

Leveraging the network-building potential of social media marketing

An examination of digital engagement strategies and tactics for entrepreneurial firms

The rapid digitalization of marketing in the last two decades has had an immense impact on businesses worldwide, accelerating this new field of marketing to the top of most business' agendas. A case study paper by [Drummond et al. \(2020\)](#) explores social media (SM) in the context of its impact on business-to-business (B2B) relationships, entrepreneurship, and the development of digital marketing skills. By identifying digital engagement strategies and tactics used in B2B environments, this paper seeks to heighten SM marketing capability among entrepreneurial firms by supplying practical strategic and tactical advice for developing their SM capabilities in the B2B environment. Data for the study were gathered by analyzing over 2,000 Facebook posts and Tweets by an artisan food producer, along with the collection of interview responses from the firm in question and from business associates with whom they engage on SM.

Social media capability and advantages to entrepreneurial firms

Although consumer-focused SM has attracted much study and analysis, less is known about B2B social media in the context of entrepreneurial business relationships and network marketing. SM capability can be defined as the ability to engage, connect, coordinate, and collaborate with other businesses via SM to generate marketing activities or resources. These activities could be a new connection, a new customer, or could even involve developing new products and services in collaboration with other businesses.

There are multiple advantages for entrepreneurial firms in engaging in SM activity. For instance there are almost no barriers to entry, it's easy and inexpensive to setup and become active on SM platforms, and doing so requires far less budget than most other forms of marketing. Most SM platforms have been designed for ease of use and SM does not have to be resource heavy. For entrepreneurial firms, SM opens the doors to a wide range of benefits by allowing them to create a shared space in which to share knowledge with other businesses outside of their local network, to establish and develop relationships for mutually beneficial purposes, and to build brand awareness in real-time. This makes SM an important tool in helping smaller and newer firms to extend what traditionally was a limited network, as well as facilitating a whole host of other activities such as lead generation, improving customer engagement, and supporting the firm's other marketing efforts.

Social media strategy categories

The SM communications analyzed in this study were collected into four strategy categories:

1. Connect;
2. Engage;
3. Coordinate; and
4. Collaborate.

Connect: This strategy focuses on connecting with and communicating with B2B targets outside the firm's traditional network, in order to initiate relationships and dialogue. The overarching aim of this strategy is to build connections that have the potential to add value. Example tactics in this category include content and post sharing to generate connections, interacting with other firms' SM posts and tweets to encourage reciprocity, and recommending or reviewing other brands.

Engage: This strategy seeks to establish relationships between B2B actors through immediate and meaningful communication for business purposes via SM, as well as to facilitate further reciprocity. The content of these communications is unique to the parties involved, deepening the relationships between them. Example tactics of the engage strategy include conversational posts and tweets (which can be between multiple parties over multiple conversations) for purposes such as extending a firm's network of partners, fostering further discussions, and developing greater interaction.

Coordinate and Collaborate: Used in combination, these strategies enable firms to deploy SM to co-create value between B2B partners by developing activities and resources together. The use of SM to develop these strategic relationships can result in sharing resources (e.g. sharing information that a firm believes will be useful to another firm) or coordinating marketing efforts to achieve a common goal (e.g. promoting a collaborative event). Tactics employed here include information and knowledge-sharing posts and tweets, as well as those relating to order processing and fulfillment.

Recommendations for managers

Following the analysis of the large quantity of data used in this study, a total of eight SM digital engagement strategies and 15 digital engagement tactics have been identified, which span the four SM categories: connect, engage, coordinate, and collaborate. To illustrate their findings, the authors cite examples of how each of the four SM categories were executed by the entrepreneurial firm in question. The following insights will prove useful to other entrepreneurial firms wanting to develop their SM capability:

- Connecting with SM audiences is the primary step, with examples cited in this study including tagging B2B targets in posts to attract attention to a firm's products, complimenting another firm on the quality of their product (often done on a specific day of the week), and sharing other firms' content like recipes. These actions are intended to generate a response from the subject firm and are important in growing online networks.
- Engaging SM audiences goes a step further than connecting, by deploying such tactics as liking or sharing others' posts or adding comments, asking for information, or making business-related requests (e.g. searching for a supplier or stockist). These are important because they begin to establish relationships between business actors, which in turn encourage reciprocity.
- Coordinating via SM platforms involves actions like the posting of valuable information to a firm's SM network, for example a link to a blog article or an event. Additional examples include information sharing to solve problems like being unable to source specialized information or suppliers, and even sharing potential sales opportunities.

These types of SM activities enable firms to strengthen relationships and provide value to other B2B actors in their network.

- Examples of collaborating tactics include using SM to organize and manage joint initiatives with one or more other firms, for instance competitions, events, or promotions. Collaborative sales efforts can also be conducted via SM, for example by promoting other businesses who have joined together for a large-scale nationwide competition. This enables small entrepreneurial firms to extend their reach considerably in the process.

The digital engagement strategies and practical tactics detailed in this study can be directly applied by all entrepreneurial firms (not limited to the artisan food sector) to develop their SM capabilities within the context of B2B marketing. However, given the transparent nature of SM communications, it's easy to identify a firm's agenda or motives in their SM interactions. To reduce this risk, the study recommends a collaborative approach with other firms in their network to help deliver successful SM marketing strategies.

Commentary

The review is based on "Digital engagement strategies and tactics in social media marketing" (2019). This case study paper analyzes social media (SM) communications and interview responses to uncover the types of strategies and tactics entrepreneurial firms can use on their SM accounts. These communications are arranged into the categories: connect, engage, coordinate, and collaborate. Examples of tactics deployed include making business-related requests on SM to establish relationships, posting links to events, and even sharing potential sales opportunities. The authors particularly recommend adopting a collaborative approach with other firms as a way of delivering successful SM marketing strategies non-aggressively.

Keywords:
Marketing capability,
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relationships

Reference

Drummond, C., O'Toole, T. and McGrath, H. (2020), "Digital engagement strategies and tactics in social media marketing", *European Journal of Marketing*, doi: [10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0183](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0183).

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