

Post, Engage, Grow: A Social Media Primer

Social media platforms enable people to share information and network with others online. From a marketing perspective, implementing a social media strategy can complement other marketing efforts and create value for your business, including building a loyal customer base, collecting new product ideas, promoting products and generating sales. Social media can be a powerful tool, but creating and maintaining a social media presence takes time and resources.

This guide will help business owners understand different types of social media platforms and how to select appropriate platforms, as well as how to establish a presence and build a following. See MU Extension publication G6229, [Harnessing Social Media to Drive Sales](https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6229) (extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6229) to learn more about using social media to generate sales.

Understanding different types of social media platforms

Social media platforms may fit into various categories. Hootsuite categorizes social platforms into seven groups, and this guide focuses on four platform types that are most relevant to small businesses. Choosing which social media platforms to prioritize is one of the most important parts of a social media plan, and can help your business reach its audience while effectively managing resources. Table 1 highlights four types of social media platforms, their strengths and weaknesses, a business's role and ways to engage audiences on these platforms.

Table 1. Strengths, weaknesses and use cases of four types of social media platforms.

| Social media platform type | Strengths | Weaknesses | Your role on the platform | Opportunity to engage your target audience |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Consumer review networks (Yelp, Google Business Profile, TripAdvisor) | Build trust through customer feedback Help with SEO/visibility Facilitate brand engagement | Negative reviews can harm reputation Limited control over customer feedback | If your business is listed, claim your page. If not, create a detailed listing. | "Listen" to reviewers' commentary. Respond to customer questions or concerns. Encourage satisfied customers to leave an online review. |
| Traditional social networking sites (Facebook, X, LinkedIn) | Large user base and audience reach Support multiple content formats | Engagement varies by platform and post type Younger audiences are turning to alternative platforms | Create your own account. Promote products and services, and build a community. | Offer real-time engagement through comments and direct messages. Conduct market research through prompts and comments. Promote events and partnerships. |
| Image-based social networking sites (Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat) | Strong visual appeal helps with brand awareness Good for e-commerce and product promotion | Require high-quality visuals to stand out Hard to drive traffic to website | Create your own account. Use visuals for storytelling about products or services. | Share high-quality content and encourage interaction with posts. Create a storefront if appropriate. |
| Short-form video social networking sites (Instagram Reels, TikTok, YouTube) | Effective for brand storytelling Growing consumer preference for video content | Video length requirements vary by platform Trends change rapidly and require flexibility | Create your own account. Use video to highlight your products and services. | Publish short videos that entertain, inform and educate your audience. Use trending sounds and hashtags to increase content visibility. |

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Consumer review networks, such as Yelp and TripAdvisor, allow consumers to discover local businesses and attractions and post their assessments of products, services and experiences. On consumer review networks, consumers may post about a business and create a de facto page for the business without the owner's knowledge or permission. If your business provides a service directly to consumers — for example, you run a restaurant, hotel, hair salon or recreational venue — then it may be already listed on several consumer review networks, especially if you are located in a city or tourist area.

Traditional social networking sites, such as Facebook and X, allow businesses to connect with consumers and create an environment that fosters community and builds relationships. Image-based, such as Instagram and Snapchat, and short-form video, such as TikTok and YouTube, social networking sites also connect businesses and consumers, but they tend to emphasize strong visual storytelling and social commerce opportunities.

Depending on your business type and intended audience, one or more social media platforms and consumer review networks might be an appropriate fit; however, each platform presents content and engagement opportunities differently and tends to appeal to unique audiences. For example, a business may use Instagram if sharing visual content and attempting to connect with audiences under 45 years old. On the other hand, posting on X may enable a business to better engage with consumers and respond to customer service-related comments. A Facebook presence might enable a business to better engage with consumers and create dialogue to foster a sense of community and gain real-time feedback on products or services.

After familiarizing yourself with common social media platforms and opportunities for engagement, consider your target customer and their preferences to decide which platforms you should use to build an audience and engage your followers.

Identifying your target audience

To ensure that your marketing efforts are successful, it is helpful to identify a target audience for your business. Your target audience is a specific group of individuals who are likely to be interested and willing to buy your products or services, and have financial means to do so.

Target audiences can be defined based on factors such as age, gender, location, interests, behavior, motivators, values, lifestyle and purchasing power. According to Natalie O'Grady with Sprout Social, businesses that identify their target customers can tailor their social media content to increase the likelihood of engagement on social media platforms. To identify your target

audience, collect as much information as possible about your customers and their habits. Megan Smith, Constant Contact writer, suggests this information can be collected through several methods:

- Free tools, like Google analytics, can be used to analyze visitor demographics and behavior on your website.
- A survey can be conducted to ask customers about their buying habits and social media preferences.
- Open-ended questions can be asked at checkout or delivery, or after a purchase, to gather feedback.
- Researching competitors' online platforms can provide insight into followers' engagement.
- Visiting competitors' websites and consumer review network listings provides a glimpse into customer feedback and trends.

