

Word-of-Mouth Marketing Toolkit

I WAS DELIGHTED when Intuit asked if I would put together a guide about new word-of-mouth marketing tools. There is nothing that I am more passionate about, except perhaps, being an entrepreneur. For those of us in small business who serve as the company's chief strategist or marketing, financial, HR, and accounting departments – or who share those roles with only a few others – these new word-of-mouth tools can make an amazing difference. They have, for me and my clients, and they can for you as well, whether you are driving to build your company, or simply enjoy making a living from your passion.

What I would like to do here is to provide a window on the most important of these exciting tools and share examples of best practices. Each section will explain a specific technique, key concepts that go with them, and provide information on how and when to apply the tool, with real-world examples and tips from personal experience. At the end of each chapter, I will supply more resources that can be found on the web: video tutorials, articles and books you can refer to. My objective is to make you as excited as I am, and to give you the tools to go at your own pace.

I would suggest you read the toolkit overview first, and then select chapters in whatever order draws you in.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: An Overview: The Magic of Word-of-Mouth Marketing	2
Chapter 2: Blogs	5
Chapter 3: Microblogs	10
Chapter 4: Syndication	12
Chapter 5: Online Communities	14
Chapter 6: Social Networks	17
Chapter 7: Widgets	19
Chapter 8: How to Build a Word-of-Mouth Marketing Plan	21

It would be almost impossible to be in business today and not have heard the word “blog”, or the names of companies such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google. You may have put off learning more about them or simply felt you had no time. But, maybe you are curious, maybe you would really want to know more if someone could make it simple, and better yet, make it worth your while.

All of these new Internet techniques: blogs, microblogs, syndication, social networks, online communities, and widgets, are all social media tools that leverage the power of word-of-mouth and are changing the way we do business.

Our friends influence our decisions. They influence the restaurants we eat in, the doctors we choose, the repair shops we use and what we wear, buy and watch. It is not so surprising then that we turn to those we know, or at least those we trust, over any advertisement, marketing campaign, or sales message. Think about it for a moment. Which is more credible? An ad promoting a new restaurant or a friend who raves about it?

Word-of-mouth is essential to any small company’s success. New social media tools leverage the power of the Internet to deliver word-of-mouth, faster, bigger and better than anything we have yet experienced.

Look at it this way: In the last month how many times did you find a movie, locate an appliance, or find a repair shop by reading an ad in a newspaper, magazine or from TV? Compare that number with how many times you have searched for the same thing over the Internet!

Word-of-Mouth on Steroids

According to the authors of [Naked Conversations: How blogs are changing the way businesses talk with customers](#), new social media tools are like word-of-mouth on steroids. They can be used to promote your company, build brands, increase the visibility of your products and services, establish your expertise, build your customer base, increase sales, and deepen customer loyalty. Moreover, the beauty of all of these tools is that they cost very little money – although they do require an investment of time.

Something you didn’t ask for, don’t want, but offers a hidden magic

New social media tools offer the ability to do something we did before, but faster and better by using the Internet.

Traditional Media vs. New Social Media Tools

Traditional Media

- Television
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Magazines

New Social Media

- Blogs, microblogs
- Online Communities
- Social Networks
- Widgets

These new media tools provide benefits we didn’t ask for, don’t want, and may even wish would go away. But once you discover their hidden value, they are tools you would never want to give up.

Three-for-one

New social media tools also do triple duty. First, as the published item itself, (a blog post, or a widget on your website), it delivers content to everyone who comes to your site. Second, by coming to your site, visitors attract the attention of the search engines and begin to drive up your page rank. Others will now be able to find your company more easily, driving up your Google rank just a bit more.

Third, all social media are designed to be viral. These puppies have feet. You post information on a site and someone likes what you say and links to it or takes your post and puts it in full on

their page – with reference and a link to you on his/her blog. Or, readers may think that the widget is helpful or cool, and put it on their own desktops or cell phones. Then, you and Google are off to the races. “Virality” is influence compounding at its best. It is one of the magical benefits of all new social media.

Engagement: Listening to the Customer

Traditional marketing is based upon concepts of mass marketing and mass media. For example, you buy an ad to promote your bookkeeping practice. You define the key messages, the ad layout and design, and you place it in your local newspaper. Anyone who receives the paper may see your ad, learn about your services and call you.

New marketing is based upon engagement. The process is two-way and you no longer fully control it (although you most certainly affect the outcome.)

In this instance, you connect with a customer via, say, a blog post. You have a two-way conversation, this time about the customer’s concerns. You listen. Perhaps you reframe your comments or change your services based upon what you have heard. The result is that you have established yourself as someone knowledgeable about payroll AND willing to listen to the customers concerns. The people who read your comments are those with questions or perhaps in search of help. There is no intermediary, just you talking directly with customers – and them talking back.

Marketing with new social media tools is a very different way of “promoting” our products and ourselves based on engagement, listening rather than telling. And it may take some getting used to.

A Different Mindset

This requires a different mindset. In the “old days” of 2- 3 years ago, I would write a press release for a client, spelling out the benefits the new product would offer. I would then send the release out to targeted members of the press. If I did my job well, a key publication would pick up the release and do a short story on the new product. If I did my job really well, an editor would interview my client and write a feature story. Customers might read the article and follow up with the company.

While my client controlled the release, the newspaper or magazine ultimately defined the message and served as an intermediary between me and my customer.

Today, I might still do a release, but if the CEO or a staff member were already blogging, I would be as likely to suggest the client make the announcement in a series of blog posts where interested customers could read about the new product, provide feedback, and become engaged. In this example, my client is talking directly to customers, getting their ideas before the product is even released, and possibly incorporating them. Now the customers can be engaged in the process of making products better.

In the example of the press release, the company controls the message. It communicates just what it is interested in, and the communication goes one way. There is no one to challenge – or improve it. In the example of the blog, there is an interaction, and communication flows both ways. My client learns something as does the customer. As importantly, the company is building a relationship directly with the customer.

Of the two, which do you think is more effective in building customer and brand loyalty?

