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Your Game Plan to Social Media Success



By John Seroka

Think about the last time you attended a major sporting event, such as a professional basketball game. One connection—an interest in how the team's players will

perform that day—brought you and thousands of people together. The idea of a shared connection helps explain why social media is now a dynamic marketing force for businesses. The Internet is your arena to connect with a crowd that's interested in what you bring to the home financing game. But how do you get the crowd's attention and make them your fans?

First, you need to be a starter ... you have to get off the bench and get into the action. Social Web sites are buzzing with activity. Best of all, no tryouts are required, so you can easily join the game and become a major participant.

A main point to understand is that online social networking is about relationship-building. Take the time to build your online relationships and understand that rewards will come your way in due time ... and it snowballs. After all, Kobe Bryant didn't become a household name after his first few games.

Online networking is an inexpensive way to reach people, but you may need to pace yourself in the beginning. Too many people new to social networking get overzealous at first and then drop off completely because they don't see immediate results from all the postings they have done.

Like a coach developing a game plan, you too will need to plan a strategy that successfully uses social media.

Identify your purpose, know your audience

No pro makes it onto the court without knowing his purpose based on the position they play. As a broker, your purpose for participating in social media should be to build a solid following of loan originators, other business referrals and loan prospects.

Avoid sales pitching

Just as fans entering a basketball arena have expectations about what will transpire there, social media users have expectations too. They turn to blogs, Facebook or other social Web sites for interesting and informative online conversation. Sales pitches will drive people away from you. Instead, let people know what your key interests are, what your function is within your company, and share key industry information to help their careers. Remember that people do business with people they like, which ties into the relationship-building purpose of a social media strategy.

Know the tools available

Each social Web site has a different playbook to follow. For example, Twitter revolves around Tweets, which are messages of 140 characters or less. Facebook is designed to be personal and communicate the personality of you and your business. LinkedIn is a site that enables you to describe your professional background and display recommendations from customers and associates. A blog is a Web-based journal that typically focuses on one subject.

There are other websites for social networking, but we'll take a closer look at the most popular examples so you'll be ready to score points in any of them.

Blogs

Selecting a blog host such as WordPress.com, Blogger, Typepad or Vox is the easiest way to begin. A hosted blog is very inexpensive and takes less than 10 min. to establish. If you want the look and feel to be completely customized, however, you may feel limited by a hosted blog. The other option is a server side or stand alone platform.

As a mortgage professional, your blog will target business referrers (loan officers, past customers and other professionals), so anything you write needs to keep this audience in mind.

There are more than 40 documented ways to drive traffic to a blog. One popular method is to submit your blog to several blog directories like Blogarama or Bloggapedia. This is just one of the many effective tools available to get your blog noticed in the social media arena.

Include your contact information and picture to personalize your blog. Below each post, install a bookmarking widget. If you have Facebook or LinkedIn pages, include a link in your profile and send Tweets driving people to your blog. Be sure to put your blog URL on all your marketing pieces, including your business card.

Another tip is to research keywords and be sure to use them in the title and first sentence of your posts. For example, don't try to rank in Google for the term "mortgage news," but instead try to rank for something specific like "mortgage news in Venice,

Calif.” Use Wordtracker to find keywords with less than 100 competitors if you can.

Also ensure that people can subscribe to an RSS feed, leave comments and leave trackbacks.

Twitter

Strategic page development is an important key to the success of your Twitter page and can help set you apart from the competition. When you design your Twitter page, it's best to customize the page background so it complements your brand. Be sure to include a photo and select something professional that communicates your personality. A Twitter page with your picture will do a better job attracting followers. Just look at the top 100 Twitterers and you'll see that they include pictures of people, not logos or objects.

After you have your Twitter page set up, Tweet several messages of strategic value and substance before you invite your colleagues and business prospects to follow you. This way your followers will understand the value.

As a mortgage professional, you may wish to communicate information about rates, new guidelines, mortgage industry trends or other topics that would be of value to your audience. When communicating this information, use a hashtag (#) in front of keywords in your Tweets. This will make it easier for people to find you.

There are several ways you can encourage people to follow you. One way is to click on “Find People” at the top of your Twitter page where you'll find several options for drawing them in.

You can also install a Twitter widget on your Facebook page so that every time you send a Tweet, your Facebook wall is updated. You won't have to go to both sites to send the same message, which saves time. Remember to include your Twitter URL in your e-mail signatures and add the Twitter link icon on your Web site landing page.

In addition, there is a new feature at LinkedIn that allows integration with your Twitter account.

Facebook

Establishing a strategy for your Facebook page before creating your profile is necessary in order to best optimize your presence on this Web site. One idea is to use your company logo or your picture as the primary photo ... it depends on your overall social media strategy. You can also post photo albums with pictures of yourself and your employees to more personally connect with your audience. Including pictures of you or employees engaged in group activities or corporate events is perfectly acceptable.

Attracting people to follow you on Facebook is fairly simple, but you must remember why people become followers to begin with—it's because they like you, your company and you are a source of information to them. While establishing your fan base, be personable and informative. People on Facebook will be interested in knowing a bit about what you do during your personal time; however, overdoing this at the cost of informative communications will cost you.

To find people to follow you, you can click on “Friends” and then click on “Invite Friends” or “Find Friends.” After clicking “Invite Friends,” you simply input e-mail addresses of those you wish to invite or import addresses from your address book, write a message and send it out. “Find Friends” helps you find people in your e-mail contacts who already have Facebook accounts.

Keep a consistent presence and post relevant content

Players who have a reputation for slam dunks and three-point shots quickly become fan favorites. If you consistently post interesting and reliable updates that affect your audience directly and immediately, then the more loyal your fan base will become.

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In the mortgage industry, things are constantly changing and these changes have a definite impact on consumers, loan officers and other business referrers. There is a constant flood of economic and industry news—keep track of what's happening and frequently update your messages.

Social networking is all about two-way communication. So how do you respond to negative feedback? Quickly and directly! This always requires tact. You have to remember that putting something out there is like taking the final shot at the buzzer—you cannot take it back. If you have a problem client who posts something derogatory about you or your business, resolve it quickly, first privately and then online. Do not continue an argument online.

Connect with your crowd

By understanding how to use social media effectively, your online game plan will help your company grow. There are books available that can provide more strategy details, and marketing firms can give you a jump start to help achieve quicker results. With the widespread use of social networking sites, now's the time to get off the bench.

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