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Social Media Marketing

The Art of Conversational Sales

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Introduction

Social Media Marketing is the hottest new marketing concept and every business owner wants to know how social media can generate value for their business. This whitepaper provides you an outline for developing and managing a successful Social Media Marketing program. We examine what Social Media Marketing is and how to use social media in your marketing strategy.



People are social by nature and collect or share information that is important to them. Social Media Marketing is about understanding how technology is making it easier for people to connect socially with their social networks and how your business can profit from that understanding. More and more of your customers, whether for personal use, business-to-consumer or business-to-business reasons use social media in every aspect of their daily life.

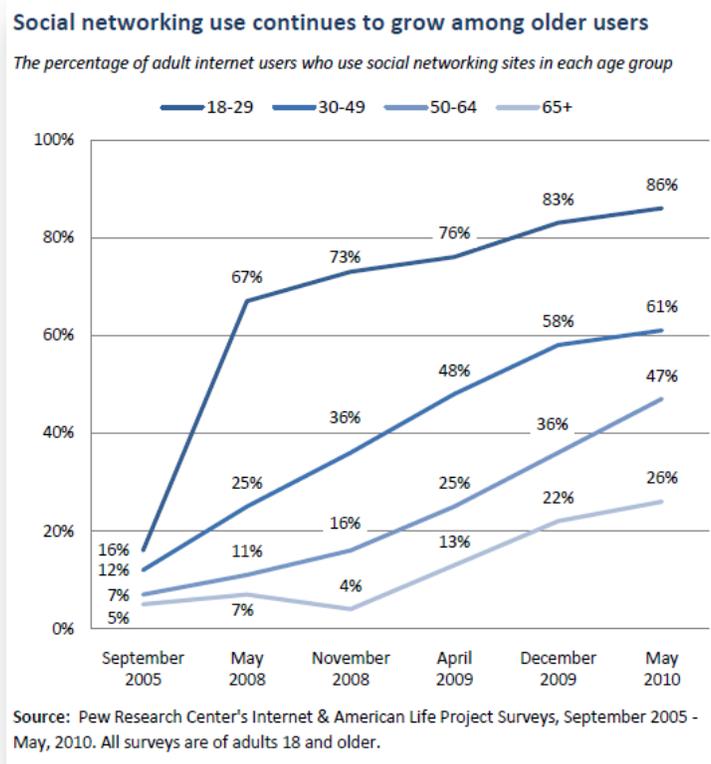
The Use of Social Media Continues to Grow

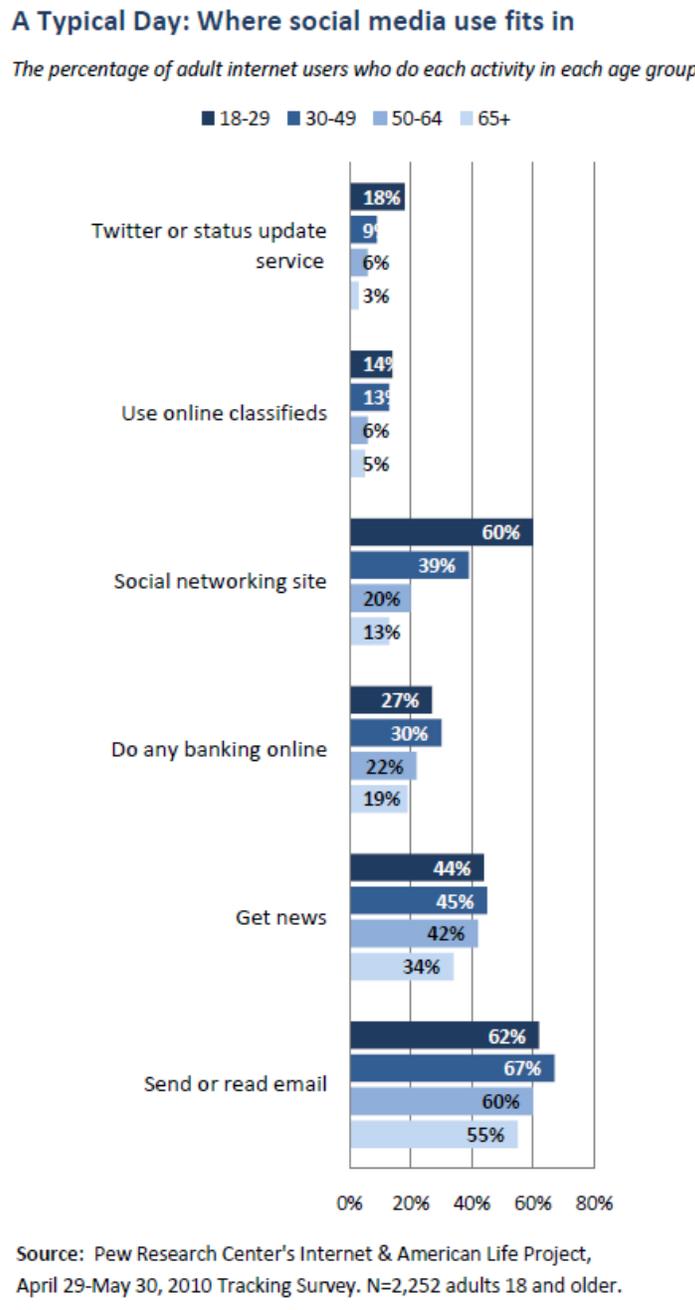
First, let's look at some facts about who uses social media and how this use is evolving. The use of social media has dramatically grown and is not limited to just younger generations. Although, younger generations have a very high percentage of users, older users have begun to integrate social networking into their daily lives.

