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TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE:

Gaining and Maintaining a Competitive Advantage with *SOCIAL MEDIA*

WSI White Paper

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Introduction

You keep hearing about social media and how it's spreading like wildfire. But as a business person with a crazy schedule - saddled with the added stress of rocky economic times and a shrinking marketing budget - you need to know: Is there any real business value to social media, or is it mostly buzz? And if there's value, how on earth will I have time to learn it and use it effectively?

Trend-chasing and random leaps into social media will not enhance your bottom line. What will is *strategic* social media participation - the alignment of social media activities with your business objectives and target demographics. If conducted methodically, the benefits of social media include improvements in search results, customer service, brand awareness, PR/media relations, recruitment, reputation management, and other measurable outcomes.

Today, you ignore social media at your peril. To quote eMarketer in a Feb. 2009 report, "Consumers are getting a lot more information about products and services from social networks than marketers think—and very little of it comes from the marketers." Indeed this truth extends beyond networks to all forms of social media. Consider this MarketTools research in late 2008 on the US market:

- 68% of adults visit blogs, social networks and online communities
- 47% said those sites had a *direct impact on their purchasing decision*
- 42% say the frequency of their visits to such sites has risen in the last six months
- 34% say they use social media sites to conduct product research
- 26% changed their minds about a product or service after reading information in social media

These same consumers have come to *expect companies* to be participating in social media. According to the 2008 Cone/Omnicom Group "Business in Social Media" Study, among Americans who use social media:

- 85% believe a company should *interact* with consumers via social media
- 56% feel they are *better served* by companies when they can interact with them in social media
- 43% believe that companies should use social networks to *solve their problems*
- 41% believe that companies should *solicit feedback* on their products and services via social media
- 37% believe that companies should develop *new ways* for consumers to interact with their brands.

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These sentiments and online behaviors are shared by people around the world. Americans actually fall behind citizens in Canada, Brazil, the UK, Mexico and Spain when it comes to the percentage of Internet users who frequent social networks (eMarketer.com; original source: comScore World Metrix, Nov. '08).

Social Networking Site Users in Select Countries, September 2007 & September 2008 (% of Internet users)

	September 2007	September 2008
Canada	83.9%	86.5%
Brazil	76.0%	85.3%
UK	78.7%	78.4%
Mexico	67.3%	73.0%
Spain	63.9%	70.7%
US	65.8%	70.2%
Australia	56.5%	67.5%
Germany	45.9%	65.5%
Italy	53.0%	62.2%
Netherlands	55.7%	61.3%
Russian Federation	36.3%	60.7%
India	50.9%	60.3%
France	51.4%	59.1%
South Korea	52.3%	58.3%
Japan	56.4%	55.7%
China	44.7%	50.3%
Taiwan	48.1%	42.9%

Note: ages 15+; home and work locations; excludes traffic from public computers such as Internet cafes and access from mobile phones and PDAs

Source: comScore World Metrix as cited in press release, November 19, 2008

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www.eMarketer.com

Defining Social Media

The term "social media" is most commonly used to describe web- and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information; communal activities that integrate technology, telecommunications and social interaction; as well as consumer-generated content (text, video, audio, photos, networks). There's really only one rule in social media: *The consumer rules*. Individuals decide what content is worth sharing, discussing, rating, downloading, joining. They base those decisions largely on what their peers are doing online, and on the opinions of "web influencers" - thought leaders with lots of people following their blog, podcast, forum, video channel, network, etc.

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One way to wrap your head around the fundamental concept of social media is to think of traditional mainstream media turned upside-down. With the traditional "top-down" delivery of content (TV, radio, papers, magazines), the media companies and advertisers are telling you what to consume, when and how to do it (at a fixed time and location).

Conversely, social media delivers content from the "ground up," which is why it's often referred to as a "grassroots" media. Social media is all about *on-demand content* – sometimes even in real-time, and always downloadable to be watched, listened to when and where one feels like. The way in which music, literature, movies and other content are produced and distributed has also been turned upside-down. With social media, any Joe/Josephine can instantly become an author with his/her blog, a movie producer with a YouTube channel, a radio host or DJ with a podcast show.

