

Social Media and Business:
A Perfect Remedy or Digital Snake Oil

Comm 302 Research Methods

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of social media. The study focused on Twitter and Facebook in businesses within the Boise, Idaho area, and how local businesses compare to national business's use of social media. Additionally, researchers intended to determine if this type of marketing is regarded as effective when compared to traditional methods of advertising locally. Using a detailed survey on social media practices—distributed to 88 college students and local residents—the research team examined the online personal habits of social media users. The data collected was used to determine how often individual social media users engage with businesses online and what contributing factors would cause them to do so. In addition to the survey data, 20 local businesses were interviewed on their utilization, or their lack of utilizing, of online social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The interviewers inquired if the businesses were present on SNS, what sites they used, and how they used them for business purposes. In addition to their presence on SNS, businesses were asked about their monitoring practices. Further exploration inquired about any future plans the businesses might have with social media. The results indicated that local (Boise, Idaho area) businesses use an online presence with social media sites on average with national businesses. Unexpectedly, we discovered that despite the use of social media sites locally, many of the business we interviewed were not monitoring their results or engaging with customers online. The implication of this research is that Boise, Idaho area businesses are not using the sites as effectively as they could in order to gain a significant return on investment and time.

The main characteristic of any successful business is its ability to connect to a target audience and persuade consumers to buy products. Traditionally this was accomplished through advertising, referrals, or direct marketing, but these methods could be expensive, time-consuming and ineffective. The advent of the personal computer, internet, and social media is changing how companies do business. “Suits” no longer sit in a room devising the perfect marketing scheme to lure new customers to their products. In fact, companies are losing their ability to control the content of their advertising, the demographics they target and the image they portray. The masses are taking over; they sit home in their pajamas exerting their influence by “liking” and “fanning” products, services and companies (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2009).

Five billion people connect to the World Wide Web—via internet or mobile phone—to share astronomical amounts of data each week. As a result businesses are finding social media – Twitter and Facebook—to be their weapons of choice in the fight over marketing control (Bulmer & DiMauro, 2009). However, entering into social networking sites (SNS) to interact with customers may yield positive or negative results for both businesses and customers.

By studying social media’s impact on business we will show: how the marketplace is adapting to its insurgence, the payoffs for business growth and sustainability, and the difficult nature of tracking its influence. We believe this study to be both timely and relative to the impact—good and bad—social media has on business success. This study will be beneficial to any business, especially local ones, that would like to understand social media in an industry setting and learn how to embark in this type of customer engagement in a way that will be useful not only to the bottom-line but to the growth of customer relations.

Review of Literature

In the Beginning-

Social networking sites began in 1995 with classmates.com, which was designed to help old high-school friends become reacquainted (Trusov, Bodapati, & Buckin , 2010).

People created a profile at no cost but then required users to upgrade to Gold Memberships in order to communicate with other members (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). In the eight years after classmates.com other social media sites began to pop up: Friendster, Xyanga and MySpace.

These sites allowed users to connect with individuals, bands, and groups without being charged a fee (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). MySpace emerged from the pack as the leader of SNS but many users left. The reason—many felt MySpace’s proclivity to inundate users with “unwanted and unsolicited advertising messages,” (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011) lead to its demise.

Then Facebook hit the web and changed everything. Originally Facebook limited its network to Harvard students but then began to branch out to include other universities. In Facebook’s infancy, the ruling college culture declared “no companies allowed” (Vorvoreanu 2009). It wasn’t until November 2007, over three years after Facebook creation, that Facebook began to encourage companies to engage in this ever growing social network (Vorvoreanu, 2009). By this time they had the market share of SNS which allowed them to slowly muddy the waters between business and personal relationships. However, companies that failed to mold to the social norm of personal relationships with in SNS risked failure of effectively communicating with their customers or of being labeled spam and thus being tossed in the recycle bin (Vorvoreanu 2009).

In 2008 a college in the southeast decided to look at this phenomenon by conducting a research study to look into students perceptions of companies in connection with Facebook. The researchers formed focus groups to evaluate the student's personal perceptions of companies and their involvement on Facebook (Vorvoreanu, 2009). The results showed students didn't feel it was appropriate for companies to interact with people about commercial or business transactions because the nature of Facebook was for personal transactions. "Any communication that does not come from an individual and is not personal is considered inappropriate," (Vorvoreanu, 2009, p. 75). The students thought that "faceless corporations" or large market businesses were not welcome to 'friend' them or write on their wall. Overall, the students were very skeptical of large businesses on Facebook, but ironically they were very open and accepting of small business and non-profit organizations (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

Several of the students admitted that they "friended" small businesses and interacting with them on a regular basis. "When it came to small businesses, students did not manifest suspicion toward their motivation to make a profit, and several stated that they actually enjoyed supporting them," (Vorvoreanu, 2009, p. 75). The students also had a very positive response to non-profit organizations with whom they befriended through the "causes" application on Facebook. However, the students would not go as far with non-profit organizations as donating money. Facebook users want to be left alone while engaging in personal matters on SNS (Vorvoreanu, 2009). But, there are always exceptions.

The students involved in the research study made it clear that unless there was something in it for them they had no interest in participating. "Given the financial situation of most college students, the 'no engagement with corporations' rule would be gladly broken in exchange for special discounts or coupons" (Vorvoreanu, 2009, p.75). The students all agreed they were more

likely to engage with large corporations and 'like' their page if discounts and coupons were involved. Statistics found in Media Week showed that 77% of users were likely to engage with companies if there was an incentives offer (Dolliver, 2010). The students however, did not think it was a successful strategy for corporations to join Facebook to be on the "cutting edge" of technology and were turned off when corporations "tried too hard to be cool" (Vorvoreanu, 2009, p. 78).

Most businesses understand the opposite to be true and believe the customer wants the company to be on the "cutting edge" of technology. For example, Nicholas Dunlap, a property supervisor at Dunlap Property group said, "First and foremost, we are capable of providing our current and prospective clients with updated information and insight into the marketplace, and second, we are able to quickly and creatively market our move-in specials, bonuses and incentives to the masses by way of cutting-edge, online advertising" in regard to his use of social networking sites for his business (Bushey, 2009, pg. 25). Social media marketing can be a win or lose situation for business based on how they play the game. Dolliver (2010) noted that 58% of fans will quit the company site with over communication and 53% abandon the brand if its content is not relevant to them.