The chart on the right depicts the penetration rate and use of social networking by age group. (1)

The U.S. has experienced a significant growth of social media use with nearly half of online adults ages 50-64 and one-in-four seniors (65+) with access to the Internet now considering themselves as regular users of Facebook and LinkedIn. However, these older users (50+) continue to have a heavy reliance on email as their primary contact tool.

The following chart demonstrates how the various demographics use social networking as an everyday occurrence. (1)





What is Social Media?

Social Media is about networking and connecting by engaging in conversations through technology. Although based on technology, it is real and honest conversation that people share and discuss. People

share thoughts, activities and engage in conversations of interest to them. They do this by connecting with people of similar interests or backgrounds such as; hobbies or professional interests, high school classmates, family and friends, etc. When using social media and a person finds someone else's content self-serving, too sales oriented or simply boring, their natural reaction is to disconnect or block that person from the conversation.

How Technology Impacts Business

Over the past 40 years, we have experienced a radical shift in how business is conducted and how people interact. The introduction of personal computers, the Internet, and e-commerce have had a tremendous impact on how businesses operate and market. The introduction of social media technology is accelerating and we can expect it to have a similar impact on businesses now and into the future.

KEY BUSINESS POINT: People want real conversation that interests them and is meaningful to their interests.

As new technologies became available, businesses that learn to use new technologies gain great benefits. Some of the best-known examples include technology-driven companies such as Microsoft, eBay, Amazon and Google. Less well-known examples include a Seattle Coffee company that experimented with Twitter and learned how to create greater profitability during the normal daily business lulls, or a small, family operated insurance agency that actively integrated social media into their business model and rejuvenated the business with more clients and prospects. These examples of early adopters demonstrate implementing a powerful tool before your competition wins you market share and creates wealth for your business.

Finally, the explosive growth of the smartphone market and mobile computing is affecting your strategy, as social media connectivity is becoming easier and is helping social media grow even faster!

A New Type of Marketing

The American Marketing Association defines Marketing as; “ the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.”

In defining how traditional marketing works, we know a business will buy space or time in a certain activity such as radio and television, newspaper or yellow page ads or direct mail campaigns to distribute to a large group of potential customers. This is “Push” marketing, because businesses push their marketing message out to a wide audience hoping to make a connection or position their brand so that the consumer will purchase their product or service. In “Push” marketing it takes a lot of effort and money to connect with a very small percentage of customers.



Through the development of the Internet, we experience the sensation of customers finding product and services through the advanced algorithms of the search engines. This is “Pull” marketing because a properly constructed business website or online advertising campaign pulls the customer through the search engines to your business because your website contains the proper content the customer is looking to purchase.

The rapid evolution of social media demands a new type of “Engagement” marketing by business. Business owners now need to engage customers and prospects in an ongoing, meaningful and productive conversation.

This conversation allows you to:

- Foster trust and professional confidence with these individuals,
- Improve your product and services to better service your target market, and
- Build a strong referral network of impromptu salespersons to help sell your products and services through their personal networks.