ROI of Social Media Across the Company

Resources are limited during a difficult economy, and the workload often falls on the shoulders of fewer employees, with the expectation of timely delivery and quality results just as high as before the downsizing. Not to panic!

Your thinking may not be broad enough when you're considering the role of social media to augment functions within your organization. While marketing is an obvious fit, don't overlook the value that social media brings to other business processes:

Human Resources: Social media boosts a company's brand online, therefore attracting more job candidates, and if social media use by employees is encouraged (such as corporate blogging, running company Facebook group), and staff is happier and tend to stay longer.

Bottom Line: Reduced employee turnover; lower hiring and training costs; lower costs for job advertising.

Customer Service: Social media means open lines of communication between consumer and company, so customer problems and needs can be addressed in a real-time, transparent environment. The result is accountability and trust by consumers.

Bottom Line: Less customer churn, lower customer acquisition costs; higher customer conversion rates.

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PR/Media Relations: Social media is used more and more by mainstream journalists, as well as citizen journalists/bloggers, for spreading the news and views of a company with easy dissemination of photos, videos, and links.

Bottom Line: Higher profile means more business leads, more sales per customer.
Corporate Communications/Shareholder Relations: Social media allows a company to keep close tabs on what the public at large, as well as investors, competitors, and consumer groups are saying about it.

Bottom Line: Enhanced share value; online reputation management; crisis aversion/management.

In every one of these scenarios, increased revenue is the end-point of a strategic social media program's development and careful implementation.

New Business Signed in First Two Months

Companies that have invested in social media programs are getting new business as a result. For example, Jerry Steele, outreach director for TheraVitae Co. Ltd., was thrilled with the new business his firm received as a result of social media programs WSI put in place to raise brand awareness of VesCell, their adult stem cell therapy product. Their blog, Facebook group, MySpace page, YouTube channel, Flickr account, Twitter stream, Delicious account, and Squidoo page started in September 2008; the number of new patients signed by the company increased by 34% in November and by 95% in December over the same months in 2007.

"The (WSI) team trained our staff on blogging principles, influencer outreach strategies, and online reputation management," Jerry says. "The deep knowledge of search and social media, coupled with tremendous project management, got us great results in a small window of time."

Top 8 Steps for Social Media Success

No matter where you live or what kind of industry you're in, a common refrain among business owners and executives is: "I don't have hours a day to blog, to update my Facebook, to Twitter, etc. I have a business to run!" You'll be relieved to know that social media does not have to take up a lot of your time, perhaps as little as 1-2 hours/week, if you have a well-defined plan with these considerations in mind.

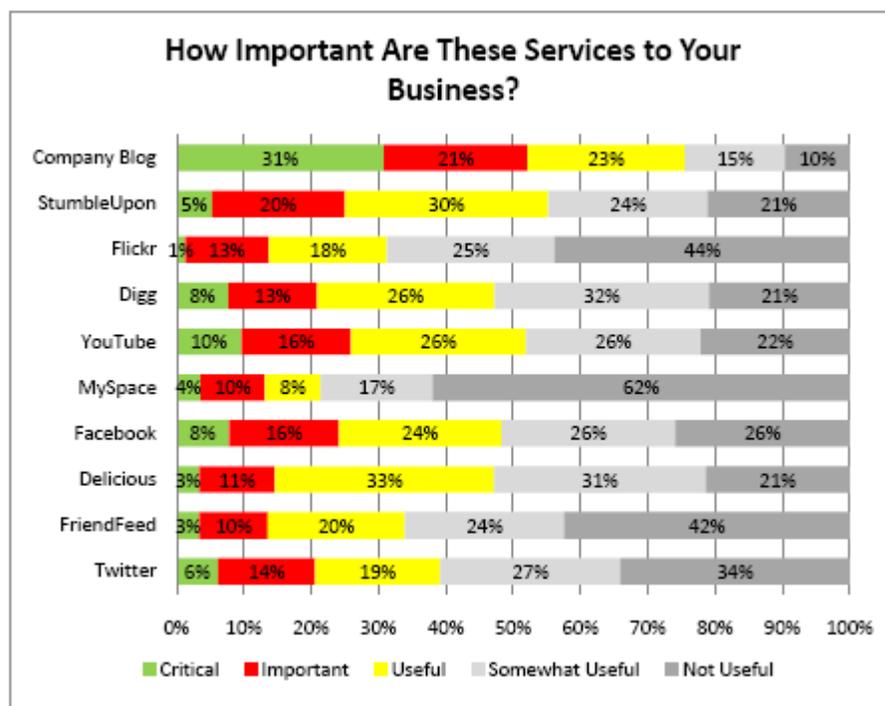
1. Research First. Who/how/why your prospects and customers are using social media. Which of your competitors are using social media? What are their best practices? Who are the 'web