The Evolution-

Social media changed the rules in which companies and consumers associate—from the traditional form of "selling" to a consumer, to the new practice of "engaging" the consumer. With online communities such as Facebook and Twitter, consumers can directly communicate their feelings and opinions to a large audience of their own peers. According to Moran and Gossieaux (2010) this type of communication, when done in an affirmative manner can provide positive awareness of their products and a competitive edge in the market. However, to use this

forum well, a business must participate and be alert to what is going on in these communities. Dolliver (2010) states, “Users reported connecting online with an average of five companies or brands, although 33 percent said they engage this way with “none”” (p.1). Sustaining this relationship can make businesses successful in SNS marketing campaigns. Consumers feel more empowered when they can have two-way conversations with the company; yet they do not want excessive communication (Dolliver, 2010).

But companies must remember the primary culture of SNS—a culture based on personal communication. “The only accepted communication tone on Facebook is the personal one, and organizations that are able to engage in personal communication, such as small business owners, are embraced on Facebook,” (Vorvoreanu, 2009, p. 79). Those businesses that don’t conform are given the cold shoulder.

It is estimated that over 200 million Americans actively use Facebook. With an average of 50 percent daily usage and an average friend list of 130, Facebook’s influence is enormous (Facebook, 2011). While the amount of usage varies by age groups, it’s estimated that 60 percent of teenagers check their social network one or more times a day, 67 percent of young adults 21 and younger check their sites daily, while 42 percent of adults 22 and older are once a day users (Taylor et al., 2011).

Twitter fills a different role in the world of SNS. Twitter—the youngest of the SNS—has only been around a few years and is used by predominately older demographic. “Tweeting” leans toward public use instead of personal thus making it a more attractive to the world of marketing and public relations (Farhi, 2009). Twitter has grown at an astounding rate “attracting 17 million visitors in April 2009, an 83 percent gain over the previous month, according to the research firm “comScore” (Farhi, 2009). Twitter is being used by a “more serious crowd than its popular

social networking cousins, Facebook and MySpace” and attracting a different set of users (Farhi, 2009, p. 30). Journalists, businesses, and celebrities are turning to Twitter in order to generate “real-time” updates of the events, stories and situations. The ability to access the news before news corporations produce it is “changing so fast that the mainstream media can’t assemble all the facts at once,” (Farhi, 2009, p. 28). Companies using twitter might be reaching a smaller crowd but can reach an older target market rather than the younger demographic inhabiting Facebook whose primary demographic is the 18-34 years olds (Taylor et al., 2011).

Scott Fox, author of *e-Riches: Next-Generation Marketing Strategies for Making Millions Online* states, “Twenty-first-century businesses don’t succeed by getting new customers, but by getting new fans,” (Docksai, 2009, p. 40). Businesses that use Facebook are able to enlist users as fans. Fans become repeat customers with a sense of loyalty. They are the first to try new products, and they actively promote new products to friends and family. A core fan base is more profitable than a large group of one-time customers (Docksai, 2009, p. 40). Often these fans actively seek out advertising content and participate in the dissemination to other consumers (Taylor et al., 2011). Expert communicators, which make up 19.88 percent of social network fans, spend over five hours a day networking. Part of that networking includes keeping informed and updated about new products that interest them (Alarcon-del-Amo, Lorenzo-Romero, and Gomez-Borja, 2011). The future of advertising is making it personal, because the most effective tool is the recommendations of friends (Langheinrich & Karjoth, 2010). Customers are more likely to believe the experiences of previous customers over the marketing department because many are now resisting print media and are being courted by digital media (Taylor et al., 2011).

Social media allows consumer to align themselves with brands, but it also open venues for customers to negatively impact a brand (Dolliver, 2011). The potential for harm is also great because companies do not have control over who posts comments and what the post says. Nestle experienced this first hand when someone posted an article saying they used palm oil from rain forests that were being destroyed. Their site was taken over and soon became an angry cyberspace mob. Nestle denied these claims but the late response and ineffective communication ultimately cost the company support and they had to pledge to only use environment friendly harvested palm oil in the future (Langheinrich & Karjoth, 2010).

The problem many businesses run into is that monitoring comments—while highly recommended—can be costly if over looked, both to the bottom line and to patron relationships. Ramada Hotels invited customers to comment on their webpage. A customer posted a negative comment and Ramada Hotels did not respond. Another negative comment was posted and still no comment from the hotel. Potential clients decided not to book with Ramada because of the negative comments and Ramada's lack of reply (Chan & Guillet, 2011).

Businesses that enter cyberspace must have a commitment to monitor and engage on a regular basis. Understanding social media means a business will respond, socialize and build relationships with customers. It is recommended they designate a staff member to manage the sites (Chan & Guillet, 2011). Social marketing creates a forum for disseminating information, creating online communities and engaging in dialogue. Companies who successfully engage in social marketing have higher sales, create customer loyalty, and receive useful feedback from customers (Docksai, 2009). Businesses must realize this process takes time. This begins by first being visible and creating credibility after that the profits will come (Klein, 2010).

Show me the Money-

Business measures the cost of marketing by return on investment (ROI). Simply how much money is gained or lost relative to the investment. The food service company, Sodexo used Twitter for personnel recruitment. The time and salaries investment totaled \$50,000. Recruiters searched Twitter for tweets about food, cooking and job searching and engaged Twitter users in conversation. Part of the conversation was to direct users to Sodexo's web page. Sodexo was able to fill multiple job openings and therefore could cancel a \$350,000 ad campaign on Monster.com. This experiment saved the company \$300,000.00, which produced a net ROI of about 6000 percent (Paine, 2011).

ROI is difficult to measure in regards to relationships, but it is another measure of success. Good relationships with customers shortens sales cycles, speeds-up adoption of new products, increases efficiency, reduces turnover, lowers recruitment costs, and eliminates or reduces lawsuits and legal fees—all of which all up to a better bottom line (Paine, 2011). Creating good customer relationships is necessary for businesses success. Paine (2011) states, “The difference today is that it's no longer optional. In order to survive, organizations need to understand not just the volume of stuff they sell, but the social context in which the sell it,” (p. 20). There is now a new measure to the bottom line, not only volume and profit, but also customer relationship and quality (Paine, 2011). Companies must remember that social media are just that—social.

Where Does that Leave Us?-

Twitter and Facebook have been used very effectively in personal relationship building and communication. However, when attempting to use these same sites for business growth and sustainability, monitoring the effectiveness in promoting a business is difficult. While methods to analyze traditional marketing efforts have long been in place, the novelty of social media

marketing means success determinants have not been thoroughly developed. Sonnier and McAlister (2011) contend that many businesses are boosting their dollars on advertising with word-of-mouth marketing as the popularity grows in social media forums. The measuring tools for this type of marketing have not yet been agreed upon.

