

Make Social Media Sell—Now

Jeff Molander

The “social media revolution” is over-hyped nonsense. The real business opportunity is to become more relevant and meaningful to customers in ways that create sales.

Few will question the impact social media is having on people’s lives. From assisting political revolutions to simply reconnecting us with old friends, social media is touching our lives in meaningful ways every day. But with all the stories you’re hearing about the power of Facebook, Twitter, blogs, LinkedIn, Google+ and other social networks, the one question you may be asking is “how can my business actually make money with social media?”

The jury is out. Most businesses dipping toes in social media waters are not experiencing a clear, focused understanding of it, let alone netting customers with it. We’re all enthusiastic about the advances in communication technology, but we rarely see or use them in a useful, practical way. Yes, social media gives us the ability to instantly, ubiquitously observe and react to customers like never before. But for most of us, the social media revolution has yet to reveal a clear path forward beyond running out and “just doing it.”

A year ago, my frustration finally piqued. I could not find a practical resource explaining how social media could be applied in ways to generate sales. There were scads of books expounding on the importance of things like Twitter—and how to use them—but none clearly explained how to sell goods and services with social media. Even more perplexing, more-and-more experts were claiming social media’s arrival represented a revolution. Yet, in practice, most businesses were experiencing the same, mediocre results from social marketing that traditional advertising was producing. At best, most of us were simply chasing the fleeting attention of customers.

I kept wondering, beyond the hyped-up keynote speeches and sexy YouTube videos comparing Facebook’s population to that of countries, shouldn’t we be seeing more “socially revolutionized” businesses? Where were they?

I decided to set out and discover exactly how those who were quietly successful selling using social media were doing it. I realized these businesses, and the people running them, knew something that we didn’t; they likely had common practices powering their success. I also committed myself to examining a personal hunch: that the so-called social media revolution might be a lie—a false “paradigm shift” foisted upon business folks by charlatans looking to make a fast buck. I would find out if my instincts were right.

It took me a while but I found people like Amanda Kinsella, who is selling dozens of heating and air conditioning systems and service contracts each month on Facebook. I met entrepreneur Marcus Sheridan, who is busy selling luxury items at record pace in a down economy. His River Pools & Spas is selling more in-ground, fiberglass swimming pools than any business in North America—using a blog. Marcus is even increasing his profit margin, shortening his sales-cycle and creating a new revenue stream using that same blog.

I discovered large corporations cracking the nut too. Software and services giant Intuit is convincing more customers to sign up for its Online Payroll product using social media. Investment and property management firm Jones Lang LaSalle is generating leads on seven-figure commercial real estate deals using YouTube. Banks and credit unions are increasing customer share-of-wallet (diversifying product portfolios) and acquiring new customers at record pace. Retailers like rural lifestyle store Tractor Supply Company are using educational approaches to acquire new customers and growing purchase activity.

From a home and garden cataloger in United Kingdom to an infomercial seller in Eastern Europe and a credit union in Australia, I was uncovering a surprising truth: Selling with social media requires ignoring the over-hyped “wisdom” of popular business gurus and returning to basic marketing principles.

For instance, my research revealed direct response marketing is at the heart of successful digital marketing campaigns. The practice itself is not being revolutionized; instead, it's being applied on the internet using new tools like Facebook. The core principles behind "what's working" is what has always worked.

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The fundamental concepts powering effective social marketing programs are rooted in a return to basic practices. Successful social sellers understand that the difference between fooling around on social media and selling with it relies on developing three key habits:

- 1 | **Solving customers' problems** and trusting instincts.
- 2 | **Designing to sell**, planning social experiences to provoke customer responses.
- 3 | **Translating**, or discovering customer need and using it to improve response rate.

Your business can immediately begin selling with social media by applying these 3 principles. Let's look at each more closely.

Solving Customers' Problems. The truth is compelling: making things like blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook, Twitter and the like sell actually challenges us to trust traditional instincts—to evolve, not reinvent.

The social aspects of attracting, nurturing and successfully earning a purchase are already known. Selling with social media is less about technical revolution, more about evolution. Successful social sellers are designing interactions (“conversations”) in ways that solve customers’ problems. This approach makes it easy to help customers guide themselves toward products and services.