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influencers' (bloggers, podcasters, YouTubers, forum moderators, etc.) in your market who can affect how your brand is received?

2. Plan, Plan, Plan. Create a detailed social media strategy, based on information arising from the online market research; then align your social media initiatives with your specific business objectives and target demographics.

3. Blog. No Exceptions. Blogs? Those personal online diaries written by weirdos about their cats and superheroes? (No, not those ones.) The practice of corporate blogging gives you the double-whammy benefit of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and all the above-stated business benefits (customer service, HR, etc.). SEO plays into blogging because every time a blog post gets published, Google favors it as a new page of content on your site, moving you up the ranking to the cherished page-1 position in the search results. No surprise, then, that blogging is viewed as the most important lead generation channel by those companies that have tried it, according to HubSpot study released in Jan. '09. Compared to other social media, 75% of respondents say it is "useful" or better. Other social media ranked positively included StumbleUpon (55%), YouTube (52%), Facebook (48%), Delicious (47%) and Digg (47%). MySpace was thought as being the least useful (22%).



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4. Get Your Hands Dirty. There is no greater way to benefit from social media than to get adequate education, ideally to include hands-on training/demonstration of how to use the social media sites (create user profiles, uploading digital assets, getting followers/fans/friends, etc.).

5. Think of Social Media as Vertical Search Engines. Maybe you've never thought of crowded online beehives like Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr as search engines. True, they're a lot more fun/sexy than Google's pragmatic functionality - but these social media act like vertical search engines for finding people, videos, photos, documents, links, etc. For example, Joe is thinking of buying an acoustic guitar, so he trolls through those sites and lands on the photo of a guitar you've uploaded in Flickr (a giant photo-sharing site). He likes what he sees and clicks on the link in your Flickr profile that takes him to your corporate site. Whether e-commerce or lead generation, you've now got a potential customer in Joe!

6. Great Ideas Drive Great "Viral" Campaigns. Like in any aspect of marketing, having a great, timely, demographic-aligned idea can be the bud of a truly memorable social media campaign that spreads. Online contests, content crowd sourcing, the building of a targeted community whose members are your market and many other ideas that work in the social media sphere.

7. Don't Stop at Content Creation. Just as with traditional PR, digital outreach is a key aspect of an effective social media campaign. Digital PR is all about excellent relationship management - understanding the needs and wants of key 'web influencers' in your market, and the best approaches to use with them.

8. Measure and Repeat. It is critical to benchmark the progress of your social media program at the start, at various milestones during a campaign, and then in an ongoing manner to keep an eye on the effect on your site's traffic, your position in the page rankings, the engagement levels at your various social media locations, and most importantly - the increase in business leads and sales!

