



## The Elephant Is In the Room... And It Needs To Be Fed

### Social Networking Is No Longer An Optional Activity

By Drew Zagorski

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I came across this data the other day and thought it was very timely. More and more, businesses are turning to social networks as a primary marketing tool. Take a look at what this study by Network Solutions and the University of Maryland discovered. I've interspersed the info with some of my own perspective and recommendations...

The third wave of the Small Business Success Index, by Network Solutions and the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, reports social media adoption by small businesses has doubled from 12% to 24% in the last year. Small businesses are increasingly investing in applications including blogs, Facebook and LinkedIn profiles.

Small Business Social Media Sources and Usage	
Social Media Exposure	% of Small Businesses Using
Company page on social networking site	75%
Post status updates and/or articles of interest on social networking sites	69
Build network through sites like LinkedIn	57
Monitor positive/negative feedback about own organization on social networks	54
Have blog on areas of expertise	39
Tweet about area of expertise	26
Use Twitter as customer service channel	16
Other	8
<i>Source: SBSI/NetSolutions, February 2010</i>	

**LBRB Take :** I can testify to the explosive growth of social networking as a tool to stay in front of customers, business partners and the world. Most all of our clients are using one form of social networking or another. Another powerful tool not listed here is email newsletters. I would place these in the same realm as social networking as it is a way to engage your audience and collect very useful feedback. And if you're posting newsletter content to your website, just like sending out tweets and facebook updates, it helps your search engine optimization efforts.

Key social media usage highlights (% of respondents)

- ☛ 75% surveyed have a company page on a social networking site
- ☛ 61% use social media for identifying and attracting new customers
- ☛ 57% have built a network through a site like LinkedIn
- ☛ 45% expect social media to be profitable in the next twelve months

Dr. Alan Glazier, CEO and Founder of an eye and vision care center, said "... I was forced to consider alternative options to keep my business visible... with a very small investment in social media marketing, I was able to generate new business opportunities..."

61% of the respondents use social media to identify new customers. The biggest expectation small business owners have from social media is expanding external marketing and engagement including identifying and attracting new customers, building brand awareness and staying engaged with customers.

**LBRB Take :** This is absolutely true. Think of it as 'number of impressions.' It's not necessarily that everyone who sees your tweet, gets a LinkedIn update email or who receives your e-newsletter will open it and hang on every word... it's that they'll see your name. Over time, you capture mind share, so you're



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always top of mind - that's gold! Be careful not to use these tools as a coupon or special offer delivery system. Put content out there that's of value to your audience. Give them something. Position yourself as a thought leader and expert.

50% of small business social media users say it takes more time than expected. While social media adoption has doubled in the last year, there are still some roadblocks to small businesses fully exploiting its potential.

**LBRB Take :** This is think is the big myth. There are a lot of tools (hootsuite.com) that allow you to manage social networking effectively. I think if a person is doing the right thing and managing with the right tools, a couple hours a month is about all it takes to stay in front of your audience. You can schedule a month's worth of tweets in about ten minutes. The challenge is to stay relevant.

Another 17% feel that social media gives people a chance to criticize their business on the Internet. Related to this, nly 6% feel that social media use has hurt the image of the business more than helped it.

**LBRB Take :** Some folks have told me that they don't want to get into the social networking thing because it can open them up to negative comments. When I hear that I wonder what those few folks are doing wrong that this is a concern for them... basically if you have to worry about that, you probably know that something isn't right and you've got bigger issues. The web is a wild place. You'll always be susceptible to negative comments, but look at the body of your work. There are plenty of players who are in the Hall of Fame who stunk it up once in a while. When people see all the positive recommendations and comments about your business, they'll generally toss aside the one or two negative ones.

Other key findings from the December 2009 Small Business Success Index:

Building online presence continues to be key focus for small businesses:

- ☞ Company Web sites seem to be the top technology investment in the next two years, with small businesses either adding new features/functionality to their existing Web sites or building one from scratch

**LBRB Take :** Amen! If you don't have a well executed and optimized web site, you are perceived as not being legit. And how it looks matters. Fair or not, people make decisions based on the look and feel of your site. If it looks 'do-it-yourself' you can come across as unprofessional. And there are a lot of people out there who are searching for your goods and services, and the reality is that they're looking online, not in a phone book.

- ☞ The ability to showcase their products and services online to attract new customers is second in the hierarchy of technology investments

**LBRB Take :** Use both pictures and words... search engines read words. This is what gets you found. Shy away from all flash web sites. They're cool, visually stunning, and they don't get read by search engines well, if at all. Embed a little bit of flash if you need to but don't go all the way with it.

- ☞ Social media investments rank third in small business investments to be made in the next two years

**LBRB Take :** This is the elephant... it's here to stay and it's hungry. Feed it.

Customer service the biggest strength of small business owners:

- ☞ Small businesses are highly successful at answering customer questions, ensuring customer satisfaction, showing empathy, providing consistent service, resolving problems and winning repeat business



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- ☛ Four of the six customer service dimensions have gotten stronger compared to a year ago, and one of these, ensuring customer satisfaction, is significantly higher

**LBRB Take :** And I would bet that a great deal of feedback comes via social networks. Good and bad.

The bottom line is that you need to get on the social network thing if you haven't already. It's easy to use (and there are folks you can hire to help you) and it's a very powerful channel for getting your message out to people and winning hearts and minds... Feed the elephant, it can be one of the best friends your business will ever have!

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