I am often asked which is best – traditional marketing or the new stuff? I really feel it depends upon what you want to do. Press coverage is a form of word-of-mouth marketing. It, too, can be effective. But with the decline of newspapers, magazines, and television, mass media will reach an increasingly smaller share of your audience. I would suggest doing both, at least for now, depending upon what you want to accomplish. Radio didn't disappear when TV came on to the scene, but its impact was diminished by the new medium.

Traditional Media vs. Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Traditional Marketing

- Controlled
- Company voice
- Monologue
- One-way

Word-of-Mouth Marketing

- Control is shared
- Authentic voice
- Dialogue
- Interactive

Resources

Tutorials

- [Five Weeks to a Social Library](#)

Some of the best and earliest material on new word-of-mouth tools comes from the world of librarians who were the first to come up with a first-rate, free-of-charge set of tutorials on new social media with videos, articles, and links. It is excellent and I highly recommend it for those who prefer a paced self-study.

Articles

- [“Sneak Peak of the Introduction” and Chapter 1 of “Wikinomics”](#) by Tapscott and Williams
- [See-through CEO](#), Wired
- [Teaching an Anthill to Play Web 2.0](#), BusinessWeek

Books

- [Citizen Marketeers: When the People are the Message](#) by Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba
An excellent and easy read on when your customer becomes your marketing department.
- [Wikinomics – How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything](#) by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams
Best book on the subject of how the Internet is changing business.

In the old days of several years ago, having a website was a big deal. Today *it is required* if you want to do business, especially if, your business is your avocation, such as someone with a wild bird store, a needlepoint, rock climbing, or sailing business etc. Why? Because it is a sure fire way to find and draw in others who share your passion.

At this point let me say, that *not* having a website for your practice or small company in a world defined by Google search is like trying to promote your business by sitting in a closet and closing the door – and as effective. No ifs ands or buts about it. Small businesses need to have a website.

The best known and most widely used of the new word-of-mouth tools is blogging. A blog is a personal web site with posts typically displayed in reverse order with the newest post first, making it easy to see what is the most current. A company blog is a website that supports objectives of its business, such as to raise the visibility of the business or to draw new customers in.

Posts are the opinions of the author – not an anonymous “corporate voice”. One of the best known bloggers in the corporate world is Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of Sun Microsystems, a Fortune 500 company, who uses [his blog](#) as a fine musician might his violin, to express to customers, partners, press and anyone else who is interested, what he has to say. A blog gives Schwartz his own private pulpit, a place to tell the Sun story in his own way – direct to the reader.

If there is a difficult or problematic issue, Schwartz can address it head on. For example, a bug in a recent software release or [bad news in last quarter's](#)

before any action is taken. Suddenly the customer is not dealing with a large impersonal company, but interacting with a real person – *and they like it*. Schwartz has single handedly turned around public opinion on his company.

But blogging is not just for big companies. Indeed, a blog can do magic for the small business owner, consultant, or person with a passion.

In a fiercely competitive market, blogs can raise the individual firm above the rest. [Here](#), is an excellent example of a real estate agent's blog in the hotly competitive Los Angeles market. Kira Gould, the agent, uses her blog to provide resources to prospective home buyers in L.A.: [where to eat](#), where to find the most adorable [children's shoes](#), etc. After you read her blog, you know a great deal more about the neighborhoods she covers, AND you know something about Kira, and probably you appreciate her helpful advice. Out of the thousands of real estate folks in the area, she is someone you know and trust.

Note that the focus of the blog is not Kira or why she is such a good agent, but information an L.A. homebuyer looking in the Westwood neighborhood might really want to know.

Business blogs can strengthen your relationship with key customers or market segments and build awareness and credibility for your

Free Website on Intuit

You can now get a free website from Intuit Websites as part of the Intuit [Small Business United](#) campaign to help small businesses thrive.

Some Examples

- Albany [Lawyer](#), a lawyer in upstate New York, who uses his site to promote his law practice.
- [An artist](#) in Biloxi Mississippi who uses her site to create interest in her art.
- A [Des Moines, Iowa tax blogger](#) in who has been steadily building his blog following (and his practice).
- And [Chicknits](#), a knit design shop based in Chicago, Illinois.

[results](#). If there is good news, he can frame it in his own way. And, if there is a new concept he would like to test, he can float it out and get feedback

company, your products and yourself. Blogs allow you to test a new product or concept, enable you to build customer loyalty and attract other customers, address a sticky situation, and/or help recruit employees.

Hidden Magic: Search Engines Love Blogs

There are benefits of blogs and social media that provide a hidden magic. *Search engines love blogs.* The more you post, the better your rankings, and the more likely you are to be found. Not simply when someone types in your name or the name of your business, but when they don't know you and are simply looking for help with their taxes, car, PR or plumbing.

Search engines love blogs because they love fresh content, and unlike most websites, blogs are likely to be updated more often.

I can't tell you how often I get asked whether a small business should optimize for search. The answer is, of course. But before you invest in what can be a costly process – one that must be fine tuned on an ongoing basis – consider blogging. Why? Because it is free and because if you blog, it can be enough to draw the search engines to you on an ongoing basis, whether or not you are optimized for search.

Reach the long tail of your market

The other hidden value is that blogs help you reach the long tail. What does that mean? It refers to the niche-based, low sales volume businesses at the far right of a sales graph.

Let's say you have a passion for fly fishing and run a fly shop in West Yellowstone. It used to be that you if you were in a small town in Montana, and you didn't have a large advertising budget or following, it would be very hard for you to find, much less reach, the people who would love to fly fish in West Yellowstone, Montana. Fly fishermen love to fish in the best spots for their sport. But how on earth would

they find your fly shop, unless they already knew you were there?

Before the Internet, the fishermen would be forced to go to the very largest outfitters who had the money to advertise or they would rely on advice from friends: word-of-mouth. If your fly shop wasn't yet discovered you'd be at a disadvantage. Now with the introduction of the Internet and new word-of-mouth tools, a small business can suddenly reach the exact market and be found, as well as heard.

Long Tail – Term coined to describe the shift from a business model based on selling “hits”, the most popular common items or the fat part of the distribution curve, to a business model based on selling to niches, or the long tail of the curve.

