Social media... it’s everywhere. People use it almost unconsciously every single day. From status updates on Facebook and mentions on Twitter to posting pictures on Instagram and creating boards on Pinterest, social media has taken over our lives. We are addicted. In fact, 23 percent of Facebook’s users check their account five or more times every day (Edison Research, The Social Habit, 2012)! And, 76 percent of Twitter users are now active tweeters (not just in listen-only mode), up from 47% in 2010 (Edison Research, The Social Habit, 2012).

Not only do we use social media to communicate with our family and friends, but it has become a successful platform for many types of business practices. For example, many people discover, qualify and eventually purchase all kinds of products and services from social media.
According to Mediabistro,

50 percent of small businesses said they gained new customers from social media *(Mediabistro, 2012)*. That’s a big deal for small business. The traditional way of generating referrals can only go so far—in this new age of technology, small businesses are moving their marketing and advertising strategies online. However, it’s not enough to simply create a profile on one social media site and expect referrals to come pouring in. A strategy needs to be put in place that makes it easy for your customers to use social media avenues as a way to send you more business.
Here are the first few pointers on getting more referrals by leveraging social media:
You Have to WOW Your Customers

This is the most important thing to remember when it comes to getting referrals. If your customers aren’t happy, they won’t send you more business. Always go above and beyond when it comes to serving your customers. You want to create a personalized experience for them and social media makes wowing your customers much easier. Encourage your customers to communicate with you via social networks about their concerns. You can even create a Twitter account dedicated to customer service. This creates an avenue where your customers can get real-time feedback and solutions to their current issues.
Make the Ask Using Social Sites

Survey your customers using an online survey tool like SurveyMonkey. They have a free basic package, as well as a select package that is $17 a month – it offers unlimited questions and responses. You can also collect responses from your customers via Facebook. Use the survey results to measure their satisfaction with the product or service that you offer and ask those with high ratings if they know someone who would benefit from using your product or service.
Build Informative Case Studies

Use case studies not only to outline your product or service, but to focus readers’ attention on very happy customers. You want people who are interested in your company to know who your satisfied customers are. Make sure your case studies have a personal element to them so that readers can relate – see themselves in the position of those that are already benefiting from what your business has to offer. Feature your successful customers on all of your social networks and make sure you create and keep a positive reputation on review sites like Yelp. By the end of June 2012, over 30 million local reviews had been posted on Yelp, making it the leading online hub for real word-of-mouth marketing.
Some small businesses require more marketing strategy than social media, which leads us into the realm of paid endorsements and customers contests.
Paid Endorsements

You can raise awareness about your business and reach new audiences with sponsored content on targeted blogs. This can be really helpful to expand reach, but it is at a cost. Before you engage in any paid endorsement activity, you want to make sure that you:

>>> Research your audience and demographic thoroughly. You want to make sure that you have as much information about them as possible, that way you know you are placing endorsements in the right places.

>>> Considering leveraging leading industry blogs. Industry blog receive a lot of traffic and have a specific audience.

>>> Ensure bloggers comply with Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines on endorsements. We will talk a little bit about those guidelines later in this post.
Customer Contests

You can use customer contents to drive more referrals and testimonials. Make sure that you always connect the contest with your brand’s message and your company’s key objectives. Make sure that the prizes you give away are relevant to the products and services that your business offers. Ask yourself: Why am I giving this iPad away? Is it relevant to my business? Also, make sure you make it super easy for your customers to participate. Use social networks to announce the contests and communicate with participants throughout the duration of the contest. Also, use social media to announce your winners.
About Those FTC Guidelines

The FTC mandates that all endorsements that received compensation (of any kind) must be disclosed plainly and clearly. That’s not only just for testimonials, either. In 2009, the FTC updated their Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising. These changes addressed endorsements by consumers, experts, organizations and celebrities. The Guides had not been updated since 1980.

Remember when I said earlier in the post to ensure that the bloggers you work with comply with FTC guidelines?

Here is what an official press release on the Guides updates says about that:
The revised Guides also add new examples to illustrate the longstanding principle that “material connections” (sometimes payments or free products) between advertisers and endorsers – connections that consumers would not expect – must be disclosed. These examples address what constitutes an endorsement when the message is conveyed by bloggers or other “word-of-mouth” marketers. The revised Guides specify that while decisions will be reached on a case-by-case basis, the post of a blogger who receives cash or in-kind payment to review a product is considered an endorsement. Thus, bloggers who make an endorsement must disclose the material connections they share with the seller of the product or service.