A properly designed and executed Social Media Marketing strategy provides:

- Improved search results,
- Better customer service,
- Better brand awareness,
- Improved PR and media relations,
- Improved recruitment opportunities,
- The ability to conduct online reputation management, and
- Very loyal customers.

KEY BUSINESS POINT: In order to establish a successful Social Media Marketing strategy, you must understand how to create a meaningful conversation with your prospects and customers. Once you understand what information they value, you can engage them in a meaningful and lasting conversation. This engagement enables periodic sales advertisements to them through your mutual social media conversations.

Create a Social Media Strategy for Your Business

Start using social media by making a plan and methodically executing and monitoring your plan. The following process is a good overview of how to develop and maintain your Social Media Marketing strategy.



The Discovery Phase

- a.** Determine the Goals and Objectives you want to accomplish.

- i. Define your Social Media goals; then determine how these goals complement your business goals. Example goals and objectives might include:
 1. Improve your brand presence across social media channels.
 2. Increase positive sentiment about your brand.
 3. Develop relationships with prospects or future business opportunities.
 4. Increase traffic to your website.
 - ii. Establish appropriate metrics for each goal and objective.
 - b. Research the social media habits of your industry and target market. Find out where your customers and prospects network online and what information they find of value in these conversations. If you have not already done so, now is a good time to test out how these various social media sites work and what others might be saying about your business and industry.
 - i. Note: You need to be very clear about identifying your target market, the better you define what your target market is interested in; the easier it will be to create a strong customer relationship.

The Pilot Project Phase

- c. Start slowly by selecting two or three pilot projects.
 - i. Start with a workload you can manage. As you gain experience and confidence with a social media site, start participating in the next one on your list. For example, join Facebook, start an Online Reputation Management process, join a forum.
 - ii. Create and maintain a viable blog as one of your initial pilot projects. Your blog can also enhance the value of your website to the search engines.
 - d. Begin making connections through your selected social networking sites. Remember, this should be a natural process of engaging with your customers or prospects.
 - i. Start by listening and then slowly contribute to the conversation.
 - ii. Become a valued participant of the conversation and don't start off by selling your products or services.

The Creation Phase

- e. Develop relationships by participating in the conversations. For example, post comments on blogs and forums, answer questions on Yahoo!, LinkedIn, join groups or forums related to your industry and follow the right Twitter chats.
 - f. Define the Content your Visitors Want. Identify the information that is most valuable to your prospects and customers. The key here is to define the types of content you will deliver. Once you provide the right content you will earn the right to advertise to these prospects and customers every once in a while. Most successful conversation streams contain a mixture of content types, all of which offer value to the recipient.
 - i. Note: Offering value is the most important aspect of your content; if your content most interests you rather than the recipient, you may acquire very few followers.
 - g. Define your Communication Style. Consider your target market and what organizational voice best appeals to them (e.g., funny, sarcastic, intelligent, authoritative, expert, etc.)

and reflects the values and culture of your business. A good organizational voice is a personable, consistent, and believable voice that is attractive to your target audience. The reward for successfully developing your organizational voice is your customers and prospects allowing you to sell to them with a well-timed advertisement.

- h.* Create information of value for customers and prospects. Based on the content and the organizational voice you identified, begin actively participating in the appropriate conversations.
 - i.* Once you have mustered enough support through a steady stream of strong content, you can send out or post an occasional advertisement or coupon.
 - ii.* Plan to periodically communicate a summary of the information you are providing to them.
 - iii.* Create blog articles based upon the conversations in which you are participating. This develops a good destination for you to refer your connections to once you have become fully accepted into the conversation.

The Measurement Phase

- i.* Measure the results of your campaign. Assess how well your strategy is performing by comparing the actual results to your desired results.
- j.* Assess the results, modify your strategies and improve the performance of your campaigns. Now that you measured those results, what are those results telling you? Take the time to analyze what these results mean to your objectives, modify your campaigns and start testing and measuring the impact these changes have on your campaign.

The Importance of Integrating Social Media into your Website

As you develop a successful Social Media Marketing strategy, consider how this strategy integrates with your website. In today's business world, your website and your social media marketing strategy are messengers that carry your marketing message. However, in order for your online presence to effectively convey this message, every component must work together in unison. This requires bolting these pieces of your strategy together to form a seamless marketing tool.