Hay Kranen



Moreover, the long tail means you can go after only those people who like to fly fish. Instead of paying to send your advertising to outdoor enthusiasts or even everyone who likes to fish, you can target fly fishing aficionados. People will find you because they will use search engines to find the best fly fishing outfitters. The more you post, the more likely your business will be found.

The very large outfitters are the fat part of the sales volume tail. They sell more fishing gear than anyone else and have the largest sales. But there you are, a little guy based in West Yellowstone, sitting in the long part of the tail, with a smaller sales volume and budget. How do you attract all those fishermen who might really like to fly fish in Montana?

Well, you could add [a blog](#) to your website, as Madison River Outfitters in West Yellowstone did and let the blog help the search engines find you.

A blog with rich content can level the playing field for a small businesses by playing to the Long Tail of the distribution curve.

Anatomy of a blog site

It used to be that there was a fairly standard format of blogging. Outside of posting in reverse-chronological order, there really isn't a common standard anymore. Many people, myself included, use their blog site to host their website as well as their blog.

But let me give [an example](#). InnBrattleboro is the official blog for [Forty Putney Road Bed and Breakfast](#) in Brattleboro, Vermont. It will give you a feel for some of the common elements, which are:

- **Date header:** The date the post is written, usually in reverse chronological order (most recent first).
- **Title:** Each post is given a title. This is a pithy phrase, a pun, or something that you think your customers may search on.
- **Time stamp and/or permalink:** The time the post is uploaded to the blog. The time stamp is a link to a permanent page just for this post.
- **Post:** A word, sentence, paragraph or essay, with links and names and current news. **Key words and names are often highlighted in boldface**, which makes the post “scannable” by the reader. The usability gurus at [Useit.com](#) tell us that *online readers don't read – they scan a page*.
- **Author nickname:** The name or nickname of the person who wrote the post. For blogs written by one person, the author is often left off (because the author identification can be found in an [About page](#)). For collaborative blogs, the author helps to differentiate contributors. The nickname can also be a link to a page of all the author's posts.
- **Category:** Individual postings are often labeled as part of a category.

- **Comments:** A software feature that allows readers to leave their own comments and reactions to the author's post.
- **TrackBack:** A way for one blog post to link to the post of another blog. In other words, one blogger can write about the content of another person's weblog, and the two posts are linked in a web. (excerpted from [Blogging 101](#))

How to get started

First you need to choose a blog hosting site. There are many good ones and many that are free, at least for the first level of service. Here are a few favorites along with a link to a tutorial on each.

- **Word Press**
[Word Press Tutorial](#)
- **Blogger**
[Blogger: How to start a blog](#)
- **Typepad**
[What is a blog](#)
[Typepad Video Tutorial](#)

You can also buy blogging software, but what I like about blog hosting sites is that they are easy to set up and use and for the first level of service are free. They have strong help desks that get back to you quickly. I use Typepad, which is less feature rich than Word Press (which is an excellent content management system), but simple to set up and use. As a non-technical person, I like simple.

Choose a service or product you feel comfortable with

Decide what will work best for you. The video tutorials should help. I would suggest setting up and working on your blog posts in “draft” mode for a month or so before you publish your blog. Don't make your blog public until you have the hang of it.

Start by commenting on someone else's blog

in your market or industry to gain practice in engaging others and bringing attention to your own company. When you are ready, activate your blog, and jump on in.

Make friends with your blog hosting company's analytics

People think that the most difficult part of blogging is in dealing with tough questions from readers. More often, the most challenging part of blogging is getting no formal comments. First, know that it is a common experience. Second, make sure you are commenting on other blogs or other forums so that people can find you. Often when you comment on someone else's blog they will return the favor. Third, make friends with your blog hosting company's analytics, and learn to use it. You will discover the words and phrases people use to find you – and they may not be what you thought. Play with your blog analytics and use them to fine tune, fine tune, fine tune.

Leveraging someone else's Google Juice

You can often take advantage of someone else's "Google Juice," a high page rank. Let me give an example. When I started blogging in 2004, there was a cover story in BusinessWeek on the Vanishing Mass Market. "Bingo", I thought, "this is exactly what my clients are experiencing." Since I had just gotten a blog, I decided to blog about it. Well, I didn't know much about blogging at the time. Truth be told, my blog looked more like a demented person had authored it, with fonts in all manner of types, sizes and colors.

None of this bothered me because I figured no one was reading my blog (i.e. no comments), so I went merrily on my way. Six months later I discovered the analytics to my site and to my horror realized that this post was one of the most well read for the term "vanishing mass

market." In fact, that post, which was authored in July 2004 continues to [rank #2](#) for those key words to this very day, just below BusinessWeek's cover story.

The difference between a website and a blog

A standard website is usually a place where a company or individual provides information on their company, products and services. It is typically a one way communication written in a more anonymous "corporate speak". A blog is a place where an individual expresses an opinion, preference and set of beliefs. Typically, it is two-way, updated often, and a type of viral marketing.

When blogging was first introduced, blogs looked very different from websites. Today, it is often hard to tell which is which from their look, although the "voice" remains personal. As blog hosting sites, such as [Word Press](#), [Blogger](#) and [Live Journal](#) become more full fledged content management systems, the difference may be going away.

What I had inadvertently discovered was the power of leveraging someone else's (BusinessWeek's) Google Juice. It is a lesson I never forgot.

Now think about the possibilities if *you* were to leverage someone in your market's Google Juice. Say you write a response to something in Field and Stream or USA Today that lots of readers in your field might read. What would you choose and what would you say to get readers' attention?

Build a better blog and they will not beat a path to your door – unless ...

I have another example, because while many believe if you write a blog, readers will come. The reality, sadly, is different. You have to work to get readers and attention. About six months after my BusinessWeek discovery. I was trying to

figure out how I could both boost readership in my targeted market (B2B high tech companies) and nudge up my page rank in the process.

By now, I understood the importance of having content that was compelling enough to draw readers in: I decided to look into what one of the Valley's premier companies, Cisco, was doing with their online communications program, news@Cisco.

After some nosing around, I met the right person at Cisco, or actually the person who knew the right person, interviewed her, and wrote up several posts on what Cisco was doing with regards to online PR. I posted [the first](#) part, and then the next day went to my blog site analytics. I had gone from a readership of about 30 hits/day to over 800 in that first night and the

number proceeded to grow as “alpha” (the most popular) bloggers began to link to my posts.

