

8 Critical Steps to Leveraging the Power of Social Media to Drive Franchise Sales

As social media usage among consumers and prospective franchisees continues to grow, it is becoming increasingly important for franchise developers to engage their audience in this new channel to increase brand awareness, drive demand for their franchise offering and transform their franchisees into brand advocates through automated word-of-mouth marketing.

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Overview

Companies of all types and sizes are embracing social media in creative ways to amplify brand recognition, propel sales, and increase customer loyalty.

Nearly 70 percent of active internet users have joined a social media network such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or YouTube. These users share their opinions about products or services with others, increasing the popularity of a brand and increasing the number of loyal visitors to a company website. This gives social media *explosive* viral marketing potential.

Successful social media marketing consists of creating the type of buzz that grows the number of company "followers" "friends," and/or "fans" while encouraging them to spread your message in their social network.

Ongoing buzz fuels successful social media marketing, but converting that buzz into revenue requires a separate set of disciplines - and that's what distinguishes AIS Media.

Social media marketing (SMM) offers companies and brands an exciting opportunity to connect with this growing audience to increase brand awareness, drive sales, increase loyalty, and inspire customer advocacy (word-of-mouth advertising). When properly implemented, social media marketing can perfectly complement marketing and sales efforts, deliver measurable results, and help maximize the return on investment (ROI) from both online and traditional advertising.

A 2010 survey of social media usage by franchisors who are actively recruiting franchisees found that nearly half of the respondents (47%) were using social media as part of their franchise recruiting efforts. (Source: Franchise Update Media Group.)

In 2010, Facebook edged close to 600 million users worldwide, with 160 million in the U.S. - about half the population. LinkedIn announced its long-awaited IPO, and Twitter added 100 million new registered users.

It's no wonder a growing number of franchise marketing executives are aiming to integrate social media into their advertising and sales process.

This report focuses on the critical steps of integrating social media into the overall franchise marketing process to increase response rates, sales, and maximize the return on investment (ROI) from advertising.

1. Integrate social media into the franchise offering website

Properly integrating social media into a website enables users to distribute website content to their friends and colleagues across the internet. Franchisors should strongly consider creating either a separate website or a sub-domain off of the main website that is dedicated solely to franchise development.

While not all of the following tactics may be appropriate for every business, and some are more complicated to implement than others, each should be evaluated for its potential benefits. Integration of the suggestions below is acceptable—and encouraged--on both the consumer facing and the franchise development website.

- Integrate Facebook Stories: display success stories from existing franchisees on the website -- testimonials are your greatest asset. Integrate social media icons into your website and cross-link to social properties.
- Encourage website visitors to become Facebook Fans and distribute your content to their Facebook Friends through the use of Facebook Widgets and sharing tools.
- Add the Facebook Social plugin to your website to dynamically display a visitor's friends who also "Like" the website.
- Publishing to Facebook: This enables Facebook members to publish Status Updates directly from your site, notifying their Facebook Friends of your content.
- Live Stream: Facebook Friends can view live video on your website while chatting in real time about what they are watching. This can be useful for tradeshow, special events, and conferences.
- Comments Box: Facebook users can post comments on your website that appear both on your website and on Facebook.
- Publish your live Twitter feeds in a section directly on your website. For B2B franchises, promote your LinkedIn profile by adding LinkedIn badges to the website.

2. Integrate social media into digital and traditional advertising

Integrating social media into both your digital and traditional advertising can increase overall response rates and yield a higher return on investment (ROI) from your advertising. Specifically, integrating a social media strategy into your franchise portal advertising is important to fully optimize and take advantage of social media. The most reputable franchise lead generation portals (of which Franchise Opportunities Network is one such company) are

constantly searching for ways to generate more value for their franchise clients. Collaborating with the portals on a social media strategy is where much the “low hanging fruit” in online lead generation resides.

- Add social media calls-to-action (CTAs) into your traditional advertising to encourage readers to engage with your franchise offering online outside of the traditional website. As to your franchise portal advertising, make certain that your brochure on the website is replete with CTA's.
- Publish the number of Facebook Fans, Facebook Likes, and/or Twitter followers to help enhance your brand's credibility and provide third party endorsements.
- Again, integrate social media into other online marketing efforts such as email marketing campaigns and develop dedicated landing pages to help increase search engine rankings and automate word-of-mouth marketing.
- Create advertising campaigns that encourage content sharing.
- Direct readers to an offer-specific web page (landing page) or a franchise development website instead of the franchise's website home page. Doing so will improve your ability to track and optimize the performance of the advertisement.