According to Fisher (2009), some companies have changed the use of the term ROI to better express the latest way to measure success with social media. Rather than “Return on Investment’ some are indicating that the new way to determine marketing success in social media would be “Return on Influence” or “Return on Engagement.” Both of these terms are examples of how social networking sites have influenced marketing. The emphasis has turned to the relationship and communication with the consumer.

With online communities such as Facebook and Twitter consumers have found they can communicate their feelings directly and share their opinions quickly with a large audience of their own peers. According to Moran & Gossieaux (2010), this type of communication, when done in an affirmative, manner can provide positive awareness of their products and a competitive edge in the market. However, to use this forum well, a business must participate and be alert to what is going on in these communities.

Duboff and Wilkerson (2010) also assert that with the use of social media, the marketers are able to connect with their customers in the same way their peers do – through a webpage or by “tweeting.” Additionally, they point out that many of these services—“social networking sites”—are an inexpensive way to market; making them attractive to the marketing bottom-line. By using the opportunities while they are cheap, it offers a good chance to experiment with new marketing practices.

When using the social media sites to attract potential customers, businesses have several opportunities to engage and promote their products or services. By encouraging a connection with consumers, they support an environment in which consumers talk about the businesses amongst themselves. Moran and Gossieaux (2010) indicate that this word-of-mouth, peer-to-peer communication in a community formed on an online forum can generate more first-time and return customers than those attracted by traditional marketing.

In an example of how larger corporations are using social media such as Twitter, Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) analyzed five companies in detail: Google, Dell, Whole Foods Market, Zappos.com and JetBlue Airways. In their research, they identified three stages of customer engagement used in marketing strategies on Twitter. These phases include “pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase.” Each of these steps requires a different form of interaction with the customer to bring value to the use of social media. In the pre-purchase stage, corporations must be aware of what is being said of them in the forums and react to negative dialogue quickly. For example, when Dell began to monitor Twitter, they discovered in what their customers were saying, that two of the keys on their new product the *Inspiron Mini 9 laptop* were situated too close together for customer use. By using this information, Dell was able to correct the problem on future products, a rectification which may have never happened with conventional marketing techniques.

Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) examined the second step—the purchase—which included offering special promotions to followers. Google utilized this stage by creating separate accounts for each of its products and updated followers when new developments occurred. Whole Foods participated in this stage as well, by organizing contests for followers and informing them of product recalls and specials. They also offered a “reward” of a \$25 gift card

to the “Tweet of the Day” to encourage followers to engage in communication. These types of activities strengthened brand messages and promoted a positive environment for customers.

The final stage is the post purchase. This is an opportunity to bolster customer relations and attempt to address customer complaints. Research indicates that unfavorable comments by consumers can lead to very negative effects on a business, while positive responses provide advantageous outcomes. In this word-of-mouth online community, companies must address unhappy customers quickly and efficiently. JetBlue Airways provided a perfect example of this when an unhappy customer tweeted how the airline was unable to seat him next to his wife and child due to a full flight. JetBlue was monitoring Twitter, saw his tweet and responded in a matter of minutes by contacting the customer to ask for further information. At this point, they prioritized his ticket to address his concern and offer him the service that would satisfy his complaint. Using social media, JetBlue Airways turned an unhappy customer into a pleased one, who would most likely repeat his positive experience to other potential customers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011).

Each of these examples offers a valid way in which firms can use social media to their advantage; there is still the issue of determining the true value of this type of marketing. Duboff and Wilkerson (2010) assert that everyone needs to scrutinize their reputation online, and suggests that it may be best to look at long-term profitability that comes with of return customers and positive word-of-mouth publicity. With the effectiveness of using social media in profitability still under debate, they suggest that while everyone needs to be using it, it is not necessary appropriate to financially invest in it.

The research team will look at Treasure Valley businesses and determine if their use of Facebook and Twitter correlates with the national research.

RQ- How effectively are businesses in the Boise, Idaho area using social media sites– Facebook and Twitter–for customer development and industry growth.

Method

Participants–Survey-

The survey administered identified social networking habits of local university students and Treasure Valley residents. It was delivered to prospective respondents through student and personal email. Access to the email accounts was granted through instructor permission for the students and the other participants were notified through personal email accounts of the research team. Survey participants were primarily students from Boise State University with representation from a variety of ages, starting at age 18 and including age groups over 46 years of age. The socio-economic demographics at Boise State also varied and are representative of the Treasure Valley population. Additional participants were recruited through email by convenience sampling from members of the research team. There were 79 participants who completed the survey; of which 20 participants identified themselves as male and 47 were female. The largest group of respondents was over 46 years of age, being 29% of all respondents. The smallest group of respondents was the 26-35 age group, making up 21% of the survey participants.

The survey was constructed on Qualtrics–a website that allows the surveyor to create a custom survey that delivers anonymous results– and consisted of twenty-seven questions which were pre-tested on a similar demographic population and then revised. The questions were developed to offer a comparison between the Treasure Valley SNS users and the national data found through the literature review. The survey began with a brief explanation and the purpose of the survey, which was to collect data concerning the practices of social networking site’s users and their interactions with local businesses. The introduction identified the research team as students in a research methods class at Boise State University. The first few questions on the

survey consisted of demographic information—age and sex. These questions are usually at the end of the survey but served to exclude the protected population—under 18—from completing the survey. Another reason the research team placed those questions at the beginning is because the demographics of respondents who do not use SNS was important for the research. Following those questions, a filter question was asked to identify whether the respondent used Facebook. When the participant answered “no, they are not on Facebook,” they were directed to another filter question about their use of Twitter. If the participant answered “no, they are not on Twitter,” they were thanked for their time and the survey ended for that participant. This ensured the remainder of the survey was taken by those who use social networking sites. The goal of the research was to discover how local businesses benefit from the users of SNS. The final questions measured attitudes and habits of the participants towards businesses when they are on social networking sites. The results will be anonymous because no names were included on the surveys.

Participants – Interviews-

Local businesses participated in the study through phone and face to face interviews conducted by research team members. Twenty businesses were selected by non-random, non-probability convenience sampling methods. The businesses were chosen according to location, personal contact with a research team member, and had no national affiliation. Table 1 below shows the types, size, and age of owners or managers of the businesses.