The lesson is to know who or what is important in your market. What insights can you provide that will help your readership grow?

P.S. As time went on I grew increasingly busy. There were other companies that wanted help with their word-of-mouth strategy and tools, and I began to teach as well. So I let go of my blog, or at least of any regular posting, and the number of readers plummeted. The lesson that came back to me, is that a blog following has to be worked on *consistently over time*. To build a strong blog following, you need to work on it regularly.

Tutorial

- [Blogs In Plain English](#) Common Craft

[Lee Lefever](#), at Common Craft, does a series of videos on making social media simple. Most are excellent, and I will be recommending several to give you a feel for a specific tool.

Articles

- [Does Your Company Belong in the Blogosphere?](#)
- [“It’s a blog world after all”](#) **Fast Company.com**
- [Blogging Strategy 101: A Primer](#) Scott Blog

Books

- [Naked Conversations: How blogs are changing the way businesses talk with customers](#)
Best business blogging book around.

Resources

Microblogging³

Microblogging is a short form of blogging that allows authors to post instant text messages, often called “tweets”, of up to 140 characters. (Just to give you a sense of the length of it, this last sentence was comprised of 140 characters; spaces included.)

Microblogs are based on the simple question, “What are you doing?” They started off, as blogs did, as a very personal kind of communication, i.e., “I am eating lunch.”

It is estimated there are as many as 300 different systems to send short messages. The most well known of these is [Twitter](#).

Microblogs and blogs share several aspects in common. Both are personal forms of communication and reflect the thoughts of the writer. Both allow you to share links, ideas and content (including photos and audio files). Both enable you to engage with customers and allow you to listen to customers. And while neither are appropriate vehicles for press releases or company ads, when used appropriately, both can be very effective for self promotion and for staying in touch and in tune with customers. They also can be syndicated, which we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Microblogs also have some unique elements. Microblog posts are a great deal shorter than blogs, and they can be published in many more ways. These include [text messaging](#), [instant messaging](#), [email](#), [MP3](#) or [the web](#). The combination of those two qualities – of short and quick – means that you can post much more often, take less time, invest less effort and still be connected. Also, all microblog posts are public, unless otherwise defined.

Now I can almost hear you asking, “Why would I want to do this?” For busy people like us, the concept of adding microblogging to our daily to-do list is nothing short of mystifying.

But for small businesses, microblogs can help you to tweet company news: an article you have just published, a webinar you are planning or a new service you have launched. It can enable you to give and get answers to business questions. Microblogs can help build connections, provide a network for new contacts or reinforce old ones. It can track conversations about your company, brand, competition, and industry.

Other Microblogging Sites

While Twitter is the most popular of the microblogging sites, there are many others. Some of the most popular include: [Jaiku](#), [Plurk](#), and [FriendFeed](#). Another microblog, [Yammer](#), focuses on business users and limits its memberships to those with the same corporate email address.

New microblogging tools can be especially helpful to business.

[Whole Foods](#) uses Twitter to offer or solicit favorite recipes using Whole Foods ingredients and to discuss subjects its readers care about, such as [A Green Holiday](#) or [Recycling Christmas Lights](#), or what [they are reading](#). Whole Foods uses its microblog to answer customer questions, or promote something special in the store, such as where to find the free sample coffee.

[JetBlue](#) uses the site to discuss how weather conditions are affecting air traffic, to notify customers when there has been a change in operations, to discuss fees, and to announce company news. They use the system to provide travel tips, answer customer questions and float new ideas. The [American Red Cross](#) uses Twitter to alert people in real time to an emergency situation. This summer, for example, Californians used the service to alert family and friends of their whereabouts during the fires which spread across the state.

Microblogging

What would you give to have an airline answer your quick question, without having to navigate an endless phone tree? And, wouldn't it be cool if your local natural food store or sporting goods shop alerted you the way Whole Food does?

The hidden beauty of microblogs is that you can do it all – post and read your blog responses, or research an issue – in no more time than it would take to drink a cup of coffee.

Microblogging has really taken off in the music world, too. Musicians *love* it – and so do their followers. Why? Because an artist can connect directly to the fans and develop an ongoing relationship. Fans are passionate about their favorite musicians. Most artists struggle to be seen and heard and are looking for ways to increase their following. The neat thing is that when the tour bus pulls into East Texas, a musician can now alert everyone on the fan list in the area where their new gig is.

Microblogging is a tremendous word-of-mouth tool for small companies and individuals. There is [a small restaurant](#) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa who uses Twitter to attract new customers and maintain the loyalty of old ones. ([Check out](#) what their fans have to say about them.) Recently, the restaurant, Riley's Café, used their Twitter account to announce a 25% discount on breakfast or lunch with its first ever "Twitter Tuesday." (example from [5 Technology blog](#)) Don't ya just love it!

[Here](#) is the site for a "media coach" who promotes his PR business by offering free advice and by announcing upcoming broadcasts of his radio show and upcoming speaking engagements.

And, [here](#), is a QuickBooks Pro Advisor who uses Twitter to help answer questions about QuickBooks and small business issues, which in turn helps him learn about user issues, develop his expertise, and attract new customers.

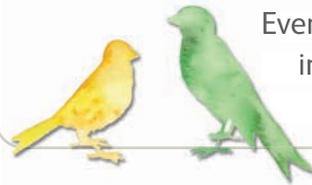
How to Best Use Twitter

Start by listening to your customers, competitors and industry. Asking questions is a great way to generate feedback and fine tune your listening. Add a photo to your profile. People like to see a real person. Share links you like that are of particular interest to your community. Talk about others who are doing something you like as well. Remember generosity counts here too. And conversely, don't make all your Tweets about you or your business. When you do Tweet about your business, make it useful information or advice a client can use.

Microblogging may not be for everyone, but it definitely has its adherents. And Twitter, which has something like 3.5 million members today, has grown exponentially as a result.

Twitter Search is a search engine for all things Twitter. It was added to the microblog this past summer when Twitter acquired Summarize, a start up with a very powerful filtering and search engine. (I am told it was love at first chirp.) It is also why the search tool is located off of the Twitter web site.

