

Episode 17

Cracking the Code of Social Media Marketing with Curtis Howe

Janice Hostager: 0:04

Today we have a captivating episode lined up for you. Over the past few years, social media has undergone remarkable changes, reshaping the way we communicate, connect and the way we do business, from the rise of influencers to the emergence of new platforms. As entrepreneurs, we find ourselves navigating this constantly changing digital world. In today's episode, we'll be delving into those changes and discussing what entrepreneurs should be doing to harness social media's potential. Whether you're a seasoned business owner or an aspiring entrepreneur, understanding the latest trends, strategies and best practices for social media is crucial for your success in this digital age.

Our guest expert, Curtis Howe, is a social media strategist. He's been self-employed for more than 20 years and has been part of numerous startups. He's currently the owner of Smart Social, where he helps businesses use social media effectively through coaching, classes and social media management. Whether you're just starting out on your entrepreneurial journey or just looking to amplify your existing social media efforts, this episode is packed with valuable insights and actionable tips to help you thrive. Here's Curtis.

Janice Hostager: 1:40 Hey Curtis, how are you today?

Curtis Howe: 1:43 Doing well, Janice. Thank you.

Janice Hostager: 1:45

I'm so glad to have you here. So many of my listeners and my clients and students really struggle with social media, So I will love to pick your brain today and I'm sure you've got some great answers for us. But first tell me a little bit about your background. How did you get started in social media, What made it interesting to you and why did you dive in?

Curtis Howe: 2:11

Sure, no, I appreciate that. So I actually had a direct sales business at one point And we were when the whole 2008 crash and all that happened. We had to really reinvent our marketing to figure out how to be better at what we were doing. And at the time this social media thing was starting to kind of come around and do something. Everybody started to know Facebook and

have the ability to have a page on it And I thought you know, if all of my clients could talk about my business on Facebook, that would help myself. I could get more referrals and get more people to connect and work with me.

Curtis Howe: 3:00

So I thought, why don't I build a mobile app that allows this to happen? that I could. You know they could just type in their stuff and it posted their page and linked to my page and things. And I thought you know there's a lot of other businesses that could use this. So I ended up getting out of the business doing direct sales to build that app and get into the tech space, basically, and start building that out, and so that's what we started with, and then, about a year in, my partners in that business voted me out of the company. They wanted to go in a different direction with it. So I started an agency helping people do social media, one of the biggest pieces of feedback we had back then, and this is back in like 2012. So 11 years ago this happened, basically when social media was still really young, really new. A lot of our clients were like, hey, we love your app, we think this is great, but now I need a Facebook page for my business, i need to do something, have a presence here, and so that very meeting in fact I was going to talk to my partners about we need to get in the business of building Facebook pages for free for our clients, just so they'll adopt our app. They decided they didn't like that and wanted to go a different direction, so I just decided to do that. I'm like, okay, I'll go build Facebook pages for businesses and I'll just help them with social media. And then it's grown ever since then where we have several employees and we've managed hundreds and hundreds of businesses of social media presences, basically.

Janice Hostager: 4:30

Very cool, very cool. What happened to the app?

Curtis Howe: 4:35

They closed a year later.

Unfortunately, yeah, they didn't last.

Janice Hostager: 4:44

Okay, yeah, I mean, it's hard to compete with Facebook and the big players too. So I'm a marketing strategist, I love big pictures, I love planning, I love step-by-step diagrams, that kind of thing. So when I work with clients, I usually start with a social media plan. So what would you say is the most important first step? Like, if you're just if I'm, you know, have a business and I'm on social media sporadically, which a lot of new businesses are, I mean, it's just hard to keep up with it And I need to. I feel like I need to make a plan. What would be the first step with that? Something like that.

Curtis Howe: 5:23

So we do. Actually, when we do work with a client, we build what's called a social strategy. It's a game plan of how to use social media for their business. It's kind of a 30,000 level view of what's possible for their business on social media. But the first question that we ask in that is who is your target audience? Who is it that you want to attract and work with in your business?

Because knowing that is going to affect everything else about your strategy. Because once we know that, then we know what sites to be on, what kind of content to share, everything else basically, you know, social media marketing is kind of different from traditional marketing in the sense that traditional marketing as a business, you're the one that creates the message to share with the people. In social media, though, you have to think like a magazine publisher, in the sense that what you are going to post on your social sites is determined by your audience. So what is it that they want to see? What are the articles they want to read And then publish? that? That's the most important content to share. Even more important than your own marketing content is what are the kinds of things my audience wants to see on social media. Let's be a publisher of that, and that'll help drive a lot of success on social media.