Table 1

Local Business Participants

| Type of Business | Number of employees | Age group of owner or marketing manager |
|------------------|---------------------|---|
| Book Store | Less than 10 | Over 40 |
| Candy company | Over 300 | Over 40 |

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| | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| City Civic Center | 25 -50 | Under 40 |
| Clothing company | Less than 10 | Under 40 |
| Construction | Over 12 | Over 40 |
| Cookie making business | Less than 10 | |
| Exercise retail clothing store | Less than 10 | Over 40 |
| Fabrication | | |
| Frozen Yogurt | Less than 15 | Under 40 |
| Graphic design | Less than 10 | Under 40 |
| Gym | Less than 12 | Over 40 |
| Hospital | Over 300 | Under 40 |
| Janitorial services | Less than 12 | Over 40 |
| Jewelry Store | Less than 10 | Over 40 |
| Lumber brokerage | Less than 15 | Over 40 |
| Multi-specialty medical clinic | Over 200 | Under 40 |
| Networking | Less than 10 | Over 40 |
| Radio station | 50-100 | Under 40 |

Research team members interviewed the owner of the business or the marketing director. Interview questions were selected through team discussion and interview construction research. The researchers chose open-ended questions because they tended to stimulate conversation and allow the respondent to lead the conversation rather than being led. Questions selected allowed for a comparison of the Treasure Valley SNS users with national SNS users and their interaction with businesses. The interview was sent to multiple associates for pre-testing and revised according to recommendations. Each research team member practiced the questions ensuring an unbiased and non-leading format, creating reliability and validity.

There were two interview scripts. The first interview script started with a filter question and identified a business as one who uses or does not use Facebook or Twitter. When the business was not on either of these sites, the interviewer asked two follow-up questions. They were: Why have you decided against social media at this time? Do you have any plans to use social media in the future? For businesses that are not using SNS the interview ended. The businesses that are using Facebook and Twitter were asked if they had time for more questions or would prefer to make an appointment and have the interviewer return at another time. The interview usually continued at the initial contact and the respondents were asked several follow-up questions. The interview questions are located in Table 1 in the appendix. No business will be named in the research which gives them confidentiality ensured by the interview process. Businesses were identified by the type of business in the results and discussion portions of the paper, not by name. At the conclusion of the interview the respondents were given the opportunity to add any additional information they felt pertinent to their use of SNS. The research team member offered the respondent a copy of the interview or the research paper when completed and thanked for their time.

Results

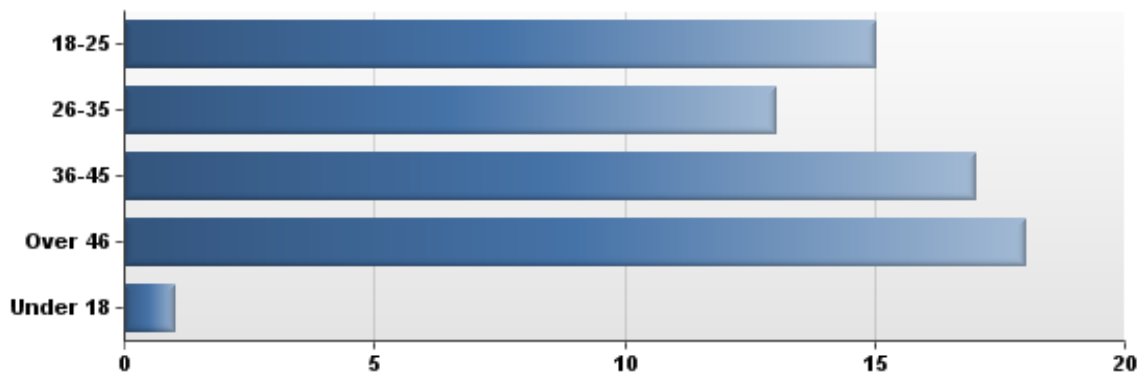
In order to research social media's impact on local businesses in the Treasure Valley, two types of research methods were used; surveys and interviews. The use of both methods allowed for an integrated evaluation that encompassed both the businesses application of social media and the users utilization of the information made available to them. A sample of social networking sites users were emailed a survey while businesses in the area were interviewed via phone or face to face. The survey and interview questions are available in the Appendix.

Surveys results for Facebook

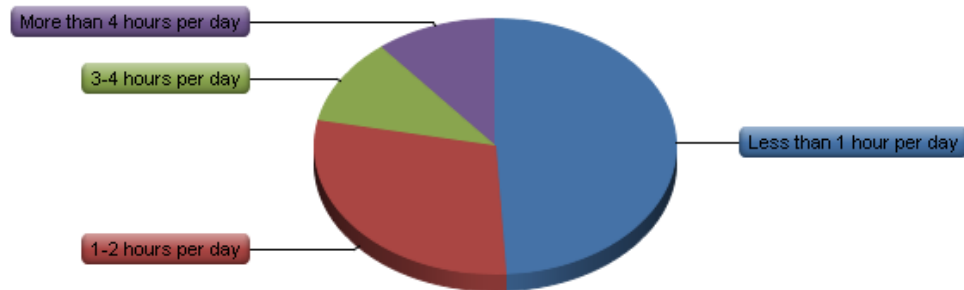
The survey was administered through Qualtrics—via blackboard—to respondent email addresses or through personal email contact with research team members. Respondents that received the email reside in the Treasure Valley and of the 88 respondents who started the survey, 79 completed it. The first portion of the survey detailed the demographics of the respondents with 20 being male and 47 being female. The following graph shows the age demographic of the respondents. One respondent was 18 or younger. The rules of a protected population applied and they were not allowed to continue the survey beyond the first question.

Figure 1—Age

Demographics



There were 60 of the 79 respondents with Facebook accounts totaling 76% of the total participants. Of those respondents had Facebook just over half (28) spent more than one hour a day on Facebook. Those who spent 1-2 hours a day represented 29% of the respondents. Those who used sites 3-4 hours a day equaled 10.9% of the survey respondents. One male and 5 females reported using SNS more than four hours a day (10.9%). The amount of time users spend on Facebook is represented in the figure below.

Figure 2: Time Spent on

Facebook

When asked if they had “liked” a business on Facebook, 75% responded affirmatively. Of those respondents who had “liked” a business 79% of them had prior experience with the business before they “liked” them on Facebook. Just under half (48%) of these participants had received benefits from “liking” the business. Those benefits consisted of coupons, discounts, and specials. All of the respondents that had received benefits returned to the business later and considered themselves repeat customers, because they continued to spend money with that business even without additional incentives. They also had supported fundraisers and one respondent noted “they spread the word about the business.” Thirty-eight percent of those who have “liked” a business maintain ties with the company and participate in conversations on the sites with other fans.

Of those who had not “liked” a business 25% indicated they were not interested in the business, had nothing to gain, or the brand content was not relevant to them. They stated they would be willing to “like” a business for discounts or coupons. One respondent felt that Facebook was not used for business purposes, but was a social site.

