

Eight Ways to Ruin Your Social-Media Strategy

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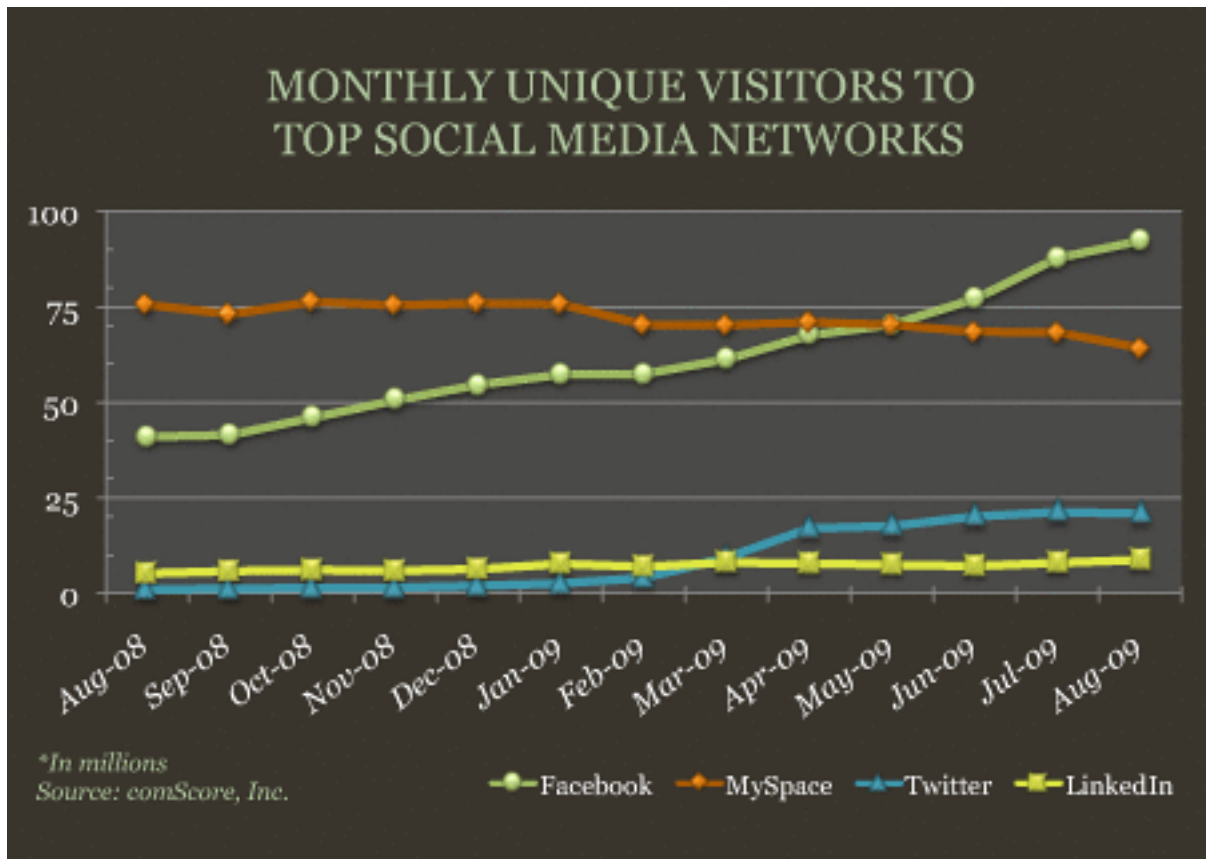
So you've set up a **company fan page on Facebook** and you're letting your employees **fire off messages to the world via Twitter** — or you're at least thinking about it. Well, congratulations! You're part of the social-media revolution, which can offer unparalleled access to word-of-mouth buzz among those you most want to reach: your customers, current and future.

Hold on, though. While social media might sound simple, there are as many ways to screw up in this new world as in the old. More, in fact, because technology and online norms are both new and rapidly evolving, often in ways that are particularly challenging to deal with in a corporate setting. Here are eight mistakes to avoid as you make your way in the buzzing cauldron of grass-roots chat.

Mistake 1: Pretend you can do without it.

You may have already run into the Graying Skeptics, executives who can't understand why they should devote employee time and company resources to social media, and who dismiss Facebook and Twitter as fads that amount to little more than a waste of time and money.