Janice Hostager: 6:38

I love that approach because you're right. I mean, there's so much that's similar to a magazine in terms of the visual layout, in terms of what they want to read and what they stop the scroll for, And that makes perfect sense. What do you recommend now? So, first of all, you want to figure out who your target market is and figure out what platforms they're actually using and where they're engaging right, And so then, after that, what would be the next step?

Curtis Howe: 7:12

So once we know that target audience, that's when we can do the research to start looking into you know that we understand your business. What do you want to do, what are your goals, What do you want to accomplish? Then we pull all that together to say, okay, so what social sites do you need to have a presence on And what kind of content should you be sharing? So we give you ideas of how to set up your marketing so you can capture leads and everything else. For online marketing, there's really a great model that's important to leverage to help you in being successful, and this works with websites, email marketing, social media, anything to do with online marketing And it's the attract, interact, transact model. So you always want to think of how do we attract the right audience? and keep an eye on. How are we getting the right people in? Then we think of how we are getting them to interact with us so that on a website could be how many minutes they are spending on my site? Are they bouncing off quick? Are they actually clicking through multiple pages? Are they looking at my content? Social media it's likes, comments and shares, those kinds of things And then how do we get them to transact? So online marketing is not an event like oh, they pick up the phone and they call it, they don't. This is a journey And so we have multiple steps in this journey. We need to track each step and see how we are progressing through each step, and that will help you to build a better marketing plan, help put things together for you so that you have success in using online tools to help you market your business.

Janice Hostager: 8:44

I love this because it ties right in with what I talk about to my students, which I have a framework called the Trail to the Sale, and it starts out with the awareness, consideration, compare, and I kind of go through like micro steps of that customer journey all the way to when they buy and refer to other people, and there's a place for social media in every step of the way, which I love, love And I also find it really interesting because you brought up something and this is a little bit

of a tangent, but you brought up how, prior to social media, it was push marketing, it was the billboards, the ads buy our product, do this thing, and when social media arrived on the scene, it really turned the tables on that. The customers became the ones in control. So marketing has really been turned on its head in the last 20 years in that way, and so I think as marketers and as business owners, we really have to rethink our strategy, and certainly with social media, we've all tried a lot of different things And some things work for a while until Meta decides to change the algorithm And then they're not working anymore. So it can be just a really frustrating journey for some people And I think especially for the business owner who really feels like they're enthusiastic about their product. They just want people to know about their product. But people do not jump on social media to find a product. Usually they're just there to interact with other people. So it really turns the whole concept of marketing on its head, basically.

Curtis Howe: 10:25

Absolutely, and that's an important thing for businesses to realize is that the consumer finally has some control and say in how things are working. In marketing. It used to be and I use this analogy all the time if you think of a water heater. If the water heater goes out in your home, what are you going to do about getting it replaced? Back before the internet was around back in the 80s and early 90s to get a water heater replaced ruined your day, because now you have to pull out the big yellow pages phone book. You're going to call half a dozen plumbers and ask them a survey of questions to understand what your pricing is? How soon can you come out? What are going to be the hassles? If there's a problem, what are you going to do about it? And the problem is, as a consumer, there's really only one question that you need to have answered And that is are you going to take care of me? and if there's a problem, not make it a hassle? I mean, that's really it, and we are consumers. We are willing to pay more for that extra service. We just want it to be done right and not have any headaches about it. And if you're not the most expensive person. That's fine, because I'd prefer not to have headaches. So we're you know, we're not necessarily always looking for the cheapest person. We're looking for the best to help us out. The problem is, is the only way to get an answer to that question is to hire somebody and hope for the best? So by the time you get your answer, it's too late. You know you're either going to be the one telling the story of why not to hire that plumber or you're going to be hearing it for somebody else.