Survey results for Twitter-

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Of the respondents surveyed 42% have Twitter accounts and 13 of the 27 had never followed a local business. Those who didn't follow local businesses—66%—on Twitter indicate they are not interested in the business and only one of them objected to businesses being on Twitter. The offer of discounts, coupons, and private sales would interest the respondent in following the business. Thirty-eight percent of respondents had received a benefit from following a local business, in the form of coupons, discounts, and free stuff. One respondent indicated they were returning customers to the business because they continue to listen to the radio station. The dominant age group on Twitter is the 36-45 year olds. Followed by the 26-35 age group, with only one person being in the 18-25 and two in the over 46 age group.

Interviewing results

There were 20 interviews conducted with local Treasure Valley businesses. The businesses were divided—based upon the number of employees—into three groups. Businesses with less than 15 employees were considered a small business, those who employed 16 to 100 were determined to be medium sized, and large businesses were identified as those who employ more than 100 people. The majority—13 out of 20—of the businesses interviewed were small businesses. The others broke down into three medium sized businesses, and four large businesses.

Connection to the community was the most common response for why the businesses used Facebook with six small businesses, three medium businesses, and four large businesses giving that as their reason. The business fields represented by interviews included healthcare, community event centers, retail, media communication, construction, and professional businesses. One Marketing Director stated, “We use Facebook as a communication tool to

interact with the community. I think it is important to have a presence there. Being absent would be noticed.”

The results showed that of the businesses interviewed small businesses were the least likely to be on Facebook. Of the 20 businesses interviewed, eight of them were not on Facebook and seven of those were small businesses. A total of 13 small businesses were interviewed and only six of them had Facebook accounts. When shy they abstained from using Facebook, time and age were the most common factors. They stated, “We do not have time.” One company said it was for younger people.

Most of the businesses agreed that Facebook is an inexpensive way to get your name “out there.” All of the companies want friends and most companies actively seek them out. Several of the businesses chose to get on Facebook without any research and started accounts simply because it is free and everyone else is doing it. Only one respondent indicated they had done any research before joining the social networking site, he stated, “At first, I dismissed it. Then I read an article that equated social media with “networking.” As I am a huge believer in networking, and run networking groups, that grabbed my attention! I made the decision to investigate rather than dismiss that which I did not understand.” Facebook actively started seeking businesses in 2007 and two of the businesses had been on Facebook for 3-4 years. Most of the business had been on Facebook for 1-2 years.

When asked if they used any of the following steps – 1) pre-purchase 2) purchase 3) post-purchase. One-third of them used the site for pre-purchase by using coupons and discounts. Five of the businesses use coupons or contests to promote their site. One-fourth of them used it for customers to purchase products. Only one of the businesses used it for post-purchase by

following up with the customer. Less than half of the businesses used the site to actively recruit friends.

Only one of the companies had a marketing strategist as a full-time employee and one company used a consulting company for help with their Facebook account. Most of the business's Facebook sites were managed by the marketing director or the owner of the business. Four of the twelve companies occasionally check their Facebook page, whereas the other companies check daily and sometimes multiple times a day. The companies averaged anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours a day monitoring their site. Of the six companies that allowed comments on their sites, they have all responded to the posts. Two of the companies had customer testimonials on their sites.

Most of the businesses—2 out of 3— feel that SNS has been positive and beneficial to their businesses, but 12 have not tracked any hard numbers, it is just a “feeling.” One business said they knew that Facebook has had an impressive impact on her business. She said, “Social media is solely responsible for the success of my business so far. There's no way I would have been able to reach a fraction of the people I have without it. I started the business about this time last year by posting on Facebook that I make great fudge and would be selling some for the holidays. That started everything. Pre-social media, I would have had to spend a lot of money to get my product known and talked about. I credit social media completely for the success, so far, of my little business.” Most of the companies said they see social media as a customer relationship tool and that this is the benefit of Facebook usage.

All of the businesses agreed that the positives of Facebook usage out weighted the negatives. Only two of the companies experienced negative comments being posted on their walls. The up-side is that Facebook changed their options and now allows businesses to delete

comments written on their walls. In fact, only one company stated they did not see any benefit at all from being on Facebook.

The final consensus among the businesses was they all wanted to continue to use social media but to use it more effectively through increased communication with their client base and a perpetual increase in their fans.

Discussion

Social media has become an important part of people's daily lives and therefore, has become an avenue for businesses to reach the masses. This study surveyed Treasure Valley residents to gage their social media attitudes and habits particularly with Facebook and Twitter, as it relates to local businesses. Local businesses were also interviewed to determine their thoughts and use of social media as a marketing tool. The goal of the research was to determine the effectiveness of the Treasure Valley area businesses in using social media as a tool for customer development and business growth.

Facebook-

Millions of people connect to social media daily and many of them spend hours a day online. Half of Treasure Valley residents surveyed spend more than one hour a day on Facebook. Initially, when Facebook started businesses were not allowed, but since 2007 they have been permitted to create Facebook "business pages" with the intention that these "pages" would be utilized differently than the traditional individual social use. With 76% of survey respondents using Facebook, it seemed a logical avenue for businesses to market their companies and products. Only one respondent on the survey felt that businesses do not belong on Facebook or Twitter. This is a significant finding; it means that less than 2% of the respondents were against businesses on social media, a fact that was not the case when Facebook began. Anymore,

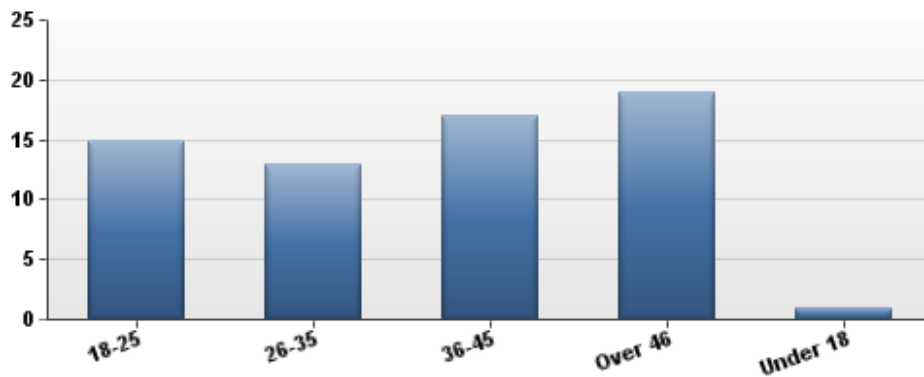
business owners need not worry about social network users being angry about their presence on social networking sites. It is important to remember the survey queried the respondents about local Treasure Valley businesses which have no national affiliation. The survey results also supported the literature review findings concerning user's acceptance of small businesses. Nationally small businesses were more widely accepted on SNS than large national chains, as long as the business did not overwhelm the user with posts. Users were especially willing to support non-profits and 49% of the local survey respondents who were on Twitter have "liked" a non-profit.

