL can be integrated into your website, or, can stand on their own.

Many blogs are comprised entirely of content coming from a source like [YouTube](#) or [Flickr](#) (more on Flickr and YouTube in the Photo/Video Sharing section below), and integration between blog engines and social networks makes it easy to post to your blog not only from the blog's user interface, but also directly from social networking sites.

[Twitter](#) uses the much more simple model of microblogging, in which you sign up for a Twitter account, and then for each post, you use their simple interface to type in up to 140 characters, which is posted on your Twitter page for all Twitter users to see. A single post to Twitter is called a "Tweet." Twitter also allows you to "follow" other people on Twitter, and they can follow you. Doing so aggregates the Tweets of all those who you follow onto a single page in reverse chronological order for you to follow.

Twitter also is the preferred utility of many microbloggers on the go, as you can use text messaging or any internet-enabled handheld device to easily post updates to your Twitter feed. This is used extensively at events like conferences, especially when your audience isn't in a position to attend.

Blog search engines:

Several search engines are used to specifically search blog contents, such as [Bloglines](#), [BlogScope](#), and [Technorati](#). Technorati, which is among the most popular blog search engines, provides current information on both popular searches and tags used to categorize blog postings.

Blogging Communities and Directories:

Several online communities exist that connect people to blogs and bloggers to other bloggers, including [BlogCatalog](#) and [MyBlogLog](#).

[Digg.com](#) is a user-generated link blog where news and blog posts all over the internet are deemed worthy of widespread attention, and their popularity is voted on by participants "digging" an entry on the site. Digg, and other blog utilities, provide a small widget that you can place on your own blog to make it easy for your audience to dig a blog entry directly from your site.

Podcasts:

A podcast is a series of digital-media files, audio or video, which are distributed over the internet using feeds (see above) for playback on computers or devices like iPods. Podcast, like broadcast, can refer to either the content itself, or the method by which it is syndicated, sometimes called Podcasting.

Software like iTunes allows users to browse and comment on all podcasts offered through the service, sorted into category by type (eg: Business, or Food, or Arts...), and then view and playback those to which they have subscribed.

Podcasts may be audio-only, or also video, and are similar in model to a syndicated radio show or TV show, including that they are often sponsored by corporations looking to reach the podcaster's audience. Often, audio podcasts use the MP3 filetype, and many times podcasts are distributed through blogs.

How it works:

Using whatever recording equipment (microphone, etc..) and software you have (something like Garage Band on the Mac), you record your audio/video, then upload to your web hosting server. Keep in mind that because the filesize of audio and video files can be quite large, you want to make sure you have purchased enough space and bandwidth with your web hosting server to make sure there are no over-capacity issues.

Once your podcast has been created and saved as something like an .MP3 or .MPG file, you're ready to upload it to your blog, or, if you want to reach a much larger audience, you can share your podcast on Podcasting.com, or the behemoth iTunes Podcast Directory.

For your audience to listen/watch your podcast, they can either watch it directly from your blog, or subscribe to your feed through something like iTunes.

Photo/Video Sharing:

Online services like Flickr or YouTube allow users to upload photo or video content, categorize it using titles and tags, and then share it with the world. People who visit Flickr or YouTube can view the photo or video content, and comment on it, or share it with an audience using email, IM, a blog, or another social networking tool like Facebook (more on that later).

In addition to allowing public access to content, access can be limited to only select "contacts" or "friends" with whom you've invited to share your content.

How it works:

After creating an account with Flickr, YouTube, or PhotoBucket, you upload your photos or videos, tag them with keywords that will allow people to find them easily, and that's it! People can then comment on them, share with friends or check out any links you've provided.

You can also use a widget on your blog that displays your latest photos and/or videos, as a way to broadcast them to your audience. A blog widget is mini-application usually added to the sidebar of a blog that provides additional functionality to the blog, such as the most used tag in that blog, or a calendar indicating which days have posts, or a feed of the blogger's tweets from Twitter.

More and more, blog content is being driven off of photos and videos stored in photo/video sharing services. And services like Flickr and YouTube provide an easy way to embed their content directly into your blog.

Social Networking:

In addition to the larger, more general definition of the term which refers to connecting with any community, in the age of Web 2.0, Social Networking refers to the ability to connect and share information through an online community-based service.