Also, according to the release, here is what the FTC says about advertisements featuring consumers:

Under the revised Guides, advertisements that feature a consumer and convey his or her experience with a product or service as typical when that is not the case will be required to clearly disclose the results that consumers can generally expect. In contrast to the 1980 version of the Guides – which allowed advertisers to describe unusual results in a testimonial as long as they included a disclaimer such as “results not typical” – the revised Guides no longer contain this safe harbor.
Always ask that people properly disclose the nature of their review and compensation.

A great tool that you can use for compliance is CMP.LY. According to their website, CMP.LY enables companies of any size, in any industry, to conduct open and transparent marketing with solutions that make regulatory and other disclosures simple and standardized.

Now, let’s chat about creating quality content, how to generate leads using content and how you can participate in industry discussions on Twitter.
Creating Awesome Content

Creating great content isn’t always easy. Reason being is that the content you create is not about you, it’s about your customers. When you think about the forms of content you want to create and the message you want it to deliver, you have to focus on answering practical questions that are on the minds of your prospects and customers. What are their pain points with your product or service? How can you create a blog post or a video that will help address their issues? What are the questions you here the most from prospects about your product or service? You have to craft your content so that it serves their needs. To get some data around what kind of content your prospects want, ask them! When people sign up to receive content from you, ask them what they are looking for; give them the option to opt-in to certain types of content. If someone only wants videos, only send them videos. Always promote your content using social media, but keep in mind, social media is not just a platform for you to push things out. Make sure you engage in conversations about your content.
Using Content to Generate Leads

If you have great content, people will want to sign up for it, but, they won’t just do it. You have to ask. Consider a 1:10 ratio of self-promotion to great content. For example, for every tweet you send that promotes a product or service you offer, send 10 tweets that promote educational content that helps your prospects and customers educate themselves about the product, versus just telling them it is something you sell. Also, if you have a blog, you can generate leads at the top and bottom of blog posts. Always make it easy for people to opt-in to receiving your content. We will discuss creating interactive landing pages in a few paragraphs.
Participating in Industry Discussions on Twitter

TweetChats and discussion on #hashtags are a great way to generate referrals and create awareness. Participate on a regular basis and establish yourself as a leader in your industry. Remember, you want to passively self-promote when participating in industry discussions on Twitter. Your contributions to the conversation are what really matter. Also, monitor and respond to meaningful #hashtags in your industry. Creating great content, using that content to generate leads and participating in industry discussions on Twitter can help you get more customers.

>>> Generating more leads can come from a variety of methods, but those tactics always utilize interactivity and prospect engagement.
Interactive Landing Pages

When you create landing pages, always make sure they are interactive. This means that you need to place social elements on the page so that people can engage through social media. Consider using Facebook comments to drive activity and awareness to landing pages. Plus, you can solve questions that prospects have! It’s pretty easy to set up the Facebook comments function on the landing page and it’s free to use. Also, you can split-test to measure performance between an interactive landing page and a static one.
Customer Comments

Generally, most people trust the comments made by another person about a brand or a specific product or service that brand offers, so you want to let your best customers sell your product or service for you. Always keep any customer comments that you present on social media platforms raw and unedited because you want people to know that they are real. Also, think about using customer comments on landing pages to help boost social proof.
Reward Your Customers

Customer referrals are very valuable – invest in them. Reward customers with discounts if their friends purchase your products or services. Host a monthly raffle on Facebook for highest number of customer referrals. However, you want to make sure that you promote the referral rewards experience as a perk, not a bribe.
Encourage Your Customers

You want to encourage your customers to engage with you on social media networks, not just follow you. Make your calls to action to drive customers to your social platform intentional and thoughtful. Don’t just tell someone, “Find us on Facebook.” Tell them how. You want to give people a reason to like you and follow you. Offer future discounts or training content when you ask someone to like or follow you. This way, they stay engaged with what you have to offer.
Contribute at Local Events

Generating referrals is more than just online marketing. Participate in local small business events and share the knowledge you have of your industry. Tell people about the products and services you offer face-to-face and tell them to connect with you after the event on social networks. Not only will you get referrals, but you will raise local awareness about your business.
By utilizing interactive landing pages, leveraging positive customer comments on social media, rewarding customers for referrals, using case studies to showcase your company, encouraging customers to engage with you on social networks, all while abiding by FTC guidelines, will allow you to generate more leads than you ever thought possible!
Lifecycle Marketing is a seven-step system devised specifically for small businesses to help them transform their sales and marketing. By combining proven strategies and tactics with affordable, easy-to-master automation technology, small businesses that implement Lifecycle Marketing are in the best position to grow, nurture and retain valuable customers. Watch an online Lifecycle Marketing workshop to learn more.

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