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THIRD OF FOUR PARTS

## Facebook is about interaction, it's not about sales

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The owners of the **School Bakery Café**, a bar in Toronto's Liberty Village neighbourhood, had an idea. The World Cup was coming up – in four days, no less – and they wanted to pack the place. Could social media help?

They turned to Jaime Almond, a social media strategist.

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Ms. Almond knew that in just four days, she was unlikely to reach hundreds of individual patrons, so she took a different approach. First, she set up a list of national teams who were likely to go far in the tournament and have a strong local following. Then, she scoured sites like **Facebook**, looking for fan groups that might be looking for a home base. Sure enough, she found a Facebook group of 800-

odd German fans who happened to be in the middle of a public discussion about where to watch the games.

The bar reached out and built a relationship with the group. The fans were receptive. The bar ordered German beer. The German fans showed up in droves and - as fate would have it - the German team made it deep into the tournament.

"There was a line all the way out the door and around the corner," says Ms. Almond. "Not everyone could get in. It was packed."

By Ms. Almond's own admission, it was a stroke of luck. But it's proof of the serendipitous benefits a small business can reap by marketing on Facebook.

But Facebook can be a double-edged sword for small-business marketers. On one hand, odds are good that your customers are already there: Canadians are among some of the most active Facebook users in the world. The social network offers a much more interactive



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users in the world. The social network offers a much more interactive, engaged experience than a page on the open Web. The payoff, however, is often indirect. Facebook is a private world that plays by its own rules, complete with a byzantine set of limitations.

If you're living in the Western hemisphere, chances are you're already one of the 500 million people with a Facebook account, in which case you know that it involves creating a profile for yourself and allowing "friends" to see and interact with your page. But Facebook has grown increasingly commercial in recent years, and it's added features to match.

Today, businesses or public figures can set up special Facebook pages for themselves called, simply enough, "Pages." Unlike individual profile pages, which can only be seen by certain people, Pages can be viewed by anyone on Facebook. Significantly, each page is adorned with a prominent "like" button. It does two things at once: first, it lets users signal their support and alerts their friends that they've "liked" your business. Second, it acts as a subscription button. Updates to your Page will be instantly delivered to the "updates" section of your fans' Facebook homepages.

But the power of Facebook for businesses is the same as it is for individuals; it's not about sales, but interaction. For many, Facebook is less about driving sales than a tool to build a brand for your product or service, gain fans, listen to customers, and gain loyalty.

Katia Millar is a Toronto-based entrepreneur who built **Positive Fabulous Women**, a women's networking and event-planning business, almost entirely on Facebook. (As the business grew, she has since added an outward-facing website.) Her audience isn't the stereotypical audience of technology-addled youth, but women aged 35 to 50, who are regular Facebook users. She leveraged the network's strengths to build a community and reach out to prospective clients with conversations, not sales pitches.

Ms. Millar follows an 80/20 rule: "80 per cent of the engagement is personal fun stuff," she says. "And 20 per cent is business and events. They don't want to be sold all the time; they want engagement."

The result? A 3,567-fans-strong following on Facebook, and sold-out events.

#### Five things to keep in mind

1. **Ask yourself if it's right for you.** Small business owners who want to use Facebook (and other social media outlets) are trying to replace business leads that once came in through the Yellow Pages, which is now in decline as consumers research their needs online. If that's the case, strengthening your business' presence on Google might be the better option.

Facebook, meanwhile, is better for brand-building, re-enforcing relationship with existing clients, and making connections. "Small business shouldn't be spending money on advertising," says Daniel Patricio, the founder of Orange Rhino Media, a Toronto consultancy. "They should be working with their existing customers to get them to buy more often, and to drive referrals."

2. **Go with Pages over Groups.** One of Facebook's more confusing quirks is that it allows for both "Groups" and "Pages." The two are confusingly similar, but Groups tend to be used for community activism and event planning, while Pages are geared toward business use and self-promotion. (Facebook seems to be enforcing this distinction: the company has been known to disable Facebook Groups that engage in commercial activity.)

With Pages, you can create tabs (or parts of the page) that are only visible to users who have "liked" your page. For instance, you might offer a discount coupon only to users who have joined your Page. Pages also provide what Facebook calls "insights:" useful metrics about how and when people are visiting and interacting with your page.

3. **Create your Page.** When you're ready, visit <http://facebook.com/pages>, and click the 'Create Page' button. Facebook will ask if you'd like to create a 'Community Page' or an Official Page. If you're setting up the page on behalf of your business, you'll want an Official Page. The page-making process is straightforward, much like the process of creating a personal Facebook account and the website will walk you through it.

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**4. Add content.** Now, here's the trick. Populating your page with content and promoting conversation is your challenge. Post photos and conversation pieces to promote dialogue. Authenticity and consistency are key – post regularly, and talk about ideas that are related to your business, but aren't necessarily product or event pitches.

"Don't just sell stuff – that's the biggest mistake small businesses make. They're so busy trying to promote themselves," Ms. Millar says. "Just remember, this is a virtual networking event. Don't take it so seriously. Just be human and respect people's lives and boundaries."

For instance, a hairstylist might give (or solicit) hair-care tips; an accountant might dispense tax advice. Be generous with your knowledge. Small business owners are often protective of their knowledge, lest they give away the store. But, Ms. Almond says, "people don't hire people because of information, they hire people because of the implementation of that information."

**5. Be friendly.** Facebook is a place that blurs the line between friendship, acquaintance, and stranger, and this is all the more true in business. Your first fans will probably be personal friends, before others find the page. As your page grows, visitors might not draw the distinction between your business page and you personally. Expect a lot of friend requests from people you don't know.

Should you accept them? That's a personal decision; even Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg doesn't. But Ms. Millar, for one, says yes – it's a small trade-off for being in business, as long as you're alright with your personal page being public. "A fan page starts with your friends. You're going to have to make yourself more open, more accessible," she says. "Whatever contents you put on your personal page, just be comfortable with it."

*Special to The Globe and Mail*

**Here's a look at the continuing social-media series on the [Web Strategy section of Your Business](#):**

**Sept. 17:** [Boost your social presence, boost your bottom line](#)

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