



PennState
College of Agricultural Sciences

A Guide to Developing a Social Media

Strategy for Ag Entrepreneurs

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Consumers are evolving, and our marketing efforts must evolve to meet their needs and preferences. We've moved, for the most part, from what can be considered a traditional marketing environment where the business controls the messages that consumers receive and one-way communication dominates, such as through printed materials or radio ads, to a more progressive marketing environment where two-way messaging and communication take place on multiple levels and across multiple platforms and media modes, such as through social media platforms.

Consumers can connect with a business in any number of ways, using the method that best suits them at the time and circumstance and their individual preference. Small acts by a business and interactions between a business and consumers are now more important than the mass-marketing message crafted by a business in the past. Interactions can be shared and go viral in the social media landscape, thus holding businesses to a higher level of transparency.

Let's take a minute to consider the long and winding road that many consumers take when making a purchase decision for products new to them. Consumers interested in a product may begin with an online search for the product to learn more about it, the business that produces and sells it, and what other consumers are saying about the product and/or the business. This online search activity may or may not include social media sites as sources of information. The consumer may then move on to asking members of their social networks for opinions and experiences with the product of interest or the business. They may also actively seek out content that the business is sharing on social media platforms to learn more about the product(s) and/or business.

Social Media Strategy Briefly Explained

A social media strategy is a plan for what you want to accomplish by using social media as a marketing tool for your business. Within the larger context of a business plan, your social media strategy will typically be a component of your marketing plan. Developing and implementing a comprehensive social media strategy is important. As a business, you want your online presence, content, and messaging to be accessible to consumers at all times and aligned across all platforms. That is to say that the branding strategy you have for your business should be consistent across all marketing tools. The image and perception of your business should be the same whether the consumer visits your website or is interacting on Twitter, Facebook, or your blog. Developing and implementing a social media strategy, rather than randomly publishing content, will help you more effectively meet your business goals, reduce your risk of losing consumer trust and damaging your brand, and ultimately save time and money. This publication discusses the concept of social media strategy and the steps to effective social media strategy development, implementation, and evaluation.

Key Questions

The key questions to answer during strategy development are:

- Who is your target audience?
- What are your primary objectives?
- Where does the overall strategy fit into the business?
- How will you differentiate yourself from the competition?
- When and how will you evaluate your strategy?

Strategy Development Process

Below is an illustration of the social media strategy development process. The process involves six steps, or stages. Notice that the process is similar to that for business plan development. Illustrated here as a cycle, it begins with listening and progresses through each of the other stages. The cycle is continuous. As consumers and markets are dynamic, so must be your social media strategy.



Figure 1. Social media strategy development process.

The following sections will discuss each of the stages of the social media strategy development process in more detail.

Stage 1: Listen and Research

The first stage of strategy development is the listen and research stage. Particularly for ag entrepreneurs new to social media marketing, this stage provides an opportunity to learn about each of the social media platforms, understand the type/forms of content shared on each, observe how users interact and engage, learn the functions each platform provides, and gauge the potential reach and influence that they may be able to develop through a presence.

Understanding consumer use of social media to connect with businesses is a crucial aspect of the listen and research stage. For businesses that are already in operation, one way to learn about social media use and preferences is to ask existing/current customers:

- What social media networks do you actively use?
- Which ones do you use to connect with businesses?
- What information would encourage you to visit and engage with us?
- How would you prefer to learn about activities, events, and new products?
- Which “how to” videos would be the most helpful to you?

Researching and studying data from third-party sources is another method for learning about consumer social media use. Several social media and digital marketing groups routinely conduct market research studies and publish the findings. Social Media Today (<https://www.socialmediatoday.com/>), Nielsen (<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en.html>), and Sprout Social (<https://sproutsocial.com/insights/>) are three such sources of a wide range of social media data and information.

The Pew Research Center is another reputable source for data on social media use and demographic research. Figure 2 is from Pew’s report “Share of U.S. Adults Using Social media, Including Facebook, Is Mostly Unchanged Since 2018.” It shows the use of various social media platforms by demographic group. This type of data can

be used to verify that the social media platform(s) identified for use by your business align with those being used by your target market consumers. Additionally, you may identify a social media platform that you may decide to start using as a way to reach a new target audience—that is, consumers who are currently not your primary customer audience. Use of social media is dynamic, and it is vital that you stay up to date on current trends both among your current social media followers and the public at large.