So that was the problem in marketing. When websites came around, we thought this got fixed or was better for us, but it really wasn't, because all the websites did was take that interview selection process and shorten it. So now I could go to a website and I could check availability and look at their prices and stuff faster, but I still couldn't answer the question are you going to take care of me? So this is one of the beauties of social media now, if I need to replace a water heater, I don't even have to look at any marketing. I can go to my social media sites and I can ask my friends, people who I trust, that I've connected with, and say, hey, my wider heater just died, who should I hire? And then I can go about my day. I don't even have to make the decision. My friends will tell me who to hire, they will give me that so I can leverage the wisdom of my network to find the answer. Basically And we couldn't really do that efficiently before, so I ended and none of that has any marketing. That's a hundred percent customer service from a business. So businesses need to realize that in a way they've kind of lost control of their

messaging, because now their customer has a large say in messaging because of review sites and because of the ability to communicate and share on social media. So if you treat your customers badly, they now have a platform to tell everybody about it. So you know, there's that old adage that if you have a bad customer, they'll tell 100 people. Well, now that can be 10,000 people. So social media means that your business and your customers can communicate for good and for bad. And if you're not there, you're just not part of the conversation that's happening around your business. It's happening, there is a conversation. You're just not a part of it if you're not actively on social media using it.

Janice Hostager: 13:54

That's so true. That's a really good point. In fact, I just did an episode a couple of weeks ago on branding. And one of the points I make on that is, if you don't define your brand, your customers will do it for you. And the same goes through with customer service and policies and all of that. I mean, if you're just kind of winging it in terms of customer satisfaction, it's too easy to let it slide. I mean, obviously everybody has situations where a customer is not happy for one reason or another. But you're absolutely right, if that's approached, most people will find that forgivable. And you know they come back and say you know, I apologize, this has happened. You have a bad review. You know you're addressing on social media so that people are not thinking that that's just who you are. You know address it and say, look, I apologize that this happened, you didn't get your coffee on time. You know, we'll make sure once you contact us, dm us, and we'll make it right or something like that, so that you're addressing those issues head on so that people are satisfied. And yeah, that's, that's a great analogy. I love the water heater thing because you know we just did that. We had to put a roof on last summer after a hail storm and we did the same thing. We went to social media and said where should we hire? You know, such a great analogy. So what do you recommend for people who are overwhelmed with social media? I know I asked you about where to start with a social media plan. Where do you start with just integrating it? Let's say you're a solopreneur. What do you start with? Integrating it into your life? Is it enough to post one day a week? Should you post every day? I mean, what is it that you recommend for the solopreneurs and the really small entrepreneurs?

Curtis Howe: 15:43

So, if you're going to do it yourself, I would recommend one, of course, understand your audience and then think of who, where they are, what sites are they going to be on, you know, and be there, Have a presence there. And so if you're, once you have your presence set up, start posting, start trying things out, share information, Be a resource. So you want to either entertain or educate your audience, basically so, or a little combination of both. Figure out what they are looking at, what's going on, and then just start posting stuff. Just start doing that. I would recommend it, as you get started. Most businesses, when they look at social media, they think of all, there's so many little things that need to be done to have good success on social media. They just get overwhelmed, they think it's, you know, death by a thousand cuts kind of an idea. And I just tell them you know, just start, just start posting, just start working on that and we can help you with the rest. In fact it's. I had breakfast with a gentleman yesterday who does Santa Claus in the holidays. He's like I need to have a presence, I want to grow this little side business that I have, and he's like, what should I do about it. And I told him. I said look, you

know all I need you to do. I can help you set up sites. You know that's what our company does is we manage the content and help post and do stuff.

So if you don't want to do it yourself, we can do it for you. But if you do want to do it yourself, I told him. I said here's the thing. I just want you to make videos and get dressed up as Santa and just make a bunch of fun videos pretending to be Santa. That's in the off season. Have some fun. You know, do that. You know. I told him. I said channel your inner Tim Allen from his Santa Claus movies or something you know and just have fun with it. I just create a list of cool videos, fun videos you thought you think it'd be fun to make And then just go make them. Don't worry about the rest, just start making videos. We'll help you take care of the rest, or we can show you how to dial in the rest. You know there's tons of tools out there to auto schedule your content. They're great and they will be helpful to get things going. You should post probably at least three to four times a week, if not daily, to help your business stay in front of people and keep growing. But just just start posting. Just focus on making some fun videos And if you're going to do any kind of content, do video. They're simple, they're easy. Most smartphones these days have good enough cameras to make it work easily. Just start capturing stuff. Start talking about tips and advice and ideas, other things like that. You know we did a series of shorts, in fact, and all I did is use some of these books in this bookshelf behind me And I just started talking about why this is such a great book for business, why I'd recommend you read it, and there's 30 second videos. We just started pulling books off the shelf and saying here's what this book's about, here's why you should read it, and we made a couple dozen videos in like an hour or two of that. It doesn't take much. So just get started and then start to refine it from there.

