

SOCIAL



The dos and don'ts
of social media
for start-ups.

SOCIAL MEDIA

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1.0



What is “social media” actually? Is it a new concept? Is it a new term? Or is it something much simpler than that, something that we can all explain?

We are all social. We are born to be social, and even the sociopaths - given their antisocial behaviour - are social. It is shocking, isn't it? Why? Because although the sociopaths display the opposite of what the society considers 'normal behaviour', they react or, better said, interact with the society by opposing its norms and values.

Anything that elicits interaction on human level is social, whether we approve of it or not. Anything that triggers an emotion – good or bad – is social because it makes us feel, think and question.

If we are to divide the users of social media in three general categories, these would be:

- Information or thread generators, i.e. authors
- Information consumers, i.e. followers
- Information analysts, i.e. observers

In order to effectively and efficiently use the traditional and modern public relations tools and methods available, no business should confound between these three distinct categories, because they have very few things in common and these are just:

- the interest in that business
- the use of that online platform

Let's begin with an analysis of the AUTHORS. First of all, speaking strictly from an organisational engagement point of view, the authors write to:

- convey a message (core values and principles, latest updates, organisational changes)
- show the organisation's presence online (we have posted a message on Twitter / Facebook etc., therefore we are “social” and “interactive”)
- elicit the followers' “like” (if you want us to send you a free sample of our product, “like us” on Facebook)
- engage with their market niche and ‘communicate

Conveying a message and engaging with the business' market niche are an absolute must in today's society. However, what any organisation may wish to consider when embarking on the route of using social media as part of its marketing or public relations effort, are the other two points mentioned above: the online presence and the forced “like”.

Posting a message on a social media platform and having many followers does not necessarily imply engagement unless the business ACTS and REACTS according to the wishes and suggestions of those with whom it is engaging; in other words, its followers.

Today, in 2022, the number of followers any organisation has on social media mean nothing – it is simply a beauty metric, or a ‘feel good’ moment; what matters is the level of engagement between the business and its followers and, expressed even more clearly, what matters is the UX a business can offer to all those with whom it interacts on the social channels.

Likewise, offering a “*free sample*” or a “*chance*” to win one of the business’ latest products is, by no means, a realistic and true measure of one’s social media impact. If one looks closely at new businesses who are launching physical products, one would easily see that since their last offer of a “*freebie*” went live, the number of “*likes*” has dramatically increased?

This increase is not due to the business being either ethical and/or responsible, nor due to the fact that its core values and the way it conducts its business is appreciated by its market segment – that is simply because it is offering something for FREE and, if all it takes to get that free sample is the click of button, why shouldn’t everybody “LIKE” that business?

The FOLLOWERS can be generally divided in two categories:

- those who follow the organisation because they are interested in what it has to say, and
- those who follow the organisation because someone else does it and they wish to fall in line



Those who have a true interest in the business can be considered true “fans”. Although their interest may be not pure at heart (some may follow organisations, for example, to see what jobs may become available or to check what their competition is doing), they are a constant presence out there, in the virtual medium and they should be constantly engaged with, and businesses should seek their buy-in or input into the conversations they create.

And then there are those who follow certain businesses because it is fashionable, trendy, because one of their friends follows them or simply because it shows them – in case someone checks their “sociability” level – as being highly “social”. This type of followers exhibits what is called in behavioural and cognitive sciences “pack behaviour” – they follow the “leader”, i.e. the person(s) they look up to or, in other words, the one(s) who follow(s) the business. Is their engagement with the organisation, therefore, genuine? No, it isn’t. Would they be instrumental in case the business faces a change / crisis / loss of reputation? No, they wouldn’t unless the leader is – and then, they will follow...

Arthur Snell, a former British Diplomat and currently the Managing Director of Orbis Business Intelligence, told the authors of this report the following:

“Social media is overrated and I’m not aware of any significant business opportunity that has arisen from it. I find it interesting that any company in the western world has a Twitter handle – and I’m not aware of anyone looking for good professional services on Twitter.”

If the increasing number of trolls, extremist posts, abuse and inappropriate behaviour on the greatest majority of social media platforms is any indication of how much risk these bring to business, perhaps social media engagement strategies should be carefully devised by any business, especially start-ups.

A category that merits a lot of care and attention is that of the OBSERVERS. What do they do? The observers simply observe – and this ‘observation’ is inherent to business intelligence companies, recruiters and large human resource departments, as well as to journalists. Why do they just observe and not interact? Some of the reasons are:

- they do not seek social “approval” or endorsement (journalists, competition)
- they simply want to use what’s good in terms of one’s social engagement and make it their own or
- they analyse the level and the quality of the business’ social engagement, learn from its mistakes and make sure they don’t follow suit...