Use of different online platforms by demographic groups

% of U.S. adults who say they ever use the following online platforms or messaging apps

	YouTube	Facebook	Instagram	Pinterest	LinkedIn	Snapchat	Twitter	WhatsApp	Reddit
U.S. adults	73%	69%	37%	28%	27%	24%	22%	20%	11%
Men	78	63	31	15	29	24	24	21	15
Women	68	75	43	42	24	24	21	19	8
White	71	70	33	33	28	22	21	13	12
Black	77	70	40	27	24	28	24	24	4
Hispanic	78	69	51	22	16	29	25	42	14
Ages 18-29	91	79	67	34	28	62	38	23	22
18-24	90	76	75	38	17	73	44	20	21
25-29	93	84	57	28	44	47	31	28	23
30-49	87	79	47	35	37	25	26	31	14
50-64	70	68	23	27	24	9	17	16	6
65+	38	46	8	15	11	3	7	3	1
<\$30,000	68	69	35	18	10	27	20	19	9
\$30,000-\$74,999	75	72	39	27	26	26	20	16	10
\$75,000+	83	74	42	41	49	22	31	25	15
High school or less	64	61	33	19	9	22	13	18	6
Some college	79	75	37	32	26	29	24	14	14
College+	80	74	43	38	51	20	32	28	15
Urban	77	73	46	30	33	29	26	24	11
Suburban	74	69	35	30	30	20	22	19	13
Rural	64	66	21	26	10	20	13	10	8

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Source: Survey conducted Jan. 8-Feb. 7, 2019.

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Figure 2. Use of social media platforms by demographic groups, 2019.

Finally, another aspect of the listen and research stage is analysis of the competition. You want to form an understanding of how businesses similar to yours are utilizing social media. This includes businesses that are targeting the same audience or consumer groups as you but that you may not typically consider competition from a product or service standpoint. Questions to answer during this competitive analysis include:

- What platforms are being used? Not being used?
- How are they using social media? What is the mix of format (photos, videos, links, etc.) for content being posted? What is the frequency of posting for each of the platforms being used? What day of week and time of day are posts being made?
- What does their engagement look like? Spend time looking through the comments, replies, and reactions that competitors’ posts generate. What is the quantity of comments, replies, and reactions? Is there any correlation between engagement levels and when the posts were made? Finally, how would you classify the engagement context? For example, are comments and reactions mostly positive and supportive, or are there numerous complaints and “angry face” reactions?

While analyzing the competition, take note of what you like and dislike and how you may be able to differentiate yourself. For instance, perhaps you have a witty persona that your customers enjoy, which you could carry over to social media as your social media “voice” for the business.

Stage 2: Determine Goals and Objectives

Once you have a feel for the environments that the different social media platforms offer, who and where your audience is, and what their needs are, you are ready to begin developing specific social media goals and objectives. When doing so, your aim should be to achieve your business’s goals while also meeting the needs of your target audience. Potential goals that a business might identify for their social media presence include increasing sales or improving customer service, while customers may be looking for discounts or new product offerings.

Each social media platform offers its own advantages to certain types of goals. For example, Twitter and Facebook have become go-to platforms for consumers looking for customer service, while Instagram currently does not lend itself to customer service activities as readily. Over time, however, you may have noticed that the other platforms incorporate functionalities to try to compete. For instance, Twitter didn’t start out with photo and video sharing capabilities.

Let’s work through the process of developing a social media objective for a specific marketing goal that a business may have. In this example (Figure 3), a vegetable farm has the marketing goal to increase the number of customers at their on-farm market. The business decides on a strategy of developing relationships with current and potential customers through social media. Given this, one of the social media objectives could be to share one product preparation example per week as a way to demonstrate to customers that the business wants them to be successful using their products. By sharing ideas on how their products can be used, the business is strengthening relationships with current customers and offering value to prospective customers. Taking the process one step further to achieve that one social media objective, they might decide the objective could be accomplished through Facebook Live videos, allowing live demonstrations of someone preparing a dish using the featured product and interaction with viewers.