Janice Hostager: 18:44

Yes, That's a great, great advice. I know I get a lot of questions about social media from clients. One of them is that people don't want to put their face on camera. And I get that. I mean, I think for now I'm not of the younger generation, So for me it took a lot too, And I didn't grow up, you know, doing the selfie thing or like my kids do, And so. But what you're saying too I love is that you don't necessarily have to put yourself on camera. You are piloting books and you may just do a voiceover, for example. I mean, there's a lot of videos that we can make that don't involve talking into the camera. You know, and I think you can kind of work up to that. At least, that's what I've been. This is the approach I take with my clients is, you know, start doing videos of yourself on your phone just to get yourself comfortable with how you look on camera and how you sound on camera. People don't like to sound their voice sometimes, So we kind of are just like these little micro steps toward video success, I think. But I'm thinking about doing a challenge for those two, because there's so many people that I talked to that struggle with that. The other thing is that I'm just going to like to shoot off a bunch of questions that I get from clients on social media to you. If that works. One of them is that I'll take on a new client and they have accounts on every single social media platform that they can get to. So how would you approach that? I know what I tell them, but I'm curious what you say.

Curtis Howe: 20:20

Whenever somebody asks us hey, what site should I be on for social media? The question I ask them is who's your audience? If they're not on there, then it's not worth it being on there. From a

business standpoint you have to think about it's an investment of resources. So there's time and money that's going to be invested in these sites And so you want to make sure that you're maximizing the opportunities for return on that investment. So only be on the sites where you are going to talk to your audience. So if you're talking to a more adult audience, like 35 and older, you don't need to be on TikTok because they're just not there a lot. There's just not a lot of activity there. If you're trying to do, you know, if you are a local restaurant, you only need to draw from people that are within a 10 mile radius of your facility. So that's why you're probably going to not reach them on Twitter or TikTok. You're going to look at more Facebook or Instagram type stuff. If your audience is business professionals, like you want to talk to attorneys, then LinkedIn is going to be where you want to be. So it all just comes down to who's that audience and what sites are they using. And be there. Don't worry about what's the latest and greatest that's out there. You know everybody wants to be on TikTok these days, but dollar for dollar, you will make a lot more money on Instagram and YouTube than you ever will from TikTok. Just how it's working out for businesses these days. But focus your budget to be where you can be the most effective. Don't be everywhere.

Janice Hostager: 21:43

Love it. Yeah, People often underestimate their time and the value of their time. That's your biggest resource. I mean, you are paying yourself and if you're spending hours making videos and you need a lot of videos to gain traction on TikTok anyway And so I think, yeah, I agree with you. I also kind of discourage people from having platforms accounts on platforms where they're gathering dust. If you're posted once or twice, it doesn't say much to somebody, Even if they find you on that platform. If you're not active there, I don't know that it's really benefiting you as a business. Would you agree?

Curtis Howe: 22:23

with that. Yeah, if you, you know it's, there is some value to say, i'm going to reserve my spot on those sites in case I want to use it in the future. Yeah, But yeah, it's when, if somebody goes there to find you and they see you don't have any content, then they'll just be like Oh, i don't know what's going on. In fact we had a client that didn't believe their social media was working. We had worked with us for about two years and they're like I just don't think it's working, we want to cancel it because we just don't see the value of it. And I'm like, okay, well, if you want to cancel, that's fine. You know it's up to you guys. So they canceled and six months later they called me back and said, " Hey, can you turn all that back on for us? And I said sure, we're more than happy to. We can, we can get going again. And I asked him, what's the difference? Why? you know it was, it's only been six months. Why the difference? And they said well, we turned it off and a lot of our clients stopped coming to our business. And we called them and said why are you not shopping with us anymore? And they told us well, I didn't see you on Facebook anymore, so I thought you guys shut down. So I went and looked for somebody else. And so it's that out of it's out of sight, out of mind. So they're like we need to back on, and they've. We've been with them for years now. They haven't turned it off at all. So once you establish that communication with your clients, you want to keep it going. Media is not a turn on, turn off type plan like, like you know, running ads. You can turn them on and turn them off at will, whenever you need them or you don't. That's fine. But an organic strategy on social media should never

be turned off. It's always going somewhere and you need to be continuing with it. Turning it on and off is just destroying the opportunities to get in front of people.