A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. The main types of social networking services are those which contain directories of some categories (such as former classmates), means to connect with friends (usually with self-description pages), and recommended systems linked to trust (like a business network). Popular methods now combine many of these, with [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) being the most widely used in North America. In addition, some have become popular in a specific realm, such as [LinkedIn](#), which is used for professional or business-related social networking.

Social Networking, unlike a blog or a discussion forum, is a feature, not a destination. Sites like Facebook have created a social networking destination, but the idea is basically community building. And adding value by focusing your social network on the topic you're passionate about will lead to fare better results from the community.

How it works:

After creating an account with your social networking service of choice, you populate your page/profile with information about yourself, including photos or videos, text, and widgets. You then search for "friends" with whom you connect through the service. Being "friends" on a social networking service is usually reciprocal, meaning, that if you can see their information, they can see yours.

Any time you update your profile, your friend network on that service is made aware of your update using a feed model. The service aggregates the updates of all of your friends, and lists them for you in reverse chronological order to give you an idea of what is going on in your network overall. Additionally, some services are integrated with things like Twitter, or blog engines, and will update automatically any time you create a new blog entry or tweet.

Okay, this is great, but what do I do with it?:

Social Media and Social Networking provide an unprecedented amount of access to amazing numbers of people. This means that whenever you have a product or service to sell, there are countless ways to make people aware of it, without much overhead.

The services mentioned above that have been created around the idea of making it easy for people to collaborate and communicate online have come a long way in ease-of-use, and in the ways they integrate together. Without too many technological constraints, it's now simple to provide added value to your audience, and to expand your reach.

Let's take the example of being a book author. Here is a way you can leverage the services above beyond just having the "must have," a website:

1. Create a blog leading up to the publication of your book to build momentum for your audience, and anticipation of its release. It's a great place to provide a little extra for your audience, either through insight into the process of getting the book released, or asking for input on a final chapter, or little leaks of what might happen in the book. Alternately, some authors leverage blogs to share the back-story or world-building for their book. All of these will draw more attention to you and your book, and help your audience get invested before it has even been released, which means it's more likely they'll tell their friends about it too.

Be aware that some books benefit from the mystique around how the book was created, and in that case it is best to avoid exposing unnecessary details through your blog.

2. Start posting to existing discussion forums where you may have an audience. Do not do this just to plug your book as many discussion forum participants react badly to this as it is seen as a sort-of spam. Make sure if you join a discussion forum, it is to actively participate in the online community, with the secondary benefit of generating a larger audience by making yourself better known in the communities associated with your book's topic.
3. Create a podcast upon release of the book. You can structure it in an interview format, leveraging another person to pose probing questions to you, or to read a little snippet and expand on some things you didn't get to cover in the book, or to extend the topic into the present by going over recent events in how they pertain to the book. Also, for your audience who may not be able to make it to your readings or talks, see if you can get audio and/or video so you can share it with a wider audience online. Many times the host will do this automatically and publish on their own site, but make sure you also link on yours, and ask if you can release it as well.
4. Take photos with your fans at signings and put them online, or if your book covers any how-to, if it can be put into photos, include a photo step-by-step to enhance the book. If you've written a memoir or biography that includes photos, get permission to put them online and add a few that couldn't fit into the book. Also, video book trailers are becoming more and more popular, and can really bring your book to life. Release them on YouTube, and embed in your own site. Create a profile and a Group that people can join on a social network like Facebook (preferable to MySpace as its audience tends to be more mature) or Twitter, where you can befriend people to make them aware of you and your work. They're also a wonderful place to extend

your brand and/or display cover art, and keep people up-to-date on your appearances and signings. And leverage integration between things like Twitter and your Blog engine, so that when you create a new blog entry, it automatically creates a tweet that links to it.

The goal is not to replace or outshine the book, it is to add value for your audience, and expand your reach. Presidential candidates are doing a great job of this, and are a wonderful example of how to leverage social networks to your benefit.... Just search for Barack Obama on Facebook, Flickr and Twitter to see what I mean.

And be sure to have your own website act as a hub for all of the locations in which you have a web presence. Not only should you be providing a link to your website when you participate in social networks as a sort-of calling card, but also provide links on your own website to where you can be found on Flickr or Twitter, etc..

It's not necessary to do all of the above, but even one or two, done right, will have a huge impact on your online visibility. The more information you have out there, especially in popular locations, the more likely you are to be linked and the wider your reach.

For more information about any of the above, or to get help with your own Social Media/networking endeavors, contact me to discuss: kate.mcmillan@gmail.com, or visit my website <http://outboxonline.com>.