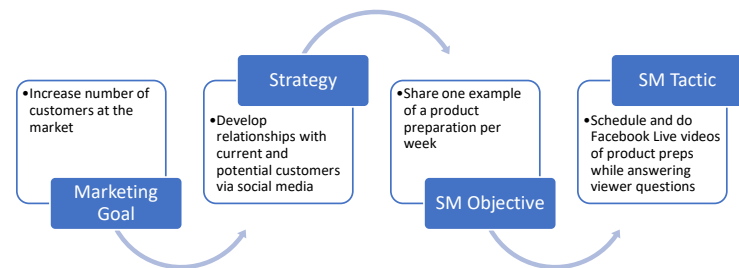


Figure 3. Example goal and objective setting.

While only one social media objective is described here, the business could develop as many as they thought were needed to achieve the goal of increasing market numbers. Additionally, specific social media strategies can utilize any number of different social media platforms, depending on the objective.

While you have goals for your use of social media, properly executed, achieving your business’s social media objectives will also fulfill your audience’s need for being connected to your business on social media. The table below categorizes the reasons people follow businesses on social media.

Table 1. Motivations to follow businesses on social media.

Interest in Product/Service	Content from the Business	Company Information/Happenings	Communication
Obtain discounts/incentives	To learn (information)	Events	Ask questions
Learn about new products/services	Entertainment	Learn about the company	Provide feedback/input
	Stories	Learn about employees	

Illustrated in the graph below are the top six reasons indicated by consumers for following a business on social media as reported in a 2019 Sprout Social report.

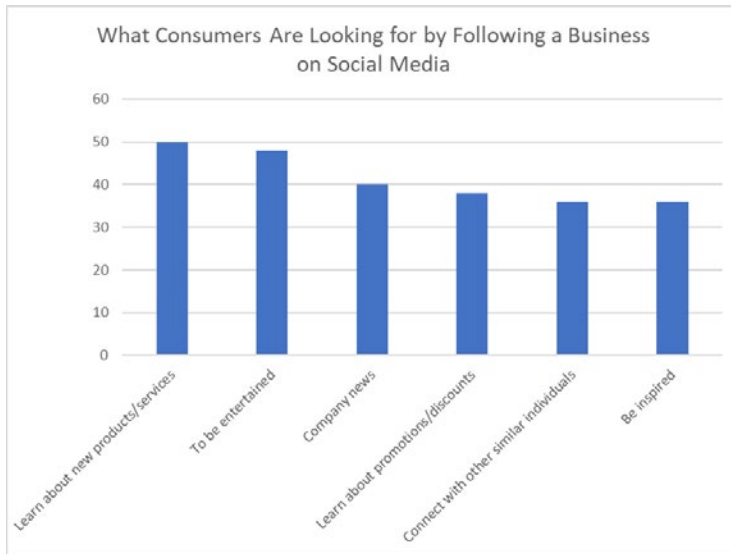


Figure 4. What consumers want by following businesses on social media.

The highest percentage of consumers surveyed wanted to learn about new products/services when following a business on social media, followed by content that entertained them, shared company news, gave information on promotions and discounts, connected them with other similar individuals, and provided inspiration.

Now compare what consumers are looking for with the top six types of content posted by marketers per Sprout Social (2018).

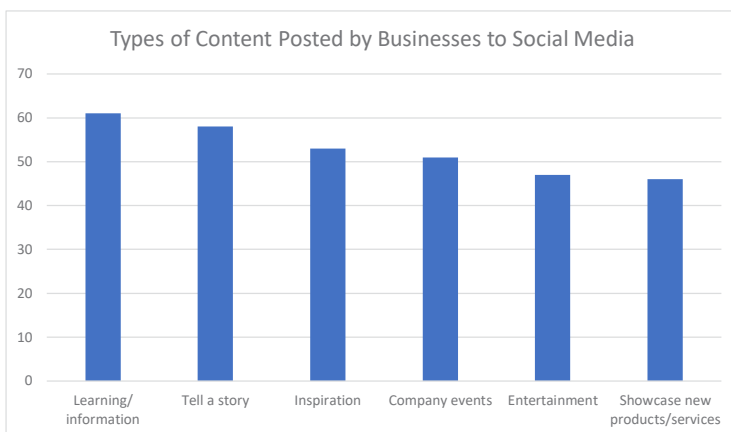


Figure 5. Types of content posted by businesses on social media.