3. Create a blog specific to your franchise offering

A frequently updated blog with relevant articles can significantly increase a website's search engine rankings. More importantly, it can be a very effective marketing medium in which to set your franchise offering apart. Integrating social media sharing features are a simple and time efficient way to help increase readership, engage audiences, and boost brand awareness.

- Design a blog that accurately reflects the brand image.
- Consider having a blog that is solely dedicated to franchise development. This blog can be post franchisee success stories, financing options available to the prospective franchisee, newest franchise unit opening, etc.
- Optimize your blog content with key words relevant to your industry and opportunity.
- Add social media sharing and Facebook “Like” buttons to each blog post.
- Encourage readers to share articles with their friends and peers.
- Invite readers to comment and be prepared to reply.

4. Develop specific social media channels for your franchise offering

Since the content aimed at prospective franchisees is unique from that of your brand's customers, create unique social media channels with content specifically aimed at this audience.

- Create branded social media properties **specific to franchise development**.
 - Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, blog.
 - Integrate social media icons into your franchise development specific website and cross-link to social properties.
- Post pictures and videos specific to your franchise offering.
- Develop creative Facebook promotions that entice visitors with special content, which becomes available to them after they "Like" or become a "Fan" your page. Be certain to have these promotions integrated with any franchise portal advertising you may be doing.
- Promote special events such as webinars, discovery days, trade shows and conferences. While at the shows and conferences, be prepared to interact with the attendees using social media. Develop your trade show and conference "presence" with social media in mind.
- Integrate social sharing functionality to display user generated content and encourage visitors to share brand franchising information with friends and colleagues.
- Aggregate socially created content oriented from your brand's franchise community.
- Cross-promote social media channels and content; integrate YouTube videos, your blog, and your tweets into your Facebook page.

5. Manage social community engagement

Trust is the back bone of any business relationship. Trust is particularly important in the decision stage for the prospective franchisee. A well-thought out and well executed social media strategy can foster and further trust in both the franchise's brand and its management. This will, in turn, greatly increase the likelihood of a successful franchise unit sale. Chances are, prospective franchisees are already engaging in conversations about your offering. Joining and proactively leading those conversations helps build prospects' trust and confidence, thus gently influencing sales. It's estimated that only about 20% of prospects actively engage in online discussions. The majority are influenced by the comments and reviews of others.

- Identify and enter into social conversations.
- Address questions and concerns.

- Share relevant content.
- Engage with key influencers.

6. Implement an advocacy program

Social media can transform satisfied franchisees into brand advocates, amplify their voice and automate word-of-mouth marketing. Encouraging feedback from franchisees within a social media medium can simplify comment sharing and delivers positive reviews at the precise moment in the discovery process when it matters most.

- Encourage and incentivize positive feedback from existing franchisees via social channels.
- Develop and distribute case studies via social channels to maximize their visibility and reach.
- Encourage franchisees to share your content on their social media channel of choice.
- Single out and highlight your superstars and transform them into brand ambassadors.

7. Create exclusive LinkedIn groups

LinkedIn is the world's largest professional network with over 100 million members and growing. While Facebook is viewed as a more casual and fun environment aimed at consumers, LinkedIn is all business - offering you the opportunity to connect with executives, join discussions about franchising, and reach prospects who might otherwise never have considered your offering.

Your LinkedIn presence can help boost prospective buyers' confidence and streamline the due diligence process as they explore your LinkedIn connections, read endorsements, and discover what you're saying and what's being said about you in LinkedIn Groups.

- Set up a personal LinkedIn profile, complete with a professional profile picture and full biography.
- Carefully choose your connections; assume prospective franchisees will browse your connections and judge you by your associations.
- LinkedIn is a professional network so keep all of your communications professional.
- Join and participate in LinkedIn Groups that relate to your industry to demonstrate knowledge, reputation and thought leadership.
- Seek endorsements from professionals with whom you've done business.

- List publications that have featured you or your franchise offering.
- Integrate your blog and link to your business Twitter account.
- Make sure all of your contact information is up to date and consistent.