Solving customers’ problems has always been the best way to raise awareness, interest and desire. Providing answers to customers’ questions remains the best way to effectively coax or nurture customers toward making a purchase. Social media is inherently interactive, making this process even easier to accomplish. The key is using this familiar process.

Making social sell is simply a matter of connecting question-and-answer oriented, digital conversations to helpful products and services whenever they’re relevant.

Think about it in your own life. Have you ever found yourself suddenly more equipped to make a purchase based on knowledge you suddenly became aware of? Think about it in your business—outside of the internet. Are you publishing white papers, magazines or other self diagnosis-type

tools to help customers become more clear on problems, avoid risk or exploit unseen opportunities? Are you doing it in ways that occasionally connect with your products or services?

Successful social sellers are using Facebook and blogs to publish knowledge, yes, but don't fall into the trap of what's being called "content marketing." Social gurus claim that generating a constant stream of content—today's flashy word for articles, video or other information—is key to your success. But just like cranking out white papers or information-dense brochures, earning sales takes more. Success requires earning response from customers through application of a problem solving or question-and-answer approach. That means prompting customer behavior with every tweet, post or update you make on social platforms. And that takes a plan, a designed system of question-and-answer driven interactions.

Design to Sell. Consider how you might creatively attract customers to discuss or complain about a problem in their life—one that loosely connects to a solution you provide.

Next, envision yourself provoking an action—exploiting a complaint, for instance, by enticing your customer or prospect to take a free trial or something else (even information) that brings them closer to whatever they're demonstrating a need for.

For instance, grocery store Harris-Teeter pays customers to ask health and wellness questions of its Registered Dieticians on Facebook. Why would a grocer—or your business—do that? Because

helping customers put out a fire or scratch a bothersome itch is powerful. Answering questions opens the door for discovery and for your business to make relevant suggestions. Using this approach, it becomes natural to offer a friendly tip, a useful trick or, if appropriate, outline the benefits of becoming a customer, member or user, or just taking a trial run.

Effective marketing has always relied on prompting target audiences to take action. Social media is no different. This essential principle is at the heart of a social marketing program that sells goods and services. Even advertising giant David Ogilvy believed in the superiority of direct response marketing to induce purchase behavior and prove itself cost effective.

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“You direct response people know what kind of advertising works and what doesn’t work,” said Ogilvy. “You know it to a dollar. The general advertising people don’t know.”

Solving customers’ problems using social media works because it’s what they want. And it’s what you want, because it puts your business in a power position. Focusing on solving problems

inherently sharpens your ability to design or “map out” simple processes that help customers guide themselves toward products and services they need.

Yet there’s an even more dynamite technique to drive purchase behavior when customers are reluctant or not yet ready to buy: Addicting a target audience to your non-commercial (“non-salesy”) solutions, answers or unique non-commercial abilities in return for the right to occasionally ask for the sale.

For instance, infomercial company Studio Moderna provides addictive, non-commercial email newsletters to prospects. The potential new customers that subscribe only buy what Studio Moderna sells once a year at most. In exchange for the addictive information the company’s Dormeo brand makes occasional promotional offers to consumers—many of whom end up buying.

Here’s how it works. I call it “ethically bribing” customers. It’s accomplished by presenting customers with opportunities—ways to create more success in their personal lives, avoid risks or drive more revenue. The key is making sure these opportunities are genuinely new, never-before seen by your audience. That’s the tough part. But getting started is as easy as providing solutions to problems they don’t yet know they have—that you’re already aware of. That’s the candy. Now, don’t hand it all out... keep some for yourself. That’s how your business becomes addictive.

Within this stream of useful information, occasional commercial calls-to-action can be delicately made.

For instance, commercial and residential building owners and managers are interested in conserving energy *and* getting green credits from local governments. This is prompting management and investment firms like Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) to create short, provocative videos on YouTube that generate immediate responses. A video may suggest, “But wait, Mr. Building Manager... did you know that in the event of a storm, the building insurance that’s designed to replace a typical tar roof won’t cover your green landscaping or solar panels on your roof without making specific changes in the contract?”