As Figures 4 and 5 show, in general, what consumers are looking for is not aligning with what businesses are posting. The challenge for ag entrepreneurs developing a social media strategy is in determining through research and trial and error what the most effective mix of post content and format is for their target audience. It's important to understand that this will change over time as well, so following through with the measure success stage of strategy development and starting the cycle over again on a routine basis is critical.

In addition to understanding why consumers follow businesses on social media and the content they value, it's also valuable to know why consumers might stop following. Per Elliott (2017), these reasons include:

- Repetitive content
- Too frequent posting
- Too much in their newsfeed
- Don't like the business's social media activities (e.g., poor hashtag use, humor to criticize, too much self-promotion)
- Irrelevant content
- Lack of engagement by the business
- Decide to follow a competitor

An important element of goal and objective setting is determining how you will know whether you've successfully achieved them. Therefore, determine what analytic data you will use to measure progress. With our example business, one way of measuring effectiveness might be to share a code at the end of the Facebook Live videos that customers would give when making purchases. A count of how many times customers gave the code could then be kept and used to determine whether the social media strategy was helping to meet the marketing goal. Without quantifiable measures of success, it will be difficult to determine whether you should make changes to any aspect of your strategy. Measurement of social media activity is discussed further in its own section.

Stage 3: Developing a Plan

Once you have identified your goals and objectives, you need to create a plan, or “map,” of how you will achieve your objective(s) and thus carry out your social media strategy. The plan should include:

- **Identified decision makers.** Who will be responsible for the social media strategy? Who will determine what content is developed and published to your business’s social media account(s)? Who determines what that content is and how it is used? Who will determine whether the implemented plan is achieving the objectives set forth and have the authority to make changes?
- **Defined roles and responsibilities.** In small businesses, the decision-maker and the person doing the work are often one in the same. However, if multiple people are available to execute the social media strategy, be certain to define each person’s roles and responsibilities. Make sure that those involved understand all aspects of the plan and each person’s role in carrying out the plan, and that they communicate with each other as appropriate. One individual may be involved at all levels of the social media strategy, while others are only responsible for certain aspects. For example, a marketing manager may be involved in all aspects from idea generation to text phrasing to final publishing, while another individual such as a cheesemaker is only brought into the process to record a video explaining how a certain cheese is made.
- **Resource allocation.** Social media is a fluid and dynamic marketing tool. As such it requires resources that may be new to your business’s marketing toolbox. What resources does each person with a responsibility to your social media strategy need to accomplish the objectives and tactics outlined? For instance, for one person this may require a smartphone/mobile device or technical training, while another person may require a subscription to a management tool (HootSuite, Buffer, etc.) to successfully perform their responsibilities.

While in the previous step you determined what your social media objectives will be, during the planning stage you will flesh out the specific tactics that you will use to achieve those objectives. This includes selecting the specific social media platforms. Using what you learned during the listen and research stage and the points that follow, decide which social media tools you will utilize for each tactic aligned with an objective and when sharing each piece of content. You may decide to share certain types of content only through one tool while sharing other pieces of content through multiple tools.

Consider the questions below when choosing the social media platforms that you will use. You’ll be using not only what you’ve learned during the listen and research stage but also the information collected and decisions that you’ve previously made and built into your broader marketing plan.

- What are your marketing goals and objectives?
- Who do you want to connect with?
- What content formats do you want to share?

- How do you want to engage with followers (frequency and form, e.g., live video or text)?
- On what platforms are your competitors?

A quick note about the last point: While instinct may be that you want to have a presence on the same social media platforms as your competitors, consider the possibility of developing a competitive advantage by using a platform that they are not using, if that platform meets the needs of your target audience and will help you meet your business goals.

To assist in strategic publishing of content, you may find it useful to develop a timeline of important dates (events, promotions, product launches, etc.) for your business. Then decide which items of content you will share at specific points in time along that timeline. Ideally, you want the content that you’re sharing to be related to these events in some fashion. Certainly, you can share other unrelated content at the same time via social media. But if you’re launching a new product, not sharing information about that new product makes no sense, especially if promoting that new product is involved in fulfilling the social media objective that you developed. Many preplanned guides and calendars exist to assist with content creation or get you thinking about possibilities.