Well, social media is here to stay, and the rocketing growth of some outlets makes it foolish to ignore them. Facebook, the largest, recently reached 300 million users worldwide — roughly the population of the United States. And **the largest demographic** is the 35 to 49 set that most businesses are eager to reach. So listen to Sebastian Gard of social marketing firm **Context Optional** when he says bluntly: "You're going to have a social-media strategy whether *you* do it or not. It's not up to you."



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Mistake 2: Play down the costs.

Sure, Twitter accounts, Facebook fan pages and YouTube channels don't cost a thing. But don't think for a second that you can do your social-media effort on the cheap. Getting the most out of these tools requires time, attention and skill — none of which are free.

Over time, however, social media does save you some money, since you can use these outlets for efforts you might otherwise contract out to PR firms, ad agencies or market researchers. Don't expect to replace them all. Instead, think of social media as a necessary and powerful complement to your existing outreach.

Mistake 3: Act like you own the conversation

Social media is a conversation, and conversations — more so than ads — require tact. “It all begins with listening,” says Paul Chaney, an Internet marketing director who bills himself as **The Social Media Handyman**. Just as you wouldn’t walk into a cocktail party and start bragging about yourself, Chaney says, you shouldn’t “just jump into the conversation” in social-media channels, either.

So if your customers are talking about your stores online, don’t just start blasting them with canned sale promotions — unless, of course, you want to lose customers. Instead, get a feel for the vibe of the conversation, then ease your way into it, for instance, by answering general user questions, even if they don’t pertain directly to your company or its brands. Let your social-media mavens become resources for these customer micro-communities. Once your folks have earned some trust, they’ll have the leeway to advance your business goals.

Dunkin’ Donuts did this well when it set up a social-media presence last year on Facebook and elsewhere. “We wanted to have conversations with our consumers, who were already having these conversations themselves,” says David Puner, a communications manager at the Canton, Mass.-based company. “Once we got out there, people found us.” A year later, one million people are fans of the official Dunkin’ Facebook page. The brand has its own YouTube channel, and its Twitter feed, **@dunkindonuts** — which Puner runs — has more than 35,000 followers.

Mistake 4: Fear empowering your employees

“A client once told me they were nervous about letting customer-service employees speak to the public through Twitter,” says David Griner, social-media strategist for Birmingham, Alabama-based ad agency **Luckie & Co**. “I asked, ‘Would you trust these people to talk to customers on the phone or face to face?’ Of course they would. The key is to think of social media more like a call center than a press release.”

The **online shoe store Zappos**, now part of **Amazon**, has a reputation for personalized customer service and communication — and social media played a big role. Dozens of employees maintain blogs on the company Web site; hundreds have Twitter accounts. It’s not just Web-only companies that offer such empowerment, Dell, IBM, Sun Microsystems and Southwest Airlines do as well. The common thread: All have corporate cultures that value transparent relationships with customers.

Mistake 5: Assume you have little to learn

Dell, however, joined the social media revolution the hard way. When Jeff Jarvis, a prominent media blogger, did a series of 2005 posts on his horrible customer-service experience with Dell — **posts that came to be known as “Dell Hell”** — the company suddenly realized how powerful, and damaging, the voice of the consumer could be. Spurred by the public relations disaster, CEO Michael Dell blessed

an effort to work his company into its customers' conversations. According to a case study on Dell in the book "[Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies](#)," the listening effort helped Dell figure out, for instance, that it needed to better coordinate technical support and customer service to quickly resolve customer problems.

Mistake 6: Take negative feedback personally

Look, this is the Internet, where there are always going to be [trolls](#) and other nasty individuals who delight in saying unpleasant things about your company. Don't let it bug you. On the other hand, don't overlook the opportunity to address real concerns head-on.

[Comcast](#) began to repair its dismal customer-service reputation several years ago by using Twitter to reach out to complaining customers, offering to troubleshoot problems or sometimes offering refunds. Frank Eliason, the director of digital care, originally manned the account, [@comcastcares](#); it's now staffed by a small platoon of Comcast employees. According to the [American Customer Satisfaction Index](#), Comcast's score is inching upward. "It's still not where we would like to see it, but we are happy it is heading in the right direction," Eliason says.

Mistake 7: Fret about return on investment

Solid return on investment in social media is tough to measure. You can, however, evaluate your outreach efforts the same way you might a PR or advertising campaign.