Successful social sellers are provoking clients to identify themselves as leads by pointing at problems and opportunities that they do not see, or providing ways to avoid risk.

The trick to cranking-up leads and sales with social media is showing customers ways to capitalize on previously unseen opportunities—and/or solve problems that exist yet are unseen risks. The rest is connecting those compelling interactions to your products and services. Think of it like making everything you do in social media spaces scratch customer itches.

Retailer Lauren’s Hope offers attractive, elegant (ladies) and bold (men) solutions to people who need protection from a variety of diseases. But many customers don’t yet know they need

an ID because they don't view their disease as a life-threatening risk and/or don't view IDs as life savers—let alone a means to avoid unnecessary, risky procedures in emergency situations. That's why this small business uses a blog to educate people looking to cope with disease and, along the way, pointing out a means to eliminate risk in surprisingly pleasing ways (via their products).

But be careful. Offering useful information to customers alone will not work. Making social media sell demands you ask yourself, "How can I get customers to really need me, to be addicted to me... so much so that they're ultimately willing to take action, purchase?" That's why Lauren's Hope and others like them use traditional approaches, like distributing valuable giveaways and offer chances to win free products. These time-tested techniques earn the business the right to nurture new and existing customer relationships over time.

Translate. How do successful social sellers know what knowledge to share, which questions to answer, what risks to help customers avoid and which unseen opportunities to entice them with? They listen for clues from customers, process them and feed this knowledge back into marketing programs.

We hear a lot about using social media to listen to customers. Yet making social sell pushes businesses to reach further, to *translate* what they hear into action with marketing programs that induce customer behavior. Successful social sellers use Facebook, blogs, video, Twitter

and even email to help capture insights on customers' pain points. Then they put that knowledge to work. Social media lets customers tell you how to be relevant. Then it's time to get creative, use these insights and encourage customers to ask more questions that your products and services answer.

Businesses generating sales with social media are using it to provide qualitative improvements in customers' lives, not just to update them on news or hand out discounts. They're structuring social media interactions to identify and solve customers' problems in ways that prompt more questions—driving buyers into stores or online for more answers.

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Again, consider grocery store Harris Teeter. This company is observing existing, in-store shopper behavior and letting it set their social media course. Customers are already “out there” (online and in-store) looking for answers to vital health and wellness issues and they're often itching to share tips they discover with others in their network. Harris Teeter is simply scratching that itch in ways that encourages customers to ask more questions, more often, and share valuable answers with friends and family. It's what customers had been doing before the internet came

along. The grocer is simply designing a similar online process that mirrors what's always worked—answering customers' questions and increasing demand for the products and services that solve their customers' problems.

Leading social sellers are not choosing Facebook or blogs as a new strategy so much as they're using it to do what they're already very good at—guiding customers.

The Revolution Will Be Scrutinized. Of course, a total revolution of business as we know it sounds far more sexy and exciting. Paradigm shifts and game-changers are a goldmine for those pushing flash-in-the-pan software and consulting services. It's their chance to scare otherwise rational business people into making irrational, hasty investments.

Social media's "newness" is so overstated and sensationalized that it's likely working against your interests right now.

Throughout history, the breathless hype-and-spin surrounding arrival of new technologies has been problematic. Unbridled exuberance always produces a fear-based rush to adopt whatever is new based on inflated expectation. This is always followed by regret and disillusionment—"it's not such a game-changer after all." This process is pervasive and will stifle your business's evolutionary process.

For instance, I've met direct television infomercial sellers struggling with YouTube because they're following the edicts of overzealous, misguided "gurus." Meanwhile, their competitors are trusting their instincts and sticking with proven success principles to drive sales. Business-to-business sellers likewise struggle from lack of confidence in what they already know works. Yet some, like telecommunications giant, Avaya, stick to their knitting—finding and closing six-figure contracts using platforms like Twitter.

Consumer-focused retailers are also throwing hands up after years struggling with Facebook marketing. Yet a small handful are selling on social platforms because of focus and dedication to getting back to basics and solving customers problems.

