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Facebook exec says tools can promote small businesses



By Jefferson Graham, USA TODAY

Emily White is director of Local at Facebook, where she works with businesses to help them reach customers.

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Updated: 05/24/2011 8:26pm

With more than 500 million members, Facebook is hugely attractive to small businesses as a place to market their wares.

But tips on how small businesses can best work with Facebook tools are buried within the site, leaving many entrepreneurs puzzled about how to use the site to get new clients and strengthen the loyalty of existing customers.

How frequently should a business communicate with its customers? And what is the significance of that "Like" button anyway?

For answers to those questions and more, USA TODAY recently paid a visit to Emily White, Facebook's director of Local, who works with businesses on Facebook tools. White was interviewed in a conference room at Facebook headquarters here, where her shiny Apple MacBook laptop was adorned with a "Like Us on Facebook" sticker that the company gives to businesses.

Q: Let's start off by talking "Likes." There is such an emphasis now by companies on getting customers to "like" them, by clicking the "Like" tab on Facebook. Why are likes such a big deal?

A: A "like" is an endorsement, a lightweight action that allows a user to say "I like what you're doing in this area; I like your product; I like your photo; and I want to put in a vote for you."

It's a way for your customer to say, "I like this business, and I'm going to tell everyone about it."

Q: Competition for "likes" has gotten so heated that many companies are actually offering to sell "likes," by paying folks to hit the "like" button over and over again. How does Facebook feel about that?

A: We're not fans. They're disingenuous and don't mean anything. If that page is publishing to an individual's profile, they'll start marking it as spam. You want a genuine "like." You want someone to "like" your business because they really do.

Q: How often should businesses post to their customers? Hourly? Daily? Weekly?

A: "The general rule is, you're in pretty good shape if you're posting three times a week. That gets you to a pretty sweet spot. Any more would be just too much.

Q: Many businesses offer special discounts for Facebook members, free items if you mention the Facebook post and the "like." What's the best-performing offer?

A: It's all about authentic content. The great thing about Facebook is you can try something and see how it works with your customers. Ask them, and see the response.

Q: Facebook recently introduced "Deals," a Groupon/LivingSocial type offer for Facebook customers. How can local businesses participate? What's the advantage of using Deals instead of, say, just buying ads on Facebook?

A: Local businesses in the five cities we're testing Deals in (Atlanta, Austin, Dallas, San Francisco and San Diego) can sign up at <http://Facebook.com/deals/business>. Since Deals really focused on things you can share with your friends, Deals is great for local businesses because it can help bring in qualified customers. When businesses run Deals on Facebook, we also help them run ads directing to their Deals. Deals are intended to drive customers specifically into the store. The purpose of Deals and ads is different, but we think they're complementary.

Q. What about Places? That's another new Facebook feature, allowing customers to "check in" and tell their friends. How can businesses work with Facebook Places?

A: A few months ago, we made it easier for businesses with a physical location to merge their Page with their Place. This allows people to run Check-in deals for their Page. We started testing this in November. Check-in Deals is a free product that helps businesses reward their customers for checking into their stores.

Q: Many small businesses are concerned about taking on another project — social networking. Why should they take the time?

A: The Web is changing from an information Web to a social Web. The way people are interacting with online materials is really starting to mimic what they're doing offline. . A small business not on Facebook is missing a ton of opportunity. People are probably already talking about them, but all the positive things they're saying are going off into the ether — and not getting shared broadly. Your page becomes a living, breathing representation of your business.

Q: What do you do if you've started with a Facebook profile, and want to move it to a business page? How do you do that?

A: We have a wizard that will walk you through this on our help FAQ page. It shows you how to convert friends to fans.

Smart ideas for marketing online

Facebook is primarily geared to personal social networks, so finding the scoop on how businesses can market to that audience can be a challenge. For tips, USA TODAY checked in with Nicole Krug, who runs Washington, D.C.-based Social Light, which works with small businesses on their Facebook and Twitter pages.

Create a Page

Facebook has a tab at the bottom of every page inviting anyone to "create a page."

Click one of the six choices, which include local business, band or artist, brand or product, company, entertainment or cause. If you already have a personal page and want to migrate your fans to the new business page, here's where to go to make it happen: <https://www.facebook.com/>

Spread the word

"There's this idea that if you have a Facebook page, people will come," says Krug. "No — you've got to do things to get people there."

She says that just having a Facebook page isn't enough — the social network has to be combined with your website, Twitter and e-mail marketing. All three should mention the Facebook page in an integrated way. "This takes a serious time commitment, but it will pay off."

Use developer tools

Have your Facebook page mirror your website. Go to Facebook's Developer page at facebook.com/developers and set up a Facebook "app" that will add a tab from your existing website to your Facebook page. This step isn't for newbies — you'll need to either know your way around how to create a website or pass it on to someone who can do this for you.

Try Places and Deals apps

Deals mimics social sites such as Groupon and LivingSocial in offering special bargains for friends, while Places is similar to sites like Foursquare, where folks at restaurants or concerts, for instance, let others know they're there.

Deals is brand new, and in testing mode in a few markets. Krug says the jury is out on whether it will take off. Places is for only the youngest of customers — teens to young adults — a "very small niche audience. It's great exposure for restaurants, though."