Eventually the tool will be merged into the Twitter system and you will find both in the same place.



Tutorial

- [Twitter for Business](#)

Articles

- [Why Twitter Matters](#), BusinessWeek
- [Now Brevity is the Soul of Office Interaction](#), The New York Times
- [50 Ideas on Using Twitter for Business](#), Chris Brogan blog post

Book

- [Twitter Means Business](#)

Resources

Syndication is a new way to deliver and gather content over the Internet. It a way to provide subscribers with frequently updated content. Syndication uses web feeds to publish frequently updated content, such as a blog post, podcast, online forum (see chapter on online community), and any kind of traditional media such as news, press releases, articles, audio or a video stream.



While there are several syndication formats, the most common is known as RSS, “really simple syndication”. This symbol representing syndication is often shown on sites to indicate a web feed is available.

Syndication is a standard way to send out an alert that you’ve published some information, maybe an update to your blog or a news announcement. It typically includes a brief summary of the content being sent, the name of the author and the date of the update.

You can also use RSS to send out a software or security update, product bulletin, speech, video or audio clip. Any kind of information or news, such as a new real estate listing, weather alert, coupon, or even an invoice. How cool is that?

Web or News Feeds

These alerts are sent in the form of web or news feeds, which signal readers that you have published something new on your blog or website. They allow companies to publish information and automatically syndicate, or send it, to interested readers. Readers who subscribe to updates receive them automatically as they become available.

Web Feeds Are like TIVO for the Web

Why would you want to do that? Well, busy people have no time to surf the web to find out when a competitor, thought leader, or anyone else, has made a news announcement.

Wouldn’t it be amazingly cool if the information, or at least a short form of it, came automatically to your email or to a news aggregator (a separate site you reserve to collect your feeds and read at your convenience). And what if all the headlines of all the topics you were interested in flowed directly to you, without your having to hunt for

RSS is the most commonly used standard for syndication. Syndication feeds, however come in a range of “flavors”.

Here are a few more symbols:



them. Syndication, or RSS, does precisely that. It captures all of the most current information from all of your favorite websites and blogs and puts them all in one place where you can read them at your convenience.

RSS is a “Pull” medium

RSS is not just a time saving device. As a publisher, you can reach a more targeted audience of people who are really interested in what you have to say. RSS is a “pull” medium – the user must sign up.

Companies often hate this aspect. They would much rather just blast the information out over email and not ask anyone’s permission. I remind the companies that hire me that these days, customers use spam catchers to filter out unwanted email, so the effectiveness of email blasts is diminishing. Moreover it may intensely irritate the receiver. With RSS the user must agree to sign up, and that means you have an

interested reader. RSS is a respectful request for permission. It helps the publisher to create a more loyal user base.

Television advertising by comparison is a “push” medium where companies push their messages out to viewers who have no choice but to receive.

Another Three-fer

When you use RSS, you automatically engage the search engines, and drive online visibility. So, if you have a news release and you send it out via RSS from your online press room, it will deliver a three-for-one benefit. You get the benefit from Google when you send the release out using RSS (not email), when you post it to your site and every time someone searches on the topic.

Read at your own convenience

As a RSS user, you control the information you receive. Unlike email, it can not be spammed. Also the information is “time shifted”. You can read it whenever you wish. The beauty of this is that you can glance over your news feeds at your leisure – and not during a time when you are busy.

All word-of-mouth media (blogs, microblogs, podcasts, videoblogs, social networks and other online communities), use RSS to distribute any kind of update. So if you use any one of them you are using an RSS feed.

Some Business Examples of RSS

Here are some examples from companies that use syndication:

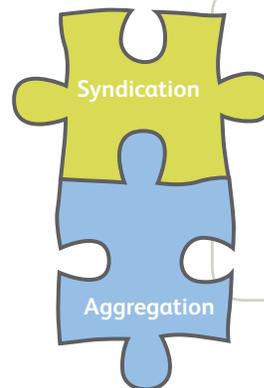
- Information by category at [Walmart](#)
- News alerts by [Yahoo](#)
- Product updates by [Adobe](#)
- Dog and cat advice by [Purina](#)

Syndication

Feed or News Aggregators

You can sign up to get your web feeds straight to your email box or to a separate site which aggregates the information. I prefer the news aggregation site, also called a news reader, which costs no money and has the added benefit of not clogging my email with things that are interesting but not a priority.

I use [Bloglines](#) with which I am very happy. Here are a few others which also come highly recommended: [NewsGator](#), [Feed Reader](#), and [Google Reader](#). All popular browsers also have feed readers as well, including Firefox and Safari.



Syndication and Aggregation or “feed readers”

Syndication and feed readers go together like interconnected pieces of a puzzle. They complement each other and make a whole system.

Resources

Tutorials

- [RSS in Plain English](#), Common Craft
- [Google Reader Tutorial](#) (also by Common Craft)

Articles

- [Fine-Tuning Your Filter for Online Information](#), The New York Times
- [RSS for Non Profits: The Web on Your Terms](#), Tech Soup
Nonprofits in many ways have been more active users of the new word-of-mouth tools than for profits. Why? They have to do more with less. Sound like anyone else you know?
- [Social Media Marketing: A Beginner’s Guide](#), Robin Good’s Master Media blog

Communities 5

New word-of-mouth marketing tools, assisted by the Internet, are connecting people as never before, enabling them to form specialized communities online. These virtual communities are places to build relationships around a shared interest, point-of-view, or belief. The Internet enables the membership of these online communities to extend far beyond geographical and organizational boundaries. They can make a small town in eastern Washington State a click away from a large city in Pennsylvania, or a farm in New Zealand. Their possibilities are limitless.

Many Types of Online Communities

Quick question: On which of the following new media tools can you build community? Blogs, social networks, podcasts, wikis, online forums, news groups, or user generated content?

Answer: On all of them. Wherever you have individuals connecting with other individuals, you have the possibility of community.

All new word-of-mouth tools have the potential to create community. A sense of community can form, for example, around comments on a rating system (the kind you would find on Amazon or eBay) or on a photo sharing service (such as Flickr), around images of a particular subject, place, or theme. They are particularly potent around a shared interest, of the kind you might find on a music or video discovery site, a fan's blog, or on a network surrounding a favorite author.

