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With Facebook, YouTube and other social media opening exciting new doors for marketers, communication expert, Kim McKay, looks at simple ways for businesses to utilise these networks.

**SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE LATEST EVOLUTION** in online communication. It is the billions of conversations people have online every day, as they share their words, video and audio. More than just email, this is an on-going engagement between like-minded people. And much like websites were a decade ago, a social media presence is becoming an essential part of any progressive online strategy.

So, how do businesses get started and tap into this global phenomenon?

#### ATTRACTION

As with all strategies, the first step is preparation. And as with any relationship, your online presence needs to be attractive, relevant and up-to-date. If you are unfamiliar with social media, this is the time to seek training and develop your skills. Even if you are planning to outsource the function, you should still acquire a broad understanding of this dynamic media.

#### PLANNING

Define your strategy. Like any new activity in business, you should have a plan with measurable outcomes linked to your business goals. 'Hope' is not a strategy. Determine which social media technology and platforms are right for your business, and how best to engage in a network. You can't be effective on them all.

For travel, the social media platforms that utilise images, video, recommendations and deals are often most popular, so consider Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and 'blogs', remembering that your 'online' messages should be consistent with your 'offline' brand.

#### SHARE YOUR NETWORKS AND GROW

Once you have decided on your platforms it is time to expand your network with new fans and followers. There are lots of free tools online to help you get started with links to online communities, but it is worth remembering how you develop and maintain friendships outside the Internet and use similar practices.

Allow plenty of time as results take effort and commitment. It's important to remember that just because you are ready to tell everyone about your business, they may not be ready to listen.

#### HAVE FUN

Now you are ready, this is the time to be innovative, creative and have some fun. By posting exciting and engaging content, friends and followers will become advocates, and start talking about you to their friends. This type of communication will build product loyalty, so ensure you are truthful in your relationships. You should soon notice a shift in the quality of relationships with your social network as they appreciate your specialist advice.

#### TRACK YOUR RESULTS

The beauty of working in the online space is that everything is measurable. You are able to track your clicks, responses and site visits to quickly determine what is, and isn't, working for you.

Kim McKay is managing director of Klick Communications, a media and marketing consultancy that is leading the way in Social Media for the Australian travel industry. You can follow them on [@klicktweet](#); befriend them on Facebook [www.facebook.com/klickcommunications](#); or simply visit an old-fashioned website at [www.klick.com.au](#)