Every organisation looking to effect a real engagement with its public via social media, and not only, should have its own “observers”. Some companies do and the actual terminology for their specialism is “Business Intelligence”. This special category is not influenced by the organisation’s perceived or subliminal messages, and the reason for that is simple: when it comes to what the BUSINESS has to say and what’s important to the BUSINESS, they simply don’t care. Why don’t they care? Because they can’t afford to lose objectivity – and “caring” implies subjectivity. If they are subjective, then they will no longer be effective at their jobs!

Furthermore, social media becomes a rather dangerous advertorial platform in the case of disgruntled employees / volunteers / consumers. If an organisation is truly intending to advertise itself and engage with its publics, then it should be prepared for the bad because the “good” needs no special preparation... In this respect, any organisation’s “official” social media communication should be designed, monitored, administered and answered – should any inquiries emerge – by a single designated person or by a group of designated persons having the same responsibility, disseminating the same message, working in the same department and having the same supervisor / manager. The main reasons for doing so are:

- similarity of style and consistency
- use of the same idioms and language
- much higher awareness of what has been said vs. what needs to be said in response
- who, in the organisation’s structure, would be better to provide an answer to any “social” query or issue that may arise
- familiarity with the community of “followers” as well the “followers”’ familiarity with this/ these person(s), having built a “social” rapport

Language and grammar accuracy play a significant role in portraying to the wider public an image of seriousness, professionalism, maturity and real engagement. Hence, all texts intended to be posted on one of the social media platforms should be, preferably, checked beforehand for grammar and spelling. After all, any business (let alone a start-up) needs to look its best no matter how and in which manner it wishes to communicate!

When large corporates’ Communication/CSR/ Marketing/PR Departments put together a presentation for the Board or for a conference, they just don’t throw words at it and inappropriate language like, for example, “CU2”! They would be preparing for them, making sure they look impeccable, and that they bring out the best possible image for the business!

To this end, social media is no different and its users are, like it or not, also STAKEHOLDERS – they should be as important to any business as those in its general mailing list or its shareholders! Remember that although these “followers” may not be ascribed a certain financial value and they cannot actually represent a cold “profit margin”, they can be highly influential!





The followers of any organisation on a social network, although seemingly harmless and friendly, may also become its biggest critics, and a certain manner of communication should be enforced – a polite, warm, and sociable one – WITH NO room for familiarity. Why? Because although “engagement” implies a real dialogue, there are written and unwritten rules of conduct that should never be crossed: one wouldn’t address a government representative, a shareholder, an investor, or a regulator with “Hey, yo! What’s up?”, would one?

Although most people are sociable, friendly and nice to one another, when one makes an extra effort and goes a little further than what it is “socially endorsed and accepted”, one can certainly stand out from the crowd! To stand out from the crowd and make an impact on the very noisy and crowded social networks where every business under the moon and the sun is trying to build a portfolio of brand ambassadors, a new business would need to start treating its social media followers as REAL PEOPLE and not measure them as the number of “likes” or “followers”.

If someone follows us home, this may not mean that such person has the best of intentions, does it? And not all “I like you”-s that we may hear on a daily basis from a personal standpoint actually mean that we are really liked, do they?