Small Business United

I would be remiss if I didn't remind you that when you made a submission to the Intuit Small Business United Grant Competition, you also registered as a member of the [Intuit Community](#).

Online communities offer special benefits to small businesses. In addition to being able to reach out to customers anywhere in the world, these virtual neighborhoods enable smaller companies or individuals to network, build partnerships and create associations that were never before available to them. The online groups allow a small business to look and act like larger businesses –

and compete vigorously.

Let's explore a few of them.

The communities formed around a particular product, market or specialty are powerful. Many companies have online communities for their customer base. Big companies may have many around each one of their products; a small company may have one.

Backpacking Light is a store based in Bozeman, Montana. It is also an online business, wilderness trekking center, and community for people who enjoy "lightweight hiking and backcountry travels". Backpacking Light sponsors **customer forums** on gear, philosophy & technique, food and hydration, reader tips and scouting. They even mention competitors with good offerings that complement what they do.

Backpacking Light encourages readers to connect and contribute. I don't know how many people in Bozeman like to backpack light, but I can tell you that by using new word-of-mouth tools, Backpacking Light has created a business and group of passionate customers far beyond the borders of Montana. Their market is the world of backpacking enthusiasts.

The music business is *tough* these days, especially if you are a talented but unknown artist. The big recording companies aren't even going to give you an audience. But there are infinite possibilities for a musician to self-promote using the web. You can set up a blog or fan group on the social network MySpace (discussed in the next chapter), as **Brad Perry** did, and build a customer base. There are a gazillion of them – so many that

MySpace has set up a separate music division.

You can create a following on Twitter as one musician, Marty Williamson did [here](#) so that your fans can follow you and connect.

Ning

You can also create your own community for others in your profession – or join one. [Ning](#) is a community hosting site with free, easy to set up, social networks, which we will encounter next chapter. Go to the site and do a search on any kind of community that draws you. Take a gander at the depth and breadth of their communities. Here is one where [personal chefs](#), exchange ideas, tips, and concerns. And there are even more communities for [contractors](#).

There are hundreds of alumni networks for developing contacts and business from just about everything thing from a former employer, like the [Alumni Network](#) of Goldman Sachs, to alumni groups for community colleges or universities, like this one from [Ole Miss](#) (University Of Mississippi).

Want to develop your insurance business, diet store, or plumbing service?

Get social and start learning how to use online communities. You can create your own community, join one of like-minded individuals, or meet up online with individuals who share your past employer, church or school. You can network, brainstorm and offer your ideas.

Some products develop such enthusiastic supporters that communities spring up (with a little help from the company): [Harley Davison owners](#), [Lego enthusiasts](#), [Hansen's Natural Soda drinkers](#). These are big companies, *but the same thing applies to small ones* with products or services that have a passionate, albeit smaller, following. I have a friend who goes to the same local upholstery class each quarter it

is offered. The same people have been taking that class for years. What if the teacher who owns an upholstery business in the same town were to start an online community? What if your law firm, car repair shop, typing service did the same thing?

Where to begin?

Before you jump, there are some things to consider. There are many types of communities so you need to do some work on which would be best for you.

If you simply want to network or connect with possible customers, first, you need to do some research where your community “lives” on the Internet. Let’s say you want to create an online community for your bike shop. Research the communities that already exist. What are their practices, their online culture? You need to prepare and then have a plan.

To build an online community around your bike shop you could do a [Google search](#) and see what you find. There are already a great many. What will be your place in that constellation of biking groups? How will you differentiate your community? What will you do to satisfy your particular group’s needs? What will be your strategy? And how will you measure your success?

I can’t tell you how often I get called into a company who wants me to help them launch a blog, online community, or viral marketing campaign. “Why?” I ask, “To what purpose?” At which point, they look at me rather disconcertingly and say, “If *you* don’t know, you shouldn’t be in this business.” I am not trying to give them a hard time. I really want to know. Because you really need to know what your business objective is *before* you begin. Not only will your objective define what you do and how you do it, but later, it will help you know if you have succeeded.

Start small

If I have but one recommendation to you, it is to START SMALL. Try one thing. Develop a feel for it and what it can do. Note your own reaction to it, with specifics about what you like and don't. You can always make whatever you choose bigger, but first learn the ropes.

Resources

Articles

- [Building Online Communities](#), O'Reilly
- [Your community already exists](#), Sean Driscoll blog post
- [Finding your online audience: The subtle art of positioning your business on the Web and how to join the conversation once you've found your niche](#) BusinessWeek
- [What Can Social Networking Do for Your Organization?:](#) Tech Soup
Tips and tools to help your nonprofit get the most out of online networks, Tech Soup is an excellent resource for both business & nonprofits

Book

- [Ground swell: Winning in a world transformed by social technologies.](#) Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff
Hands-down, the best book on the subject. Targeted to big companies, but it is all applicable.

Social Networks are a kind of online community, whose growth has simply soared in recent years, and they are especially useful for small businesses. Social networking sites enable you to create a profile, available to members of the network, and sometimes to everyone.

For the purpose of this tool kit I am going to focus on social networks used in business. Perhaps, the best known of these online social networks for business or professionals is [LinkedIn](#), where users can network to find new business, partners, or employees. For an excellent intro to the company go [here](#).



LinkedIn is a wonderful place to bring visibility to your business or service or your own particular area of expertise. Everyone can see the public part of your profile. In fact, LinkedIn is so popular, if you are a member, when others Google you, they will often see your LinkedIn profile listed ahead of your business website.

LinkedIn offers a great many ways to network and to use your network to grow your business. First, by building your profile and providing it in an easily accessible place, and then by moving all of your contacts online which LinkedIn. This has the advantage of putting your contact information in one place AND where it is automatically updated by the contact. Now when Sarah, a work colleague, moves to another company, you won't have to run into Sarah to know that she is somewhere else. If she is a member of LinkedIn, her contact information and professional profile will be updated by Sarah automatically.

Moreover, LinkedIn will help you find others you used to work or went to school with. How often have you wondered what ever happened to good old Raoul, Mary or Pierre? Now you can find them in moments.