While both Facebook and LinkedIn enable you to create groups, LinkedIn rules supreme in business to business use. Creating a LinkedIn Groups specifically for your franchisees promotes thought leadership, creates a thriving community, can help drive website traffic, generate leads and foster advocacy among your franchisees.

- Set up a LinkedIn group.
- Post questions and lead conversations.
- Send weekly messages to group members.
- Manage members and moderate content.
- Create subgroups for specific geographic markets or franchisee levels.

8. Employ social listening & reputation monitoring

For a franchise development manager, there's nothing quite as painful than hearing that a previously excited potential buyer has changed his/her mind and decided not to move forward because of some negative comment they found about your franchise offering online.

Regardless of whether these negative comments are false, one-sided, unqualified, originate from a competitor, or are posted by a disgruntled franchisee with an axe to grind, the financial impact can be devastating and be a real morale killer.

As unfair as it may be, just ONE negative comment can cause a prospect to have second thoughts, silently undermining your sales efforts. What's more, social media can cause negative comments to quickly spread like wildfire and out of control across the internet.

The longer negative comments remain unchecked, the more difficult they become to suppress and the greater the damage they can cause. In some industries, companies have reported losing millions of dollars due to a single negative comment found next to their online listing.

- Use a tool or a service that continually monitors the sentiment related to your domain, your brand and franchise offering.
- Take immediate action to suppress negative comments before they spread out of control across the internet.
- Identify and engage with key influencers.
- Uncover relevant communities, target discussions, and conversations.

- Foster positive word-of-mouth advertising.
- Suppress negative comments and reviews through active engagement and content creation.

What are other franchisors saying about social media marketing?

"Yes, it provides brand awareness and increases visibility on the Internet where everyone seems to be searching for info these days. It also shows the consumer that you are up with the times."

Alex Roberts
VP Franchise Development
Service Brands International

"It is definitely a part of the marketing mix for franchise recruitment. You get the eyes of a different type of prospect that may not be using the traditional franchise portals when looking for opportunities."

Randy Hawthorne
Director of Franchise Development
Firespring

"Over time, it will become more significant to recruitment. The significance to recruiting will depend on the demographics of your franchisee prospect. The more your prospects use social media, the more relevant your use will be to them. The highest value today is in building your brand awareness. This, in turn, helps support your recruitment."

Troy Bader
Chief Development and Legal Officer
American Dairy Queen

"I think that franchisors should have a presence in social media as it is a tool/channel that individuals turn to for research and validation. Serving as an information source for the 'online community' is part of moving the brand forward."

Sherri Wilmoth
Director of Marketing
Comfort Keepers

"It is the wave we all need to get in on, as things will progress and change. Having your name in front of the main customer base is imperative, and being available to those interested is crucial. The more this segment increases in use and morphs in how to use, the laggards will fall behind all the more quickly."

Eva Crosland
Manager of Franchising
Gymboree Play Programs

Summary

Providing prospective franchise buyers the opportunity to engage your brand via social media can dramatically increase overall advertising response rates and ultimately the return on investment (ROI).

Engaging in conversations with prospective buyers in “neutral” social media channel can help increase brand awareness, drive demand for the franchise opportunity, and boost online brand reputation.

Properly leveraging the viral marketing power of social media can effectively transform existing franchisees into brand advocates and automate word-of-mouth marketing to passively install a greater sense of confidence into prospective buyers.

While fully integrating social media into the franchise marketing and sales process may sound like a daunting task, consider that prospective buyers are likely already engaging in online conversations about your brand and formulating an opinion. Joining the conversation and leading discussions not only helps influence potential franchisees but also increases the online reach of your franchise offering.

Not every social media tactic is right for every type of franchise. While setting up accounts on social networks is free, there is a hard cost in time and materials associated with maintaining a presence your presence. As social media and digital marketing continues to evolve and becomes increasingly complex, consider adding dedicated members to your staff or partnering with an agency to develop, execute, and help manage your social media marketing. Moreover, given the importance of franchise lead generation, partner with franchise portals that have the expertise to integrate your social media campaign into their system to help you maximize your franchise growth.

As social media usage among consumers continues to exponentially grow, a well-developed and integrated social media strategy among franchisors is expected as a standard element of an integrated marketing program.

About the Authors



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AIS Media's clients range from smaller brands to franchises to Fortune 500 corporations. AIS Media provides digital strategy, creative services, social, search and email marketing.

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