The Power of Perspective. True, most businesses dipping toes in social media waters are not experiencing a clearer, focused understanding nor making practical use of inventions like Facebook, let alone reaping sales. With good reason. What we see and hear about social media are making things seem bigger and faster—not clearer. We're allowing advances in digital marketing platforms and technologies to confuse us rather than serve us.

Look around. Smart, accomplished business people are allowing self-appointed experts to switch goals away from leads, sales and subscribers—toward likes, friends and followers. We've become scared into believing that building trust with, listening to and conversing with customers are

radical new ideas—and that before social media we were in total control of our customers. Social media’s arrival has caused us to lose perspective.

Consider astronomer Galileo Galilei. Galileo made astounding observations with his improved technology, the telescope. With it, he proved Nicolaus Copernicus’s planetary motion theory to be fact and Claudius Ptolemy’s centuries-old fact to be fiction. Similar to Galileo’s times, our businesses now have the ability to improve upon the tenets of a familiar-yet-outdated reality. I’m speaking of the limiting beliefs and practices born of the mass communications era. But something is getting in the way.

You may recall a scene in the Bill Murray movie *What About Bob*, where he’s telling a joke. Murray says, “The doctor draws two circles and says, ‘What do you see?’ The patient says, ‘Sex.’ So, the doctor draws trees and says, ‘What do you see?’ The patient replies, ‘Sex.’ The doctor draws a car, an owl. ‘Sex, sex, sex.’ The doctor says to the patient, ‘You are obsessed with sex.’ And the patient replies, ‘Well, you’re the one drawing all the dirty pictures!’”

The digital marketing industry has become blinded by metrics that it does not understand. We’ve become obsessed with defining and understanding return on investment to the point that we’ve set out on a misguided quest for the sure thing—in the form of ROI metrics for just about everything. Return on Experience, Return on Relationships, Return on Knowledge,

Return on Loyalty. What about making a sale? What about David Ogilvy's mantra, "We sell—or else!"

You see, for most of us, social media tools are not revealing a deeper, clearer reality. Too few of us are selling more with social media by serving customers better with it. Advances like Facebook, LinkedIn, Bebo and Google+ are confusing us more than they're making business opportunities clear. And that's where we see a break with Galileo's experience. His new observations made reality clearer.

Change the Question. The idea of getting back to basics and solving customers' problems is profoundly powerful because it forces a business to change the question. "What should we be doing with social media?" suddenly becomes "how can social media help us make what we already do for customers better?"

Changing the question we most commonly ask about social media calls into question the essential purpose we're assigning to it. For instance, is Facebook just another channel to push coupons, promotions or communications outward to audiences? Is Twitter merely another form of email—another means to respond to customer complaints? Or is there a larger opportunity here?

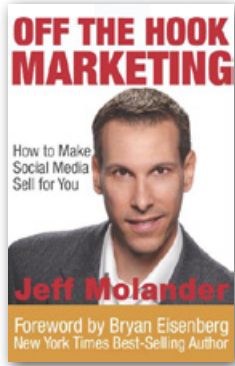
Experts claim that blogging regularly, getting retweeted at certain times of day or becoming "liked" frequently is what works. But the truth is that these practices are not, by themselves,

working. In fact, differentiating a product or service or being perceived as a thought leader isn't enough either, especially in our worsening economic climate.

Your business's culture is probably already set up in ways to solve problems and uncover opportunities for customers. If it isn't, your business probably won't use social media to do these things either! Social isn't something you do or learn; it's something you are, or are not. Social media merely amplifies your "social state of being." It changes nothing.

Achieving more with social media challenges your business to see the opportunity it presents in a different light—a more practical light. And you can meet that challenge by making social media work for you, instead of just working on social media. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jeff Molander is the authority on making social media sell and a sought-after corporate trainer to small businesses and global corporations. He's an accomplished entrepreneur, having co-founded what is today the Google Affiliate Network and search marketing division of Publicis Groupe. Today, he's adjunct digital marketing faculty at Loyola University's school of business. His new book, *Off The Hook Marketing: How to Make Social Media Sell for You*, is first to offer businesses a clear, practical way to sell with new technology platforms like Facebook and blogging.

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