The other great thing about social networks is the fact you are notified when your contacts on LinkedIn do something such as get a new job or title, move, or add new contacts. For good networkers this news is heaven sent. Now, you not only know about the change, but have a reason to contact the person, to wish her well, and remind her about your line of business.

LinkedIn also offers [groups](#) you can join or create. In the latter category, there are groups of everyone from the CIO forum (people affiliated with CIO magazine), to the eMarketing Association Network, to alumni at the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley. Which means you can find others like you who may be in a position to help you. Or better yet, that you can help.

The hidden power of social networks lies not in what you might get from a contact, but in putting you in line to do something for someone else. For example, there is a place to both ask and

answer questions on LinkedIn. Effective WOM marketers know that by operating out of a spirit of generosity, they will make a strong contact AND raise their own visibility and credibility. Now when someone else comes on line with the same question, they will find your answer AND you.

There are other more targeted business networks. Examples include: [Ryze](#) (business social networking site for the entrepreneur), [Classmates](#) (schools and colleges), and [Black Planet](#) (for African-Americans).

facebook

[Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#), are the most popular generic social networks but they can also be very good business social networks. Facebook started out as a social network for college students, and exploded into the world's largest social network with some 140 million users around the world.

Like LinkedIn, Facebook has a place to write a personal (or business) profile that people you

“Every new person on a network doubles its value. Adding 10 people, by this reasoning, increases its value a thousand fold.”

—Reid Hoffman, founder & CEO of LinkedIn

approve can see. But the age range of its audience tends to be younger, attracting lots of the college, 20's and 30's crowd (although that is changing). But the same principles still hold: Once you or your contacts are in Facebook you or they will never be hard to find and each will be notified when a contact does something new.

Facebook users may also choose to join one or more internal Facebook communities, organized by city, place of work, school and region.

While the focus of the site is to connect with “friends”, Facebook offers a rich number of ways for a company to use Facebook for business. One of the best resources on this subject is [The Facebook Marketing Bible: 24 Ways to Market Your Brand, Company, Product, or Service Inside Facebook](#), a \$39 online report created by Facebook enthusiast Justin Smith. If you go to the report's [link](#), Smith provides an overall list of tools for “guerrilla marketers”, advertisers, and application developers, and you can see if it is something you would like to buy.



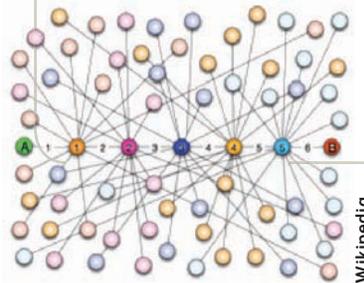
MySpace used to be the most popular social networking site on the

Internet until it was recently surpassed by Facebook. Initially embraced by young people, it too, has grown up. But its overall feel is still pretty youthful. Young people will often prefer a personal profile in MySpace over Facebook because it allows them a much broader use of media and more flexibility in designing a personal profile. MySpace is a great way to connect for the right age group and also for certain industries. For example, MySpace is probably the number one destination for musicians, because it allows them to put free samples of their music right on the site. Something Facebook does not currently offer.

Six Degrees of Separation

The theory behind social networks is something called Six Degrees of Separation. It refers to the idea that each person is no more than six people

away from any person you want to reach. Often, of course, in your business, they are much closer.



Resources

Tutorials

- [Social Networking in Plain English](#), Common Craft
- [What is LinkedIn?](#) A nice how to video by our friends at Common Craft
- [How to use Facebook](#), Video series on how to use different aspects of Facebook from Expert Village
- [How to use MySpace to get free leads and make more money!](#) Scoot Rogers
A home made video by a user.

Articles

- [“At Social Site, Only the Businesslike Need Apply,”](#) The New York Times
- [Ten Ways to Use LinkedIn](#), Guy Kawasaki blog post
- [12 Ways to Use Facebook Professionally](#), Web Worker Daily

Widgets are small web applications that can be put almost anywhere on your desktop, mobile device, laptop, website, social network or blog.

Widgets are a form of the “distributed web.” It used to be that someone would have to know you, your company’s name, or url to find your website. With that information they could go to your site and find out more about you.

Widgets enable you to put a piece of your website on someone else’s site, cell phone or social network. *They are incredibly important.*

For the user, widgets are a means of free or inexpensive personalization and expression. For example, widgets can report the [weather](#), [news](#), or [current price of stocks](#). I can pop a widget on my desktop, carry it on my mobile phone, put it next to my profile on Facebook, and always immediately know the weather, news or current price of my stock.

News widgets can bring [USA Today](#) sports, green news, personal finance, headlines right to your desktop or enable you to bring in the news of another company right on your website.

Great Widgets

Here is one recommended by [Budget Babe](#), “a blog about fashion, beauty and style for hotties on a budget.” And [here](#) is a widget for personal finance tips. And here is one for [Hairs My Story](#), “A comprehensive guide to hair care, celebrating black beauty at its finest.”

For business, widgets also offer a terrific way to build name recognition, to promote your brand, to reach more customers, to increase web traffic *and* connect with the customer on an ongoing basis. Plus, they are viral and easily shared. If my friend thinks that [this new music widget](#) is cool, he sends it to me. If I like it, I post it to my laptop and pass it on to another friend, and so on.

I had dinner recently with young friends. He works for a green certification company. Contractors call them for an evaluation of the “greenness” of products. Right now, traditional contractors are just warming up to the idea of sustainability. But being “green” comes with a bad rap, that to use “green” means more expensive. The reality is that green can *save* money, and not just over time. So

what would happen if my friend’s certification company developed a widget that could do a quick energy and cost evaluation of a product right there on the contractor’s desktop?

Well, at least three things would be true: contractors would soon notice that the cost of green is not what they expected, that it in fact saves money. Their attitude would change. And, my friend’s widget would be sitting right there on the contractor’s desk with the certification company’s name and telephone number.

We buy from whom we know and trust . . .

There are several types of widgets a business might offer. One might be a small application that relates to their business: a clock for telling time in different parts of the world for a travel agent or agency, a recipe a week for a professional chef or local restaurant, or a carb counter for a health food store.

You can also make a widget of your blog, as Reid Tinsley, CPA, did [here](#) with his Medical Practice Management Tips blog or that Susan MacCoy, hair artist did [here](#).

