

10 steps for a low cost social media strategy

You know that there's a huge potential audience online, but how do you go about connecting with them? If it sounds expensive to you, then don't worry. The following ten step plan to creating your own zero-budget social media strategy will point you in the right direction of what you need to do to secure yourself an audience without splashing out.

Social media is a way to connect with customers that's teeming with opportunities to innovate and really capture the attention of the people who are interested in your business. What's even more amazing is that these opportunities are available at no cost at all. Follow this guide, maintain positivity, focus and creativity and you are setting yourself up to tap in to the twenty-first century's greatest marketing tool for free.

PLANNING STAGE

1. Define your audience

Social media is about people and conversations, but wading in without deciding who you are trying to speak to will leave you looking clueless fast. To promote your business you will need a clear profile of who you are trying to promote to, considering age, interests and affluence. This knowledge will help you build a persona and tone that matches your audience's wants. That's not to say that you need to speak like a teenager if that's your demographic, but it does mean you should keep in mind their approach to language and their expectations of social media. The kind of audience you are aiming to attract will be central to your entire plan, so getting this locked down early will mean less time wasted in the long run.

2. Locate them

Once you've decided who your social media campaign will be aimed at, you'll need to work out where these people are. "Online" is not the answer. The various prominent social media networks may seem fairly interchangeable in terms of functionality, but there are key differences in the way users engage with them. For example, Pinterest and Instagram are both highly visual, picture-led networks, but a key difference is that the former is largely aspirational and the latter based around the in-the-moment life of the user.

A sail training vessel looking to inspire those interested in sailing to sign up to a voyage may be better served looking for users who collect pictures of sailing vessels on Pinterest, whereas if they were looking for people who are already engaged with the sail training world, who are likely to be sharing pictures of themselves sailing, Instagram would be where to look.

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Members: the national/representative sail training organisations of Australia, Belgium, Bermuda, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, UK, USA

Probationary Members: Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, India

Cultural differences mean that social media usage can vary around the globe, both in terms of number of users and the way they use each network. It's important for you to do your research on which networks it is best for you to put your time and effort in to by making sure you're using the network with the most active young people in your part of the world.

Remember that the main place to find your audience is on competitor or influencers pages who already run an effective social media campaign. Involving key influencers in your posts or collaborating with them to make a piece of content gives you a chance to get your content in front of their ready-made audience – just avoid coming across as spammy! People with a good fan-base are likely to get many requests to collaborate, so make sure you are offering them something unique.

3. Set up your profiles properly

When you've decided what social media networks are essential for your plan, you will need to set up an account. This won't cost you any money, but if you get the process wrong it could end up costing you engagement. Remember that users who land on your page are likely to do a little exploring before committing to adding you to their social ecosystem and having an incomplete or inaccurate profile can make you look like you're really not trying. Fill the profile with the character of your business at all available opportunities to give the user every opportunity to see if they are interested in what you are offering.

The various social media sites have different specifications for picture dimensions and it's definitely worth the effort to make sure your profiles measure up. It looks cleaner, more professional and therefore is more inviting to potential viewers.

4. Do your research

Now you've got a profile or two set up, you're nearly ready to start engaging with your audience and letting your business shine – but what are you going to show them? Don't take a stab in the dark, make a concerted effort to work out what makes your audience tick. There's no point working out your audience if you don't then work out what your audience wants to hear, read or see. This process will save you time in the long-run, as jumping in without a clue as to what will resonate with your users will trigger a lengthy trial-and-error cycle. Give yourself a head start by doing your research.

Social media asks users to share what's on their mind, their likes and their interests, so having a look through the profiles of people on sailing groups can give you an overview of what overlapping interests occur. Some Google Analytics know-how will mean you don't have to do this by sifting through profiles manually, but as you start out you won't have much data to go on, so don't forget to keep revising this as your audience grows

DOING STAGE

5. Create something worth going to your page for

While sharing relevant and useful information with your audience from other sources is a sure way to get in their good books and should definitely be part of your strategy, the backbone of your offering will be your original content. A user is unlikely to find enough to keep them interested if you stick to recycling other people's content, so get your creative hat on and make something that will peak their interest. You're likely to have a lot of collateral that can be converted to a social media friendly format with a little bit of imagination, so don't be afraid to dig through and find some gems.

Existing pictures, catch phrases, videos and stories that are already part of your companies brand are perfect for social media, because it's all about putting across who you already are.

At Sail Training International we have been creating our own images to share that we think capture the spirit and energy of sail training. Our good results have taught us that it's well worth the time and energy to make something unique, as social media is always focused on the newest, freshest material. We've also found a hugely positive reception to putting up galleries of pictures from our events as soon after they were taken as possible. The mixture of outstanding quality photos and publishing almost instantaneously is a potent formula to get engagement from those attending our events and those thinking about coming next time.

6. Engage your audience when they're there to be engaged with

Timing is vital, especially when you are operating on low budget – you'll want to maximise the impact of every post. To do this, you need to sit down and consider when your audience is most likely to be active and the kind of content they might want to read at different times.

For example, if you're preparing a long-form article about a recent voyage and an exciting story that came from it, posting this in the middle of the day when your audience is likely to be at school or at work will ensure that it doesn't get many views. On the other hand, posting out a great picture at the same time that can be seen and liked in a matter of seconds gives a far higher chance of engagement.

Creating a social media schedule is a great way to manage this process and there are some great free tools out there that let you schedule social media posts. Keep your schedule looking busy ahead of time to ensure that your social channels are always giving something to your viewers.

REFINEMENT STAGE

7. Evaluate your results

Now you've started to put posts out, you'll want to work out how successful they've been. A tool like Google Analytics will help you track key data such as how many people have come to your site via social media for free. Twitter and Facebook also have their own built-in analytics suites that do a good job of giving you performance indications at no additional cost.

Metrics and their value can be debated endlessly, but if you stick to your guns and build up a good understanding of what the metrics you use mean for your engagement, you will put yourself in a good position to build on your progress.

8. Tweak your formula

It is imperative that you act in a meaningful way on the conclusions drawn from your evaluations. Whether it's adjusting the timing of your posts or going back to the drawing board and creating new ideas for different content, if you don't act on your data you are unlikely to make progress at any speed.

Don't be like the [square-wheel guys](#), who are too busy to make a change that will help them achieve their goals faster. It can be painful to make big changes to a plan you've spent time and effort on, but the only thing worse than making a mistake is making it again. In social media, this is doubly true, because if your content gets stale there is a short

amount of time before your user decides that you no longer warrant a place in their timeline – and you can bet they won't be coming back.

9. Expand on your social media offering

Once you've been through a few content cycles, you may gain enough savvy to take your social media operations to a new level. Whether you opt to break in to a new social media site or offer new content on an existing one, you need to make sure that you keep consistency.

Remember that whatever content you do on whatever site you are using, it's all part of the same pizza. Your users can grab a slice with their favourite topping, but they still need to be 100% sure that this has come from the same place. Maintain your identity and style across your offerings or you risk fragmenting your audience.

10. Persist

Social media is a fantastic place to reach potential customers and audiences, giving you unprecedented access in to the lives of the people interested in your business. There's no guaranteed success formula and there's no shortcut to hitting it big, but the truth is that a campaign doesn't need to go viral to see a good return to your business.

Remember that projecting a positive and interesting image of your brand is the most important part of what you are doing and that quitting if you don't get anywhere on the first try will result in a large amount of planning time wasted. Energy, determination and creativity are the ingredients that will see your campaign deliver in the long term, but you've got to be in it to win it.

Useful links and resources – *(to follow)*