KEY BUSINESS POINT: Remember, you are creating a conversation, which is a two-way communication between you and your prospects and customers. As a rule of thumb you should post a minimum of eight to nine content messages to every "sales related" message. This keeps the conversation focused on valuable content and builds customer loyalty and trust.

Create the opportunity for the consumer to access your company content through their channel of choice, whether this is your website or the social media channels you develop that link back to your website. Consider your social media channels the windows into your website that provide accessibility to discount offers, news and information for those communities where you establish ongoing conversations. By creating this linkage, you establish your website as the destination and your social media channels as the conversation for your prospects and customers. The destination is a place your

customers go when they have a specific reason to do so (make purchases, sign up for a new program, review a new product, etc.). As a destination, your customers only visit when they have a specific need that can be satisfied on your website. The conversation can happen every day and allows you to build a relationship with your users, all the while giving you an opportunity to direct your contacts back to the destination (your website) – but only as necessary and every once in a while.

As user-friendly as your website may be, there are only a limited number of ways for people to interact with your company website (online forms, purchase products, download whitepapers, etc.). Visitors to your website come to find specific information or to take a specific action that once completed generally has them leaving the website in pursuit of their next informational need. However, your social media program provides 24/7 access to everyone and anyone who connects to your social media channels. In fact, it gives them your information on demand, when and where they want it.

Can a company be successful with only a social media presence and no website? Your website provides authority and a face to your business, whereas your social media channels provide an informal method of connecting with your prospects and customers. Most likely, any company not taking advantage of a website is making it very difficult to convert their social conversation into a tangible transaction and therefore experiencing only limited success online.

How to Integrate Social Media with your Website

Social media channels have a remarkable ability to attract customers with very brief statements, and they can lead your prospects and customers to valuable content located on your website. On the other hand, your website can encourage visitors to engage with your company by prominently linking to your social media channels. In order to accomplish this seamless integration, you should follow these seven steps.

- 1. Modify your website to complement your Social Media Strategy.** Now that you understand how your customers and prospects use social media, you need to align your website content with your Social Media Strategy.
 - a.** Design your web properties with your three to five most important visitor profiles in mind, with specific paths clearly identified for each visitor profile. These paths drive visitors to take specific actions, such as completing a form, buying a product or signing-up for a newsletter.
 - b.** Identify how your social media channels provide customer-relevant conversations that build strong relationships earning you the right to send them links that drive them to your website and from which, they will drop into the action funnels you create.
 - c.** Provide the necessary content and calls to action on your website that encourage visitors to join in your social media conversations.
- 2. Identify the Actions you want your Customers and Prospects to take.** The customers you identified in step 1 will visit your website for a specific reason and react by taking certain actions. Which actions you drive your customers to take depends heavily on what you

are trying to accomplish. If you are a B2C business you might be satisfied with an online sale of a product or a request for directions to your business. If you are a B2B business you may want that visitor to identify themselves by completing a contact form. The best websites provide visitors with several options for the type of actions they can take. However, the goal is to design specific actions for specific types of visitors, to drive each set of visitors to the site using targeted Social Media Marketing strategies, and to employ a measurable system for meeting both their needs and yours.

- 3. Implement your Conversations.** Start participating in the social media channels you identified in your Social Media Marketing strategy. A best practice is to have social media feeds providing your visitors with live samples of these conversations on your website.
 - a.** Note: Remember that building conversations is a long-term activity that takes an investment of time, energy, and patience.
- 4. Provide the Content your Visitors Want.** As you participate in the conversations, observe what information is most valuable to your prospects and customers. Experiment with your information to see how the conversation evolves and what offers successfully drive visitors to your website.
- 5. Maintain a consistent Communication Style.** Your organizational voice must be consistent on both your website and throughout your conversations. Having an inconsistent organizational voice will cause confusion and mistrust of your message with your customers and prospects.
- 6. Send Advertisements.** Now that you have the right channels for your customers, and are providing a valuable stream of information in the voice unique to your business, develop a strategy for embedding advertising and promotions into the conversation.
 - a.** Note: recent studies have shown the number one reason a person provides their contact information to a business is in return for a discount or a free product or service. So, consider providing an online bonus or discount that is exclusive to your conversation participants to incent visitors to go to your website.
- 7. Use your Web Properties to drive people to take the actions you are targeting.** With this final step, you are leveraging your web properties (your website or an appropriate social media site) in such a manner that they take the actions you want them to take when they arrive at your website.