Finally, there is another use of widgets that I call the “Trojan horse”. What I mean by that is not only is the widget bringing your company to the desktop of the customer, but it is taking note of the person’s use of it. In the instance of our green

certification company, the widget not only serves to build brand name and recognition but it is tracking the searching behavior of contractors. In this manner the certification company will be able to learn what users are really interested in. Say there are many queries about solar-powered hot water heaters. The widget picks it up. Now, the certification company has data he can sell to solar heater companies....

These innocuous little applications, are one of the most powerful tools today on the web.

Resources

Articles

Widgets

- [The Evolution of Web Widgets: From Self-Expression to Media Companies](#), Readwriteweb
- [The next small thing](#) BusinessWeek
- [Using Widgets: Get More Widgets. Have More Fun.](#) Widgetbox

All of these new exciting word-of-mouth elements: blogs, microblogs, syndication, online communities, social networks, widgets are changing the rules of business as we know them and will be the new must-haves for your company's success. Taken together they form the basis for an incredibly powerful toolkit that will enable you to communicate, promote your company and services, engage with, educate and listen to the customer directly, and spread your ideas and products virally so that you expand your company's reach.

So how do you get started, especially if you are a “newbie”?

Start small.

Pick one tool and get to know it well.

Sometimes your objective will help to define which tool you use, but more often it is a matter of comfort – what most appeals to you. If you like to write (or have an employee who does) – a blog may be just the tool for you. If you have a following of fans, Twitter might fit the bill. Perhaps you really want a tool that will help you develop contacts and leads, then a social network or online community may work best for you. Make your choice and then learn how the tool works. Get a feel for its culture and features.

Define your market objective.

Do you want your new blog to build customer loyalty, or reach out to others who may not know you? Or do you want to use it to capture customer feedback, test a new product or service? Or maybe you want to use the blog to build your brand identity and establish your expertise. The objective should help you select the best tool.

Select your target market.

That market may also help to define what tool may be best for you. For example, if you are addressing a younger market, say, those 19-35, Facebook, may be the answer. But if you have a product for kids, then [Disney's Club Penguin](#) is for you. And [LinkedIn](#) is a good bet for finding other professionals in your area. Clear market definition is key to your success.

Let's say you are a farmer in Vermont selling maple syrup. Who do you want to sell to: tourists who may visit Vermont, foodies who may

live anywhere but want the best ingredients? Restaurants? Food processors? Who you choose to target is very important!

Nose around – scope it out.

Search for like minded people, the online publications they read and the organizations or associations they may belong to. Use a web search engine to help you out. Look for online communities that specialize in your niche. Try to identify the key influencers in that group. In the case of our maple sugar farmer that could be a top food blogger or an editor of a local paper, or an association of vendors from the State of Vermont.

One of the best sites for nosing around is [StumbleUpon](#), a personal recommendation engine. Instead of doing a search and hunting around for the best sites to fit your interest on the web, StumbleUpon takes you directly to sites recommended by its members.

Begin to engage with your target audience.

If you are a company with a terrific new high tech product visit [Tech Crunch](#) (group-edited blog about tech start ups), see what they like to write about, and see whom you may wish to engage. If it is a tax issue you might try going to [Intuit's Turbo Tax Community](#). If it is concerning canoes, the [Canoe4Canada](#) blog maybe the best bet.

You don't have to have a blog to post comments on someone else's. Perhaps you respond to

someone's request for help in a LinkedIn community, or join a Facebook group. The key point is that you begin to build a relationship with your target market.

Technorati is another great tool for searching blogs. Use the search function to type in the kind of blogs you are interested in – say those that write about real estate in Arizona. Technorati will point you to the most influential bloggers. Look for those with the most inbound links, to show you the bloggers with the greatest following.

But most of all, listen

Pay attention to your customers – don't just sell. Traditional marketing has all been one way. A company decides what messages it wants to project on its market and it broadcasts those messages out via an ad or press release. But new word-of-mouth tools are two-way media and they offer the remarkable advantage of a real conversation. Listen to your market, take into account what they have to say, and you will have a very loyal set of customers.

Content is king

Content is critical with any of the new word-of-mouth tools. What you offer must be relevant, interesting, authentic and designed to bring readers back. Add new content often. Remember that when content is not updated, readership will drop off, often rather precipitously. Make certain that your content (or comments) add value and aren't just to self promote. If they are, they will stand out as such and you may regret it.

Give to get, but mostly give

If there is one truism in using any of the new word-of-mouth tools, it is that you must give to get – and give generously. On a group at Facebook, be the one who answers the question or provides the help

and advice. Your generosity will earn you visibility in the group and give you credibility.

Measure

Once you have selected your tool, you will want to consider how you will measure your success. What did you learn about the tool and the process that you were not aware of? What did you learn about your target group that you didn't know before? Take the time to think about and measure what you learned.

Some reflections before you get started. Treat your first foray as an exploration. Starting small enables you to kick the tires and test what works. Not everything will, but along the way you will learn the ropes. The more narrowly you focus, the greater the likelihood of your success. Some market segments are the size of an ocean. Pick one part of it to begin. Respect any competitors you may run up against. Bad mouthing is poor policy.

Remember to give help generously. And to acknowledge and thank those who help. Then take time to think about and measure what you learned.

Most of all I wish you much success. I hope it will bring you as much magic as it has me.

—Robin Stavisky

Robin Stavisky is Founder and Managing Partner of [New Venture Marketing](#), a high-technology marketing and communications company, a Silicon Valley firm she has headed for some 20+ years and has provided strategic counsel to over 70 high-growth technology companies. In that time, she has established herself as a savvy Silicon Valley insider and marketer combining both on-line and more traditional marketing to drive business and position clients for market leadership and success.

Robin is an instructor and frequent speaker on how to develop a Web 2.0 strategy and evaluate and apply the most powerful new social media tools. Her popular course, "Web 2.0 and Its Business Applications" at Stanford Continuing Studies explores some of the most exciting social media tools (including: blogs, microblogs, wikis, online communities, social networks, tagging widgets, mash ups and user generated content), and how companies can use these new tools in their marketing and communications.