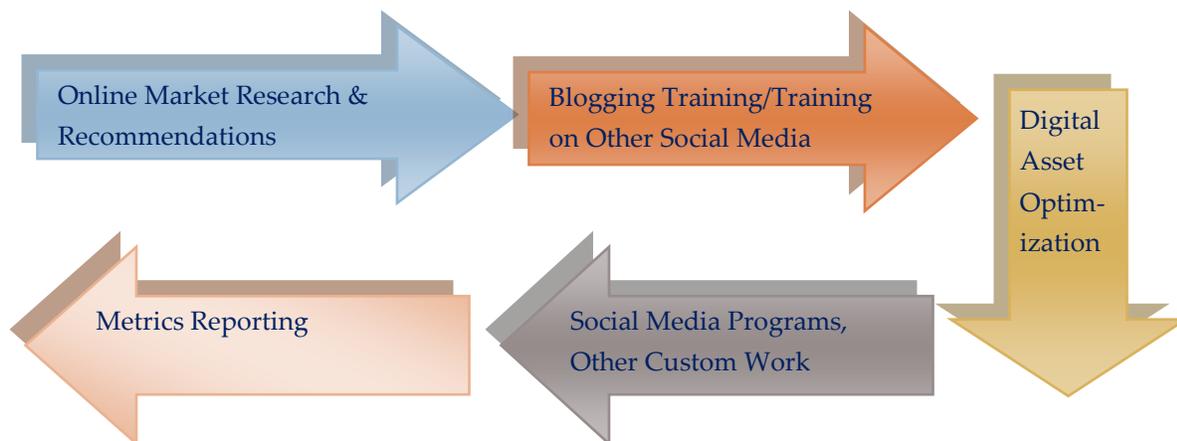
The combination of all these best practices is known as Social Media Optimization (SMO) - which shares in common with SEO, the end-game of getting found easily by people searching for information, entertainment, enlightenment, pretty pictures, videos, etc. online.

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The Methodology Behind Social Media Optimization

Given that Social Media Optimization (SMO) is a relatively new area in Internet marketing, you need to feel assured that you're getting the best advice and service. Not every Internet consultant knows the intricacies of SMO, or has a proven methodology in place to ensure clear communication of scope and progress throughout the project.

WSI Consultants use a proprietary, tested methodology for Social Media Optimization, whose project life-cycle provides deliverables in a phased delivery approach, resulting in measurable results and repeatable processes that maximize your investment.



What to Look for in the Services of a Social Media Consultant

WSI Consultants feature the following attributes in their social media service packages:

- **Scalability:** not every social media project is the same. Look for different sized packages options.
- **Affordability:** A range of price points to suit every marketing budget.
- **Customization:** A la carte menus and custom-order jobs to suit special cases.
- **Pre-sales support:** Conference calls and online meetings with social media experts to support the end client.
- **Personal service:** Direct contact with social media strategists, writers, researchers, analysts throughout the project.
- **Follow-up:** Continuation of service beyond the contract in the form of ongoing social media metrics and updates.

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Summary

As discussed in this white paper, social media is affecting fundamental changes in consumer behavior - specifically, how people research and buy products/services. How are YOU responding?

In a day and age when consumers demand an unsurpassed level of service and accessibility - and in an economy where you need every competitive edge - social media is a must-have marketing strategy that won't take up all your time and drain your resources. Few, if any, other marketing initiatives can help the way social media does when you get marching orders to build the brand, engage customers and prospects, save money, stretch resources, and boost ROI.

To meet these needs, WSI offers Social Media Optimization services - a natural add-on to the WSI portfolio of SEO, SEM and web development services. WSI leads the global Internet industry offering best of breed Internet marketing solutions to suit the needs of multiple industries. Through the adoption of international best practices, use of world class technologies and strategic industry partnerships, WSI delivers online business success to its customers worldwide.

Every Social Media Optimization project delivered by WSI includes the methodology and best practices outlined in this white paper to ensure optimum business benefits for every client. Go forth and enjoy the benefits of doing 'social' business; to your success!

About the Author

Heather Angus-Lee is the lead social media strategist for WSI. She has worked extensively in social media optimization, developing a broad client base that includes an international biotechnology healthcare provider, a national real estate company, an international machinery manufacturer, a continental workplace safety advocacy organization, regional retailers, and other B2B and B2C companies. Prior to her transformation into a web innovator, Heather was an award-winning business writer for more than 15 years - working as the editor of national magazines and as the business editor of a metropolitan daily newspaper. Heather can be reached at education@wsicorporate.com.

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Glossary of Social Media Terms

AJAX: An acronym (Asynchronous Java Script and XML) representing a way to create real-time Web applications.

Anonoblog: A blog site authored by a person or persons who don't publish their name.

Archives: Most often an index page, often organizing posts or entries by either category or date

Atom: A popular feed format used for syndicating content.

Avatar: A graphical image or likeness that replaces a photo of the author of the content on a blog.

Blogosphere: Term referring to the entire body of work online encompassed by the millions of blogs.