How to Integrate Social Media into your Sales Process

When you look at your most recent sales, do you know if your buyers and prospects checked you out online either before or after the sale? If they were looking, what did they find out about you and your business? Do you think what they discovered helped make the sale or did it make the sale more difficult (or possibly even resulted in a lost sale) for you? Have you gone online and searched for information about your company, products, market and even your competition. Once you

KEY BUSINESS POINT: It will take a few iterations before you obtain satisfactory results, so don't be afraid to experiment with your content, voice and style of advertisements. Once you understand the best combination for your customers, you should enjoy a strong click-through rate from your social media channels to your website.

do, you can see how easy it is to find out about you and your business. Given the abundance of information, or sometimes lack of information, have you considered how much influence your online presence has on your sales results, as well as on your sales pipeline? Whether you are a B2C or B2B business, your online reputation may well be the key to your success or lack of success in generating sales. So, let's take a quick look at how you can use this reputation to help improve your sales results.

Given the challenges of today's market, both consumer and business buyers are facing increasing pressure to maximize the value of their purchase and stretch their dollar as far as possible. One of the most significant tools a buyer can use in the buying process is to research all aspects of their purchase decision through the Internet. Because it is so easy to access information through the Internet, the well-informed buyer now has more control over the sales process than ever before. This shift in the sales process has evolved into two of the most important concepts in the ongoing evolution of sales. These concepts, known as socially facilitated sales and socially directed buying, reflect how the Internet has become an integral part of the sales process.

In order for your business to develop an appropriate Social Media Marketing strategy, you need to understand how your target market perceives your product and services. Once you understand this

KEY BUSINESS POINT: The best time to identify whether your business requires a socially facilitated selling or socially directed buying strategy is during the Discovery Phase of your Social Media Marketing Strategy.

perception, you can develop the appropriate organizational voice and provide the appropriate content to best position you with your prospects and customers based on either the socially facilitated selling or socially directed buying concept.

Socially Facilitated Selling vs. Socially Directed Buying

So, what is the difference and how do you know which of these concepts is most relevant to your business. Typically, if you are involved with selling expensive or complex products and services the buyer wants to know they are dealing with a knowledgeable expert that can help guide them to purchasing the right product or services that best meet their needs. Therefore, to better market your products or services, your business and your sales team need to be recognized as product experts by your target market. This is where the concept of Socially Facilitated Selling becomes the dominant concept for your Social Media Marketing strategy. More specifically, Socially Facilitated Selling is the business process of creating an environment where your sales team can more effectively close sales. This requires a partnership, a clear strategy and solid coordination between your business and the individual salesperson's social media efforts. The bottomline for your business is that your sales team needs to become recognized as industry experts rather than smooth talking, or arm twisting salespersons.

A good example of a socially facilitated selling business is a medical equipment manufacturing company. Medical businesses rely on the expertise of the sales representative to ensure they purchase the correct

product and use the product in the proper manner. Therefore, a good sales process requires a strong brand reputation and a sales force recognized as industry experts.

In order to implement a Socially Facilitated Selling strategy, your business needs to accomplish 3 things:

1. Your sales team must understand and complement your organizational voice.
2. You must collaborate with and work through your sales team to implement a coordinated Social Media Marketing strategy.
3. Your business, and your sales team, needs to promote interaction with your customer base.

What if your business focuses on selling consumer or commodity products? Then the concept of Socially Directed Buying is the marketing concept you need to adapt into your marketing strategy. This concept applies when the buying process involves products or services that are readily available through local retail establishments or through ecommerce websites and the consumer feels, they can make the necessary purchase decision based upon readily available information on the Internet, or from among their trusted relationships. Therefore, Socially Directed Buying is the business process of supporting your sales efforts by more effectively engaging your prospects and customers, while also improving your brand reputation through Social Media. Socially Directed Buying is a strategy that seeks to influence your prospects and customers by developing and maintaining a positive brand and reputation in your online marketplace.