According to the review of literature, the national average of those willing to connect with businesses is 67% on social media. Of those surveyed in the Treasure Valley, 75% had already "liked" (*the Facebook term for becoming a fan of a business or a comment made on the site*) a local business on Facebook, which indicates a readiness to connect with local businesses at a higher level than the national average. The majority of these respondents had previous experience with the business and all of them considered themselves loyal repeat customers after receiving the benefit. This correlates to the national research from Media Week that showed 77% of users would engage with a business if incentives were offered. Clearly, social media users in the Treasure Valley will accept and communicate with businesses on Facebook meaning there are significant opportunities for local businesses to use social media effectively.

The interview results found 60% of local businesses are using Facebook. According to the responses from the interviews, local businesses believe a social networking presence—online—is more about connecting with the community rather than marketing. There is a considerable potential for businesses to engage the population for marketing purposes and the users are willing to use it.

Social networking does not seem to be a respecter of age because there was no significant correlation in age groups of respondents and their use of social networking on the survey. A business can market to all age groups on Facebook and find the demographic they are looking for. The table below shows the age groups of those on Facebook from the survey.

Figure 3—Age demographics



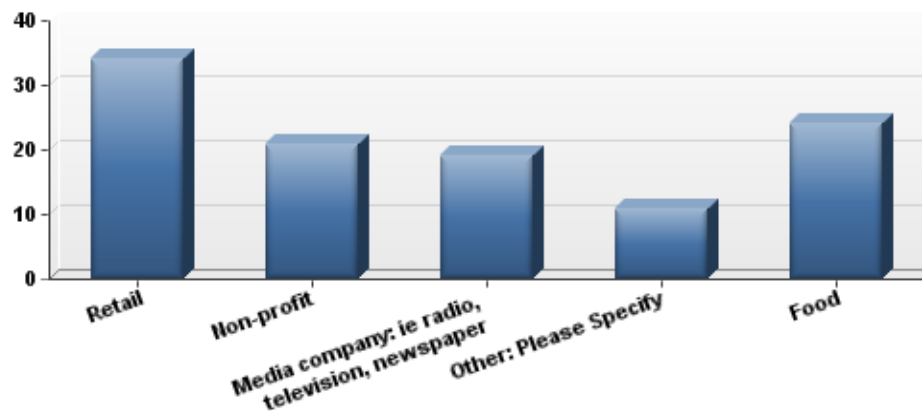
The survey respondents on Facebook showed 16 males and 44 females on social media. This is probably not a true representation of male/female ratio locally for social media use. A possible answer to the larger number of female responses might be a reflection of the survey team’s choice of survey recipients. It may also be that females are more willing to fill out surveys. If this is a true representation, it is a clear message for businesses to target females in their marketing campaigns.

Treasure Valley users are representative of national Facebook users—50% of them spent more than one hour a day online. Nationally 20% of users are categorized as “expert” users, spending more than five hours a day networking. Networking on the internet is a learned skill, similar to learning to network face to face. Those who spend more time on SNS have become more skilled as networkers. “Expert” users are more likely to comment of business walls and

spread the word. Locally, 11% of survey respondents would be considered expert users with women five times more likely to be categorized as “experts” than men. It may seem like a small percentage of users are “expert” users in the valley, but they spend at least twice as much time on Facebook as other users. They are definitely a solid customer base that businesses should reach out to. These are the users who post comments and interact with the business. The value of positive comments is tremendous, since word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool for a business. These users are also willing to test new products and respond to the business—no strings or paychecks attached; essentially creating a working lab environment at a very nominal cost.

Survey respondents have “liked” a variety of local businesses and non-profit organizations. The following graph shows the types of businesses respondents of the survey associated with. The survey respondents identified other businesses as medical, beauty salons, and marketing/PR firms.

Figure 4 Types of businesses



The survey indicates Treasure Valley social media user’s willingness to communicate with multiple types of local businesses on Facebook. The literature review noted three steps a business should take when courting potential customers online. First, businesses should interact with SNS users before there is any type of business interaction. Many of the businesses

interviewed did use their sites for disseminating information, yet they failed to engage the social users in dialogue. The event center business was the exception. They had noticed increased postings on their pages and their friend base was growing and took advantage of the increase. They routinely engaged their patrons in conversation based posts that encouraged interaction between the Facebook hosts and other patrons. They also ran a contest to get 2000 “likes” on their page and by the end of the interview process they were half way to their goal. Their success shows the possibility of success through SNS.

Certainly, the goal of all businesses is to increase revenue, which comes through the second step. Local businesses seemed to discount this step because they felt their purpose for using SNS was to connect with the community. While connecting is one way to acquire loyal customers, you must first turn the SNS user into a customer. Once the user becomes a customer, it is important the business engage and reward the customer with either additional incentives or contact. The business should check to verify customer satisfaction otherwise they may lose the customer they worked so hard to gain. The final step is follow-up and Treasure Valley businesses are also missing the boat with only one of the business interviewed following up with their customers—on Facebook—after a sale.

Of the businesses interviewed with a Facebook or Twitter account, 100% monitored their site, but only 12.5% of those were full-time social media strategists. The other 87.5% monitored Facebook as an additional obligation in addition to their other duties. Only one business reported having a social media strategist. Social media strategists are employees or consultants trained to create brand awareness and engage with customers through social networking sites to increase profitability for businesses. Many of the businesses knew they needed to be on Facebook, but did

not know how to use it effectively. In addition, many of the small businesses were not aware they could hire a marketing strategist.

When asked what their future marketing plans were, the overwhelming response was to acquire more fans. Half of the businesses surveyed already have 300+ fans. It is a great goal to acquire fans, but businesses must be prepared to use those fans to market their business. The literature review suggested three stages for effective use of social networking sites. 1) pre-purchase, 2) purchase, and 3) post-purchase. Half of the businesses participate in pre-purchase through information on products or contest updates. Some businesses are limited with their marketing strategies by the type of industry in which they belong. For certain industries there are federal regulations which limit or restrict social media usage. Two of the businesses interviewed were healthcare related and were not able to offer discounts or coupons. However, one of these businesses did have contests running on their Facebook page. Those who used the site via the purchase step—coupons and discounts—totaled only 38% of users. Ironically the research showed that all the users who “liked” a business and used coupons or discounts, continue to be repeat customers and 100% of them stated they would “continue to spend money” with the business in the future. This shows the huge potential for business growth through SNS that businesses aren’t capitalizing on. The literature suggests follow-up is an extremely important part of marketing to the public on social media and Treasure Valley businesses are failing to utilize that step.