Once you have gathered information about your target audience, consider developing a persona (a brief, fictional representation) for a member of the audience. Figure 1 provides an example of a target audience persona for a fictitious Frank's Fruits & Vegetables business; Frank makes value-added agricultural products, which are sold at a farm stand and farmers market.

After gaining clarity on the motivators, personality and social media habits of your target audience, you can pair these insights with your understanding of social media platforms to determine what platforms you should establish a presence and build a following on.



"Local Focus Lisa"

Enjoys cooking and trying new recipes, using high-quality local ingredients and supporting local farmers and businesses

Lisa is a 38-year-old small business owner in suburban St. Louis. She's passionate about local businesses, and when it comes to food, she values freshness and knowing where her ingredients come from.

Lisa loves stopping by farmers markets, chatting with vendors and discovering new, homemade products. She often looks up new recipes on Pinterest and follows farm-to-table food pages on Facebook and Instagram.

Lisa is invested in her food choices. Price matters, but she's willing to pay more for handcrafted, small-batch products. She values the relationships she's built with local farmers and knowing that her purchases support small businesses.

Figure 1. Target customer persona for Frank's Fruits & Vegetables.

Establishing an online presence for your business

As previously mentioned, your business may already have an online presence. Take the following steps to claim your presence on consumer review networks:

- Search for your business using multiple internet browsers, such as Firefox, Chrome, Bing and Microsoft Edge.
- Claim all your business's listings on Google Business Profile, Bing Places for Business, Yelp, TripAdvisor and other relevant review networks by following each platform's instructions.
- Add information about your products and services, business hours, amenities, photos and videos.
- Make sure to review customer feedback and offer courteous responses to questions and complaints.
- Set a regular reminder to review your listing, make updates as needed and engage with feedback.

Next, choose the social media platforms you want to use to promote your business. Review Table 1 for platform information and refer to the details gathered about your target audience to help you determine which platforms they will likely use. Although specific setup actions may vary slightly across platforms, you can generally take these steps to create an account:

- Use your business email and/or phone number to create a business account.
- Choose a username or handle that is consistent across platforms and represents your business.
- Select a profile picture and cover photo that are consistent with your brand (see Figure 2 for an example for Frank's Fruits & Vegetables).
- Complete your profile's "about" or "bio" section to describe your business and include a call to action.
- Provide your website, phone number, email address, physical location and business hours.

After successfully creating your accounts, your business is now ready to build an online audience and share content.

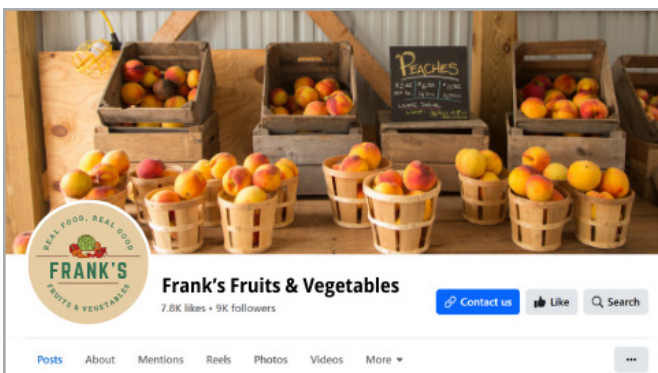


Figure 2. Facebook profile picture and cover photo for Frank's Fruits & Vegetables.

Building an audience

After creating an account on one or more social media platforms, you must attract and engage your online audience. Building a strong online community helps increase your business's brand awareness, turns followers into loyal supporters and can help generate sales. Initially, your social media efforts should be an intentional way to build your online audience and facilitate engagement as you begin to market your business. It may be helpful to set realistic goals to both grow your online audience and foster engagement. For example, you might aspire to secure 300 followers in the next calendar year and reach a 3% content engagement rate.

Your business can start building an online audience by encouraging users to follow your social media accounts. First, ensure that your current customers know about your social presence. On your website, include a link to your social account, and print your social account's web address or handle (which starts with an @ symbol) on business cards, signs and product packaging. Invite your customers, family, friends and colleagues to follow your account. Other best practices for growing your online audience include:

- Incorporating relevant hashtags and keywords into your social media content to gain exposure among members of your target audience.
- Following and interacting with similar accounts and businesses online.
- Partnering with content creators and local businesses for cross promotion to increase visibility and broaden reach.
- Leveraging offline promotion avenues and seeking out opportunities to remind new and existing customers about your social media presence.
- Offering incentives, such as special discounts to followers who like, share and comment on your social media posts to increase their visibility.

Building an audience is not only about gaining followers but encouraging those followers to engage with your content. Engagement helps your audience continue to see what you're posting, exposes content to new audiences and signals what types of content resonates with your audience.