While the plan you develop should lay out your ideal approach, you may find it helpful to also develop some alternative approaches, or a “Plan B,” should substantial changes occur in your business. For instance, if the person primarily responsible for social media marketing should experience a lengthy illness, you may want to have a slimmed down alternative plan that someone else could step in to accomplish.

Stage 4: Develop Content

The next step in social media strategy development is the generation of content (photos, videos, stories, information, resources, etc.). While some may feel that this is part of the plan development stage, it is critical enough to highlight on its own. Small ag businesses typically don't have the ability to dedicate one person to the position of social media manager. This requires you to actively manage and plan time for content development activities. To succeed in achieving your social media objectives, you must have the content to share, which you identified in the previous stage. Invest the time necessary to create quality content. Mapping out the content you want to share in the previous stage will provide focus in the content creation stage.

"Social holidays" or "national day of" calendars can be convenient in helping you connect to a topic that's being discussed on social media on particular days. For example, Figure 6 shows how a fruit farm capitalized on the date March 14 (3.14), also referred to as Pi Day.

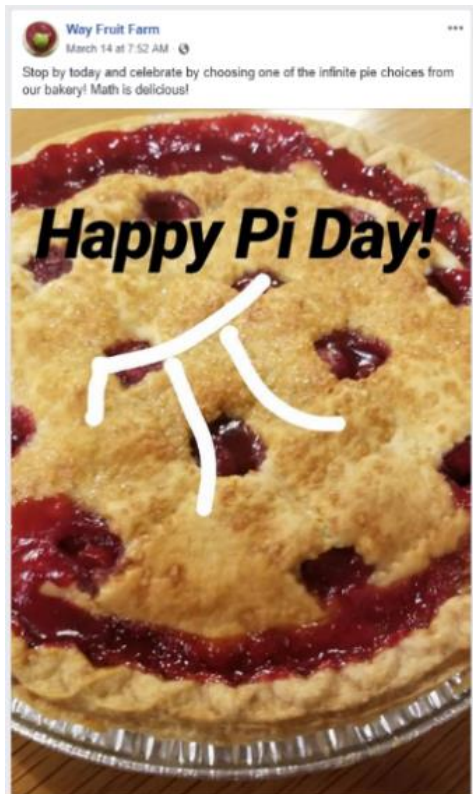


Figure 6. Example of publishing content tied to a trending social media "event." Credit: Way Fruit Farm

The type, or format, for your content can be a determining factor in the success of your social media strategy. Sprout Social (2018) found that the content type most desired by consumers were links to more information (30 percent). This was followed by graphics/images (18 percent), produced video (17 percent), text/conversations (11 percent), and produced/edited photos (7 percent). However, the key to the content format question is to match it with the subject of your content and your specific audience. For example, you may prefer to use video to show a detailed process, but then realize that a before and after photo would better appeal to your followers. Once your strategy is implemented and you can analyze performance, you may decide to adjust the format of your content.

Numerous online tools exist to assist in content creation. For example, if you're not happy with your visual design skills, you have the option of using online tools that assist with predesigned templates and color palettes. Canva (<https://www.canva.com/>), Figma (<https://www.figma.com/>), Fotor (<https://www.fotor.com/>), and Colormind (<http://colormind.io/>) are some examples of design tools that can be used. Canva also provides articles on best practices and examples to spark creativity.

Tips for managing content development:

- Create a file or list of ideas.
- Keep a file of finished content (photos, video, stories, data, etc.) that is readily accessible for use.
- Schedule time into your calendar for content creation just as you would for other work responsibilities for yourself and/or employees.
- Develop content during a slow(er) time.

Stage 5: Implement and Engage

Once you have the pieces of your strategy, it's time to implement it. Implementation and engagement is the fifth stage in our strategy development process. Remember that social media is termed such for a reason—you need to be social.