Researching social networking sites—prior to joining—was done by only one company. This could explain the lack of knowledge concerning how to use the site effectively. Researching social media sites would educate a business about the use, but there is very little validation concerning return of investment. Most businesses felt that social media was helping their business, but only one had proof. One business that is not on Facebook or Twitter stated, “I need

proof the site will help my business and I there is nothing out there that proves SNS are a benefit to my company.” Another respondent had talked to other business owners and they could not offer proof that social media was contributing to their business. There is a compelling need for data concerning the benefits of social media for companies. One business owner said he is not on SNS because he has not had time to do the research. It would be beneficial to have research available for business owners. Many businesses talked about being part of the community and this is difficult to prove with hard data, yet there needs to be some type of statistics provided. A company could research customer satisfaction prior to joining SNS and then repeat the survey after they had been on the sites for an extended amount of time. This is an area where additional research should be done.

As made clear by many of the respondents, part of the appeal of Facebook is that it is a marketing tool that is very inexpensive. To say it is free is not accurate. The businesses interviewed said they spent anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours a day monitoring their page. There is some human resource cost, yet it is modest compared to other advertising venues. The event center marketed a concert on Facebook a received 200,000 hits with 500,000 impressions at a cost of 275 dollars.

But cost isn't the only reason associated with Treasure Valley businesses' SNS participation; they see the need to be on social networking sites as a key to successful business growth. One respondent stated, “We use Facebook as a communication tool to interact with the community. I think it is important to have a presence there. Being absent would be noticed.” Local businesses felt that SNS users look for businesses and if they do not find them on Facebook or Twitter they have missed the opportunity for name recognition and marketing, thus the customer will patron the business on SNS and ignore those who aren't.

While it's important to establish a presence on SNS it is only the first step for business use of Facebook. There are ample opportunities to grow a business through social media. One business marketed their Facebook site by sending postcards to past patrons inviting them to friend the business on Facebook and they would be entered into a drawing. One business owner stated that her business success was due to Facebook as it was her only marketing tool. It was interesting that the majority of businesses that were not on Facebook were owned or managed by those over 40 years of age. There are a lot of assumptions that can be made about the correlation, but that would require additional research since this was not the focus of this paper.

There are other types of costs to consider as well, particularly the impact of negative comments posted on a Facebook page. In the world of SNS the slogan "any media is good media" doesn't apply; in fact negative comments can have devastating effect on a business. Another concern for businesses on Facebook is their loss of control over the content on their pages. During early history for businesses on Facebook, they were unable to delete negative comments, but they are now capable of deleting comments on their sites. The local businesses reported very few negative experiences with Facebook and their biggest concern was that it would be more harmful for their business to be "missing" on Facebook than to have a few negative comments. The literature research spoke of several harmful impacts to businesses from negative comments but locally the biggest concern viral issues that came from an online presence. Two local businesses reported unwanted viruses and photos, but they were quick to delete them and carry on. However one business interviewed felt Facebook brought more problems than benefits. They were a small jewelry store that experienced multiple negative issues with Facebook primarily with viruses and inane comments. They are no longer on Facebook because they said the time and hassles were not worth the potential for increased business. Most local businesses

have been fortunate to elude negative postings on their Facebook or Twitter accounts. However, it is a threat and it must be addressed. Those who do not check their sites multiple times a day are vulnerable to the flurry that may come from a negative post.

Twitter-

Twitter has only been around a few years and according to the national statistics is used by an older demographic than Facebook. The survey respondents differ in that 38% of those who use Twitter are 36-45, while 46% of them are 35 and under. Less than half of the respondents use Twitter and less than half of those have “followed” (*the Twitter term for becoming a fan of a business or comment on the site*) a business. It appears that Twitter is not a popular avenue for business to communicate with the public sector since 67% of respondents state they “are not interested in businesses.” This may change as the medium ages and becomes more popular. One of the differences between Twitter and Facebook is the amount of characters allowed when posting. Twitter only permits 140 characters per post, which may significantly inhibit the interaction between businesses and the public. The survey respondents indicated they would “follow” a business on Twitter for discounts, coupons, and promotions. For those who have “followed” a business on Twitter, only one-third of them have received benefits in the form of discounts or free stuff. None of the respondents have engaged in conversation with the business.

The survey results would lead one to conclude that businesses are not welcome on Twitter. While clearly national businesses utilizing Twitter, only four of the 20 local businesses interviewed were on Twitter. The lack of local business presence on Twitter speaks to the lack of interaction with the public on this platform. Twitter is not used by local businesses to connect

with the public. Twitter seems to be more useful as a Business-to-Business forum, or strictly for social uses.

Conclusion-

The Boise area is current with trends in social networking and Treasure Valley residents are representative of the country. They are willing to engage with businesses through social media. Local businesses are also representative of national businesses that use SNS. They know they “need” to be on SNS, but many of the small companies are unaware how to effectively use their sites. One business owner stated that in this bad economy he did not have time to use social media. Clearly, he does not understand the possibilities that exist with social media. Local businesses need education about those possibilities. They also need research providing them evidence and outcomes of businesses on SNS. There is an opportunity for local businesses to expand their usage of SNS by hiring a full-time SM manager to monitor and maintain their sites.

The need for more studies is apparent. A study discussing the age of business owners and why they avoid SNS might facilitate some of the older generation to embrace social media. Researchers might study the positive effects of SNS – or the negative ones. Research showing effective ways to market a company on Facebook or Twitter would benefit businesses. Social media is a new marketing tool and businesses are still learning and growing as it experiments with its possible uses. At this time, in the Treasure Valley the majority of businesses are not using social media effectively.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

**Interview Protocol–Final
Social Media & Business, Boise State University
Fall, 2011**

First Script (To qualify respondent) Telephone/Walk-in: Hello, my name is (interviewer). I am currently doing research on local businesses and their use of social media. Is there anyone available that might be able to answer a few questions for me about this subject?

(Once appropriate person is contacted): Hi, (Respondent's name) my name is (interviewer).

Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice. I won't take up much of your time today.

1. Is your business currently using social media?

(If no)

Why have you decided against using social media at this time?

Do you have any plans to use social media in the future? What plans?

(end of interview)

Thank you very much for your time today

(If yes)

What social media sites are you currently utilizing?

(Facebook, Twitter, others?)

Would you have time to meet with me either today or at a later time, to answer several more questions about your business use of social media?

Begin full interview, or set up appointment to come back to complete.

In person script: Thank you for meeting with me today. I appreciate you taking the time to discuss how and why your business uses social networking sites. I am also interested in your perceptions regarding its effectiveness for your business. Today I will be asking you question about your business and how social media is used within your organization. I expect this interview to take approximately 30 to 40 minutes. May I have your permission to record the interview in order to review the data for my research?