Blog Roll: The list that a blogger puts on his/her own blog indicating which other blogs he/she is reading regularly, and linking out to those blogs.

Dashboard: The administration area on your blog software that allows you to post, check traffic, upload files, manage comments, etc.

Delicious: A social bookmarking site and a property of Yahoo! Allows users to quickly store organize (by tags) and share favorite web pages. You can also subscribe to RSS feeds of other users and share a page specifically with another user

Digg: Digg is a website for people to discover, share and recommend content from anywhere on the web. (People's vote means they 'dugg' something.)

Domain Name: The identifying name of an Internet site. The domain name of my site is "www.wsicorporate.com"

Drupal: popular, open-source (free) software for creating websites and blogs.

Ecto: A stand-alone publishing application, allowing users to compose posts offline.

Edublog: A blog site focused on education, be it teacher, administrator, consultant or student.

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EFF: The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is the leading civil liberties group defending your rights in the digital world

Entry: An individual post or article published on a blog. Each of these entries, while appearing in an index, is also web pages unto themselves.

Event Blog: A blog specifically launched as a companion to an event

Feed: The RSS or Atom feeds used by news aggregators (aka feed readers).

FeedBlitz: An RSS service that makes it easy for those addicted to email.

FeedBurner: Feed Burner is a 'must-have' Google company/tool allowing web sites, blogs and podcasts to "burn" content into a simple way for readers to subscribe, including email.

Feed Reader: Aka RSS feed reader, news reader. An aggregator of content, subscribed to by the user, so that specific content or search results arrives in their "reader". Among the popular (and free) tools are Great News, Feed Demon and Google Reader.

Flog: A fake blog, such as one that a company puts up and either pays the blogger(s) to write positive stuff, or the company posts under a fake persona, posing as "happy customers" of said company.

Google Analytics: Free and popular way to measure traffic within a site (page views, unique visitors, time on page, bounce rate, referring sites and more.) Web developer grabs a piece of tracking to add to the back end of the site to activate the analytics then web-based sign in to monitor the results.

Joomla: A popular, open-source (free) software for creating websites and blogs.

MicroBlogging: A form of blogging allowing users to compose brief text updates and publish them. These messages can be submitted and received by a variety of means and devices, including text messaging, instant messaging, email, mobile device, MP3 or the web. Twitter anyone?

Moblogs: A blog published directly to the web from a phone or other mobile device.

Post: An individual article, or entry, published on a blog. Each post, while appearing in an index, is also a web page unto itself.

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RSS: short for Really Simple Syndication. This allows you to subscribe to content on blogs and other social media and have it delivered to you through a feed. Aka News Feed.

SMO: Social Media Optimization – a collection of best practices to make sure your digital assets (photos, videos, e-docs, links) are found online by submitting them to social sharing sites.

pambot: Automated software robots that post spam on a blog.

Social Media: The tool set (including blogs) that everyone can use to publish content to the web. This can include audio, video, photos, text, files, just about anything. These days, everyone is a content producer and distributor!

Splog: Nickname for Spam Blogs, or blogs not providing their own or real content. Sploggers use automated tools to create fake blogs full of links or scraped content from other sites in order to boost search engine results.

Threads: On an email list or web forum/message board, these strands of conversation are defined by messages on that same subject. On blogs, threads are less clearly defined, but emerge through comments and trackbacks.

Twitter: A social media platform, born circa 2006, that combines instant-messaging technology with the concept of "microblogging". The second fastest-growing social media tool in 2008.

Web 2.0: a term to describe blogs, wikis, social networking sites and other Internet-based services that emphasize collaboration and sharing, rather than less interactive publishing (Web 1.0).

Video Blogging: Speaking to the camera - in studio or out on the street or other settings - as the chosen form of blogging, and posting those videos, usually homemade, to digital sharing sites like YouTube. Aka "vlogging" or "vlogs."

Widget: A custom-built web application that has a function, usually involving a data feed that shows updated content in the widget. The widget can be shared for free across social media platforms like blogs, Facebook, MySpace, etc.

Wiki: A web page - or set of pages - that can be edited collaboratively. The best known example is wikipedia, an encyclopedia created by thousands of contributors across the world.

WordPress: A popular, open-source software for creating websites and blogs.