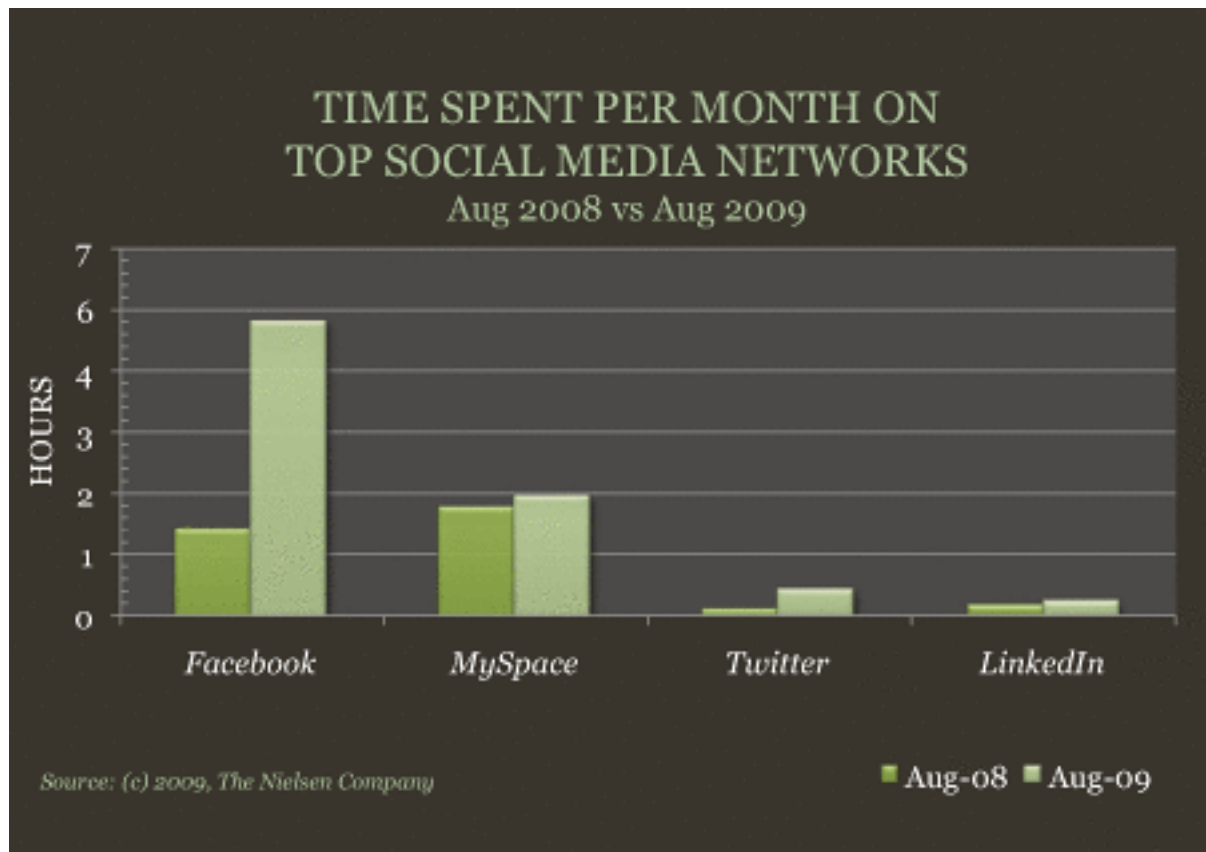
You can start by looking at simple tallies such as your number of Facebook fans and Twitter followers, or how often people visit your company's blog. Other metrics, such as the number of blog comments and the number of times consumers shared a link to your content, can show how engaged users are with your brand.

That said, many companies still take the value of social media largely on faith. Context Optional's Sebastian Gard, who until June was a social-media manager at [Microsoft](#), admits, "The only way I can tell you it's effective [at Microsoft] is that they continue to do more of it."

Mistake 8: Underestimate the power of seemingly small efforts

Embracing social media isn't about achieving specific goals so much as it is establishing a real bond with your customers. Rick Karp, president and "keeper of the karma" for the San Francisco-based [Cole Hardware](#) chain, recently announced via Twitter ([@colehardware](#)) that the company would exchange a particular water bottle suspected of chemical contamination — no questions asked. Within two weeks, consumers returned about 1,000 of the bottles. "We lost money, but we gained so

much [for our brand] by virtue of our doing it," he says. "I will do a lot to build our brand, regardless of whether it pays off immediately economically or not."



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