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? If not, let's get started.

Icebreaker

Tell me how you feel about businesses using social media?

Interview

How do you use social media? (Just information? Coupons? Discounts?)

(Probes)

Do you use any it for any of these steps? 1) pre-purchase (Information about sales) 2) purchase (Coupons) 3) post-purchase (reward for purchase)

Do you recruit followers or friend on social media?

What were the motivating factors that influenced your business to start using SNS?

(Probes)

Did you research demographics, costs, and management?

How long have you been using it?

How have your marketing strategies changed or adapted to the increase of social networking sites?

(Probes)

Do you have a social media manager or strategist?

Were they hired specifically for that role?

Is that role full-time for your business?

How much time and effort are you putting into your sites?

(Probes)

How is your site monitored? How often?

Do you allow customers to post comments on your sites?

Do you respond to customer comments on your SNS? How often?

Do you have customer testimonials on your SNS?

Please share with me any positive experiences you have had using social media.

(Probes)

Do you think it has benefited your business?

Has your company acquired customers as fans? What was the outcome?

Has your business increased as a result of social network usage?

Improved reputation?

Have you seen an increase in customer loyalty because of SNS?

Has social networking fostered better customer relationships?

What outcomes have you noticed?

Have you had any other types of experiences with SNS, positive or negative?

What are your future marketing plans with social media?

(Probes)

Where do you go from here?

Thank you so much for your time today. I appreciate your time and willingness to share information about your business and social media.

Is there anything else you would like to discuss that we haven't already covered?

Would you like a copy of the interview when the final draft is completed? We would also be happy to share with you the findings of our research, if you would like.

Thank you, again.

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Appendix B: Detailed break-down of businesses interviewed

Table 1

Business Participants

Local

| Type of Business | Small Business less than 25 employees | Medium Business 26-100 employees | Large Business over 101 employees | Owner or Manager under 40 | Owner or Manager over 40 | Facebook | Twitter |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Book Store | X | | | | X | Yes | No |
| Candy company | | | X | | X | No | No |
| City Civic Center | | X | | X | | Yes | Yes |
| Clothing company | X | | | X | | No | No |
| Construction | X | | | | X | No | No |
| Cookie making business | X | | | | X | Yes | No |
| Event Center | | X | | X | | Yes | No |
| Exercise retail clothing store | X | | | | X | No | No |
| Fabrication | X | | | | X | Yes | No |
| Frozen Yogurt | X | | | X | | Yes | Yes |
| Graphic design | X | | | X | | No | No |
| Gym | X | | | | X | Yes | No |
| Hospital | | | X | X | | Yes | Yes |
| Janitorial services | X | | | | X | No | No |
| Jewelry Store | X | | | | X | No | No |
| Lumber brokerage | X | | | | X | No | No |
| Multi-specialty medical clinic | | | X | X | | Yes | No |
| Networking | X | | | | X | Yes | Yes |
| Radio station | | X | | X | | Yes | No |
| Western Clothing Retail | | | X | X | | Yes | No |
| Totals | 13 | 3 | 4 | 9 | 11 | Yes - 12 No - 8 | Yes - 4 No - 16 |

Appendix C–Survey Questions

Default Question Block

The purpose of this survey is to research consumer interaction with local (Treasure Valley) businesses on Facebook and Twitter. This survey will take about 5 minutes and all answers will remain anonymous. Thank You!

Sex?

- Male
- Female

Age?

- Under 18
- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- Over 46

Do you have a Facebook account?

- Yes
- No

How much time do you spend on Facebook per day?

- Less than 1 hour per day
- 1-2 hours per day
- 3-4 hours per day
- More than 4 hours per day

Have you ever 'liked' a business on Facebook?

- Yes
- No

The reason you haven't 'liked' a business on Facebook? Select all that apply.

- Nothing to gain from 'liking' a business
- Not interested
- Did not want spam
- Don't think businesses should be on Facebook
- Brand content was not relevant to me
- Other: Please Specify

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What would motivate you to 'like' a business on Facebook? Select all that apply.

- Discounts
- Private Sales
- Product Development- trying new products
- Coupon
- Other: Please Specify

What type of business have you 'liked' on Facebook?

- National Business
- Local Business
- Both

What type of local business did you 'like'? Select all that apply

- Retail
- Non-profit
- Media company: ie radio, television, newspaper
- Food
- Other: Please Specify

Have you received a benefit for 'liking' a local business on Facebook?

- Yes
- No

What type of benefit(s) have you received for 'liking' a local business on Facebook? Mark all that apply.

- Coupon
- Discount
- Specials
- Information
- Other: Please Specify

Do you engage in conversation with local businesses on Facebook? ex. testimonials, remarks, reviews ect.

- Yes
- No

Did you have prior experience with the business before you 'liked' them on Facebook?

- Yes
- No

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Did you go back to the business after receiving a benefit?

- Yes
- No

In what way do you consider yourself a repeat customer? Select all that apply.

- Spend money with the business
- Support through fundraisers: ie non-profit organizations
- Listen to or watch the media: ie radio and television
- Other: Please Specify

Do you have a Twitter account?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever 'followed' a business on Twitter?

- Yes
- No

The reason you have not 'followed' a business on Twitter? Select all that apply.

- Nothing to gain from 'following' a business on Twitter
- Not interested
- Did not want spam
- Don't think businesses should be on Twitter
- Brand content was not relevant to me
- Other: Please Specify

What would motivate you to 'follow' a business on Twitter? Select all that apply.

- Discounts
- Private Sales
- Product Development- trying new products
- Coupon
- Other: Please Specify

What type of business have you 'followed' on Twitter?

- National Business
- Local Business

What type of local business have you 'followed' on Twitter?

- Retail

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- Non-profit
- Media company: ie radio, television, newspaper
- Food
- Other: Please Specify

Have you ever received a benefit for 'following' a local business on Twitter?

- Yes
- No

What type of benefit(s) have you received for 'following' a local business on Twitter? Select all that apply.

- Coupon
- Discount
- Specials
- Information
- Other: Please Specify

Do you engage in conversation with local businesses on Twitter? ex. testimonials, remarks, reviews ex.

- Yes
- No

Did you have prior experience with this local business before 'following' them on Twitter?

- Yes
- No

Did you go back to the business after receiving the benefit?

- Yes
- No

In what way do you consider yourself a repeat customer? Select all that apply.

- Spend money with the business
- Support through fundraisers i.e. non-profit organizations
- Listen to or watch the media i.e. radio and television
- Other: Please Specify