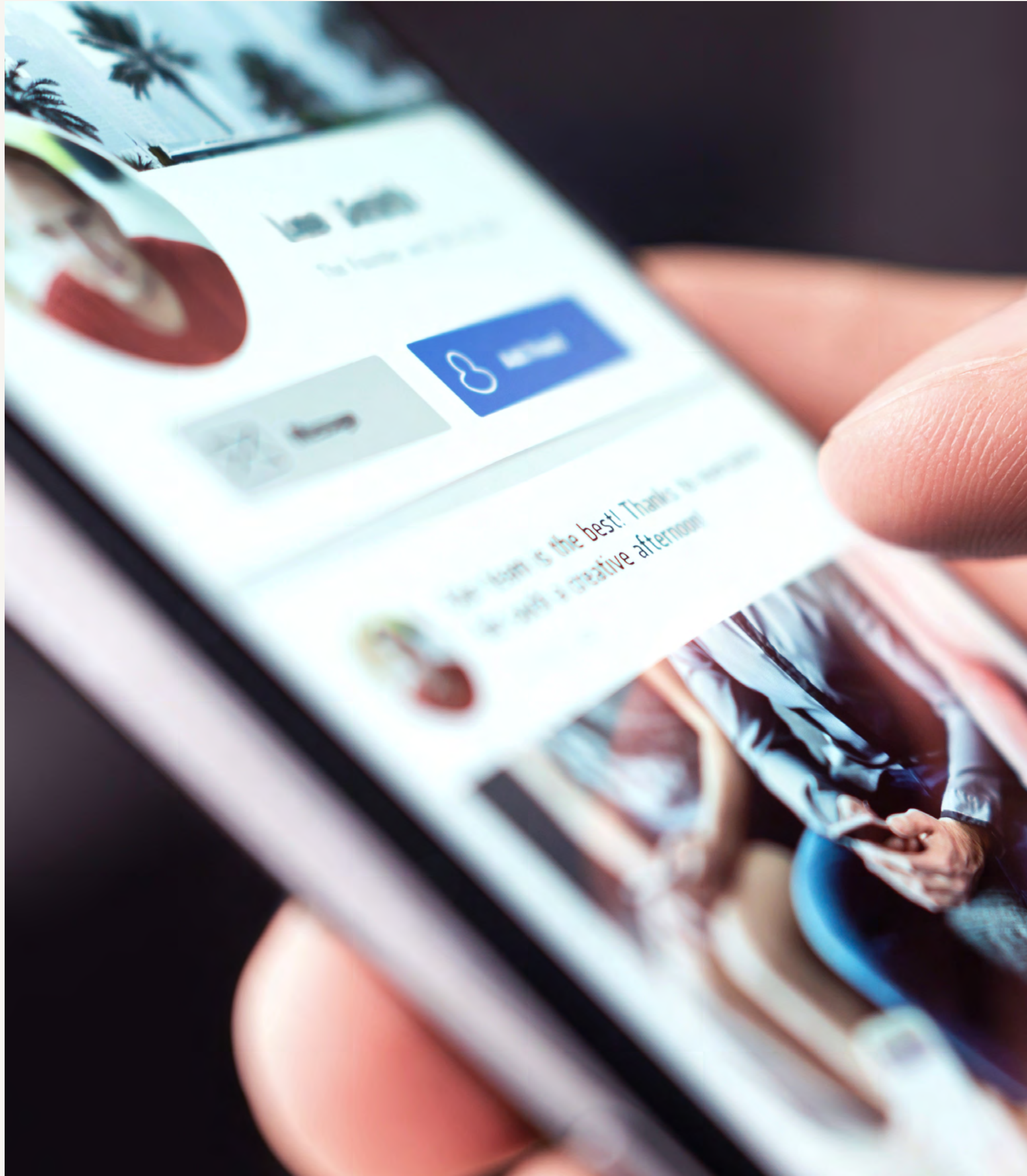
Another HUGE mistake that is constantly made “on-line” by organisations’ social media managers is that these make the line between the company’s social media accounts and one’s personal social media profile almost invisible. If a person is known as being the author of the “posts” or as being a high-profile representative of that organisation then the greatest majority of those who read those posts would automatically assume that it is the organisation’s “voice”, wouldn’t they?

The messages any business shares on social media networks should be identical in essence and meaning with the messages that can be found on the organisation’s website, those included in video materials, and those that will be disseminated via printed materials or e-mail correspondence/marketing. The reason for doing so is strictly related to CONSISTENCY: same message, same idea, same drivers, same values and the same purpose. Many organisations lose either the focus or the consistency of their message, sending mixed signals in the ether and, thus, either confusing or estranging their “followers”.

The social media updates / communication should occur only when events / new information / news occur and one should never feel “obliged” to post something on-line on a daily basis. There is, already, an over-saturation of the social media and there will be a time when the basic principles of human attraction and psychology will kick in: “How is this relevant to me?”, “I’m not even going to bother reading it now... I’ve got three tweets from them today so far” etc...

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, there are organisations which use social media for truly gauging opinions, and organisations which use it as another external communication channel. If the former version applies to one’s business, one must make sure that such social media posts are absolutely impeccable, that is:

- they are true
- they can be understood (very little, preferably no technical / specialised terminology)
- there is always someone available to come back with further information if needed urgently
- they are not offensive
- they are professionally written
- they reflect the organisation’s communication style
- the author has no personal input whatsoever in the communication thread



If for some businesses – there are many out there – social networks are too “dangerous” to directly engage with, and one simply uses them as one-way asymmetrical communication (that is no comments/feedback are/is allowed), then everything one has on social media platforms should be found in any other virtual information platforms owned by the organisation: website, video channel etc.

If such information cannot be verified or, at least, found in another reference, then one creates confusion and mistrust among one’s followers. They have no method of interacting with the business or telling it: “there’s something wrong with this”. Remember: although people may willingly accept to be nudged in one direction or another, they never like to be treated as decorations or numbers on a web page.

Most of all, one should remember that there is no “one size fits all” – a social media strategy should be directly linked, first and foremost, to the overarching strategy of the business. Regardless of the strategy to be chosen, there is one very, very important thing everyone needs to always keep in mind: SOCIAL MEDIA IS A CONVERSATION.



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