A good example of a socially directed buying business is a local Sports Shop specializing in running products. Although these running products are readily available at a local store, the consumer has the opportunity to search for information online regarding the pricing and variety of products, as well as the type of expertise and support offered by the sports shop. The consumer can also tap into their social network and ask for recommendations on what products to buy and whether to buy the products online or at a local retail store. They can research the reputation of the retail store through their social media networks or by researching the reviews and comments posted on the Internet.

In order to influence your prospects and customers, your sales effort must follow a process that captivates and transforms your prospects by implementing these six steps, which are an expansion of the Creation Phase of Social Media Marketing strategy:

1. **Develop the proper context of your message.** The initial contact with your prospects must be within a context that makes sense and is attractive to the prospect. For example, if you market supplements for seniors, then you should not expect to get a good response on teenager based sites.
2. **Create an appropriate draw.** The draw is the method you use to encourage the prospect to take action. Think of this step as the link back to your website or social networking site.
3. **Create the proper content that engages.** Engagement is the sharing of knowledge with your prospect. This content can be in various forms, such as video, online presentations, podcasts, etc.

4. **Provide a sample offering.** Whenever you can, share a sample of your product or services. This encourages engagement by your prospects.
5. **Ensure you follow-up.** This is how you make the sale by following-up on the information and samples you provided. If you provided high-quality information about your products and services, you should be rewarded with a purchase transaction.
6. **Request they share.** After the sale, encourage your customer to share the news of what they purchased with their social network. This starts the e-Word of Mouth cycle that can provide tremendous value to your company.

KEY BUSINESS POINT: Ensure your business engages your prospects and customers in conversations that help them remember your brand and trust your products or services. These conversations need to be coordinated so that your business maintains a consistent organizational voice, regardless of who is creating the content.

The Importance of Online Reputation Management

As a business, your online reputation has become absolutely critical and will continue to grow in importance as the Internet and mobile communications continue to integrate social networking into their core processes. Your reputation may very well dictate how much you can sell, the calibre of the employee you can recruit and maintain, and the quality of vendors who do business with your company. This means managing your online reputation is a critical business task you need to understand and master.

Jason Fitzpatrick, writer for the blog Lifehacker, posted the following insightful comments about managing your online reputation:

If you're not actively building your identity and establishing a presence online, you're letting search engines cobble together information, good or bad, and write your public story. You need to establish and maintain a healthy online identity. Your online identity – or lack thereof – becomes more prominent by the day. People rely more and more on search results to help build a picture of you, and you want the picture to be a good one. (2)

The key is, every business and every professional has an online reputation regardless of your online participation. This reputation will be a reputation you desire, a reputation you want to avoid, or an invisible reputation (which can be just as devastating as the bad reputation). In order for you to manage your online reputation, there are three steps you should take:

1. Implement a listening process to notify you when comments are made about you, your business, your brand or products, and your competitors. There are free and paid tools available to help you establish a viable listening process.
2. Design an engagement policy that defines how you will respond to both positive and negative comments.

3. Assemble an appropriate measurement system that measures how often people talk about you and your business online and whether the sentiments they express are positive or negative.

Once you establish the appropriate online reputation management process, you will be in a better position to help control the impact your online reputation has on your business.

Conclusion

In conclusion, business today is being transformed from a transactional relationship to a social relationship. It is now more critical than ever that successful businesses use Engagement Marketing principles to plan for successfully engaging their prospects and customers before, during and after their purchase cycle, and that the basis for this engagement is high-quality and relevant information. Information that is demanded by your target market at a time and place of their choosing (24/7 and 365 days/year). Your job is to provide this information in such a manner that you are viewed in a positive light, create a positive brand and product reputation, and are selected as their vendor of choice.

About the Author



Ron Packer has been a WSI Consultant since 2002. Ron has over 35 years of experience in business development, project management, specialized computer research and development, manufacturing and telecommunications, Ron's area of expertise is in assessing a client's business needs then developing and implementing an effective Internet business strategy. His education and experience is a unique blend of technical, entrepreneurial and business management, which enables him to operate with "the big picture" advantage. Ron has provided Internet solutions to over 200 customers, including services such as: social media marketing, search engine optimization, local online marketing, website development, content marketing, and digital marketing. Ron understands the unique challenges of marketing and advertising business on the Internet. WSI has helped many small and medium sized businesses rise above their competition on Google by leveraging social media marketing and search engine optimization.

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