Planning social media content for audience building and engagement fostering

Growing an online audience and fostering engagement requires regularly updating content and developing a strategy for what content to post. Choose how often you'd like to post given the amount of time you can dedicate to social media and the amount of content available. Posting frequency (the number of times per week or month your business should share

content) will vary by platform, but generally, your business should post frequently to stay relevant in your target audience’s newsfeed; Table 2 offers suggestions based upon data from the authors’ interactions with small food and farm businesses. However, recommended frequencies are merely a suggestion. Your business should prioritize quality over quantity, as one thoughtful, high quality social media post is more valuable than three low-quality posts.

Table 2. Posting frequency by platform type.

| Social media platform type | Posting frequency |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Consumer review networks (Yelp, Google Business Profile, TripAdvisor) | Not applicable, as these platforms are driven by customer reviews and feedback |
| Traditional social networking sites (Facebook, X, LinkedIn) | Facebook: 1–2 times per week X: 1–2 times per week LinkedIn: 1–2 times per month |
| Image-based social networking sites (Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat) | Instagram: 1–3 times per week Instagram Stories: 1–2 times per week Pinterest: At least once per month Snapchat: 1–2 times per week |
| Short-form video social networking sites (Instagram Reels, TikTok, YouTube) | Instagram Reels: 1–3 times per month TikTok: 1–3 times per month YouTube: At least once per month |

As you consider your strategy for posting content, make sure to budget adequate time to create content and manage your social media presence on your selected platforms. Some business owners spend anywhere from six to 20 hours per week on social media, depending on seasonality and skill level. Your business might decide to spend 10–15 hours per week to manage one to two social media platforms. A majority of your time could be dedicated to content brainstorming and creation, followed by dedicated time to engage with followers (including responding to comments and messages) and a small amount of time to schedule and post content. As with recommended posting frequencies, these figures are merely a suggestion and will shift based upon your resources, time and goals for your online presence.

You may find it useful to work with an online artificial intelligence (AI) program to polish first drafts of posts, or generate new ideas. No one knows your business better than you, so proofread posts carefully and monitor engagement with all content to learn from your audience.

Crafting social media content for audience building and engagement fostering

After deciding how frequently to post and how much time to allocate to your social media efforts, you can begin crafting social media content that resonates with your audience and supports your audience growth and engagement goals. Your posts can entertain, inform, inspire or celebrate your audience — what matters most is tailoring content to each platform and engaging with your followers in meaningful ways.

The type of content you post should align with your target audience’s interests and the strengths of the platforms. Consider using a mix of the following content types to build your audience, engage your followers and provide value:

- Brand awareness posts that introduce your business, allow followers to meet the owner and see behind-the-scenes content, and help followers understand what they’ll get from your content.
- Interactive posts where followers can answer polls or ask questions, share their opinions or offer feedback on your products or services.
- Educational content that can include product use examples, how-to guides, fun facts and other updates that relate to your target audience’s interests and values.
- Local and community-focused content to generate cross promotional efforts, including upcoming events, seasonal updates and shoutouts to other businesses with their profiles tagged.
- Call-to-action posts that encourage your audience to like, follow, share, comment or otherwise engage with your business.

Figures 3 and 4 offer two examples of how these content types are leveraged to build an online audience and foster engagement for Frank’s Fruits & Vegetables. Note that depending on your platforms of choice, your use of specific media formats could vary. For example, Facebook allows photo, video and text-only content, while YouTube only allows video content. Refer back to Table 1 for helpful insights as you plan and create content that maximizes the capabilities of your selected platforms.

By thoughtfully planning your efforts and crafting your content, you can create a strong social media presence for your business that fosters an online audience and encourages engagement. Remember that building an online audience and increasing engagement takes dedicated effort and time — keep your goals in mind as you create, post and monitor content on your social media platforms.



Figure 3. Example of audience building Facebook content for Frank's Fruits & Vegetables.

Summary

As a business owner, you can use social media to build a customer base, collect new product ideas, promote products and generate sales. For businesses new to social media, understanding the available platforms and how to effectively build an online audience can be a challenge.

Establishing a social media presence takes time and resources, and is not an overnight process. Garnering an online following and engaging your audience takes effort, strategy and patience.

To start your social media efforts, familiarize yourself with social media platforms and learn more about your target audience. After understanding the available platforms and where your audience is, establish your accounts and set goals. Be strategic with your content to encourage likes, follows and interaction with your target audience. Once your business has secured an online following with an engaged audience, you can leverage your social media platforms to drive sales. See MU Extension publication G6229, [Harnessing Social Media to Drive Sales](#) (extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6229) for more information.



Figure 4. Example of engagement fostering Facebook content for Frank's Fruits & Vegetables.

Resources

This guide draws upon the sources listed below to explain social media platforms, target audiences and crafting content.

- Israel, S. (2023). [7 Types of Social Media and How Each Can Benefit Your Business](https://blog.hootsuite.com/types-of-social-media) (blog.hootsuite.com/types-of-social-media). Hootsuite.
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- O'Grady, N. (2024). [Target Audience: What It Is and How to Find Yours](https://sproutsocial.com/insights/target-audience) (sproutsocial.com/insights/target-audience). Sprout Social.
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