When posting your content, make sure you engage the audience. Feel free to get the conversation started by asking questions or asking about thoughts, experiences, or opinions. Sharing photos of everyday activities can also generate interaction with followers. When composing text to accompany your content, use language that is authentic to you and your business's brand. Doing so will convey authenticity to your followers.

If your followers (or potential followers) initiate engagement by asking you questions or sharing their experiences, respond to them as appropriate. Sometimes it'll be as simple as saying "thank you." If they seem particularly inquiring, offer them additional information or resources, if you are able, or offer to take the discussion offline. For example, let's say that you tweeted a picture of yourself pruning fruit trees and a follower started asking you questions about pruning. You should answer their questions as best as you are able, but you may also want to direct them to fact sheets or instructional videos, the links to which you could tweet.

Timing of social media posts is a common question among those getting started. Guides do exist that highlight popular usage days and time of day by type of platform as well as for specific industries (food, technology, etc.). Following a timing guide can serve you well as you are implementing a newly developed social media strategy. However, over time and using the data you collect and analyze in the next stage, you should plan on refining the timing of your posts to align with when your followers are online and most engaged with your content.

Ensuring responsiveness to engagement initiated by followers is crucial. If you decide to use a management tool (TweetDeck or Hootsuite, for example) to schedule and publish content—particularly if scheduling posts several days or a week or two in advance—it can be easy to forget about checking on these posts for engagement. To combat a “set it and forget it” mentality, you may find it beneficial to carry a mobile device with the applications for each social media platform installed and notifications turned on. Alternatively, you can plan specific times into your daily schedule for checking your social media and engaging as needed.

Stage 6: Measure Success

The last stage in the strategy development process is to measure success. Analyzing social media activity will allow you to determine whether you are meeting your social media, marketing, and business objectives and whether you are efficient in your use of social media.



Figure 7. Facebook reaction options.

Major social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, etc.) all offer internal analytic information for business accounts. While there is some variation in the specific data collected and provided by each, for the most part you can get simple post engagement data and follower information (typically after reaching a minimum threshold number of followers for each platform). Analytic information provided by each platform is continually evolving just as the user interfaces are.

Table 2 categorizes the most basic analytic data available. The focus of social media strategy success is often based on the quantitative data listed in the first column. However, the value of each of these varies. For example, how valuable is having 5,000 followers of a Facebook page if only a handful are engaging with your content? On the other hand, a smaller follower group that is highly engaged by providing feedback to posts or sharing your content with their networks can prove more valuable, and possibly profitable, for your business. Recall in stage two when identifying your goals and objectives how you said you would determine whether you’re successfully achieving your objective(s).

Table 2. Analytic data available from social media platforms.

Quantitative (number of)	Qualitative	Follower
Likes/reactions	Sentiment	Gender
Shares/retweets	Context	Age
Comments	Themes	Location
Post/link clicks		Language
Followers/subscribers		When online (day of week and time of day)
Favorites/pins/saves		
Impressions/views/reach		

The second column in Table 2 lists three qualitative aspects that you can assess for your social media activity. What is the sentiment of the engagement that occurs? For example, are you posting content intended to be humorous, yet it's eliciting negative reactions? Or are you publishing content that resonates with your audience and is reflected through positive reactions and comments? Perhaps you can identify themes in the comments or replies; use this information to guide your future post activity.

Finally, you can look at some follower demographic information, as listed in the third column of Table 2. This information can help you determine whether you're connecting with your targeted audience(s) as well as target the timing of your posts to when followers are also online. However, you should be aware that follower demographic information is what those individuals complete for their personal profiles and may not always be accurate.

If you determine that your objectives are not being met, this is the stage at which you can determine where you may make changes in your strategy. Changes could be made to the timing of posts, subject or format of content, or platform(s) being used. Analysis of this data may also give insight to new opportunities. For instance, you may see that your content is resonating with a different audience than intended.

Finally, while business and organizational marketing plans may be analyzed and refined on a longer timeframe, such as on an annual basis, with social media, it is imperative to assess your activity on a shorter time frame, perhaps a quarterly basis.

Summary

Development of a strategy is critical to effective and efficient use of social media by agricultural entrepreneurs. By taking the time to follow and complete the stages of the social media strategy development process, you'll be setting yourself, and your business, up for a positive experience and returns on your time investment.

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