Janice Hostager: 24:01

Good advice, interesting. So one more question. We've always heard that the number of followers is a vanity metric, but if you don't have followers, people aren't probably seeing your content. How do you recommend people prioritize audience building on social media with, say, just focusing on the messaging? Or maybe there's not a, maybe it's not this or that, maybe it's both.

Curtis Howe: 24:28

Well, that has actually changed considerably in the last 12 months, and I'll give you an example of this with Facebook. In fact, when Facebook first started, their algorithm was designed to help you go deeper in connection with people, so it was designed to help connect you with people that you like and know and help you see more content from the people that you're connected with, so it was driving you deeper into those relationships and connections. Over time, that has changed. Where people aren't as interested in that And there's so much information out there now that it's hard to cut through the clutter. And this is one of the things that TikTok has done to revolutionize social media is their algorithm was not about connecting with people and driving deeper relationships.

Their algorithm was all about getting you in front of new people all the time. So once they figured out what you were looking at, they showed you more of it. Now it has its own inherent problems, just like Facebook's. You know, facebook's algorithm, over time, drove you deeper down any rabbit hole you were involved with, basically And we saw through the 2016 elections and other things. Sometimes that could be a problem. Tiktok's algorithm, on the other hand, isn't driving you deep, it's driving broad. It's trying to give you as much broad perspective of things as you can. But when it finds something you want, it starts to show you more and more of that, more people in that genre. So the problem is, if you want to watch a certain kind of video, you're going to see a whole lot of that kind of video from lots of different creators. So that has its own negative connotations in the algorithm. Meaning if you just want to spend your time looking at Fortuno Girls Dancing, it'll show you all of them on TikTok really quickly. So that could be nefariously used. But the challenge was TikTok's algorithm and this is why TikTok gets so many views. Is it about introducing you to new people all the time? It's not about seeing the same person over and over again. So Facebook's algorithm over the last probably 13 or 14 months has changed and most all social networks have changed as well to be more discovery focused. So it's about getting you in front of new people. So followers is still an important account number to think of because you want to keep track of. Are we getting our target audience to us? But the number itself has always been a vanity metric because ever since social media has started with businesses being allowed to be on social media. As a marketer, I can buy you followers. I tell businesses this all the time. I'm like look, if you want 10,000 followers, it's going to cost about \$100. And I can probably have them all on your page next week. And they're like really, that's amazing. I'm like I know, as long as you don't mind if they're all from Bangladesh. There's a lot of there's like farms out there, there's follower farms out there, and they're full of fake accounts

And so they make that number look good, but they're not going to help your business. And so when I talk to a business owner, I'll say look, do you want 10,000 followers or do you want 100 people that can spend money in your business? And they're like I want 100 people. Well, great, let's focus on that. Our efforts, if you're going to hire us to do it, our efforts are getting that 100 people to spend money with you, not the 10,000 followers, so we don't go off of that. And since the algorithms have changed in the near past, it's more about how you get views on your page so we can see, we can take a page. Maybe they have 300 followers on their page, but we're seeing their content being seen by like 3,000 people on a consistent basis, because the algorithms have shifted to where it's about getting the content in front of new audiences.

Janice Hostager: 28:27

So what I hear you saying in all of this is that it becomes more about the content now than about the people that are following you, which is kind of what I was saying all along to my clients, too. What I would say was that, even if it's 10 people that are following you, you want to give them the best content that you can that will help those 10 people. And so what's happening now? Because the algorithm is showing more of the same content that people are already clicking on, it becomes even more important to keep presenting, keep focusing on the really good quality content and the content that's going to be shared and liked and so on. Is that correct?

Curtis Howe: 29:15

Yeah, the content is a big part of it, and it's so important to make sure that you can stay in touch with people, because very few people will go to your page after they've liked it the first time. So it's in their newsfeed, they're going to see your content, they're going to see the comments you're sharing and the posts you're putting out there, and so you really just want to focus on that really good content that they are interested in, and outside of that, you don't need to worry about any other content that's out there. If it's what your audience likes, that's what you should share, even if it seems strange for your business to share it. That if it's your audience that likes it, then that's the ones you want to attract and work with. So you want to do more of the things that they're interested in to help keep their attention on your page. Basically, keep their eyeballs looking at your business.

Janice Hostager: 30:07

Great advice. So what if people need help with their social media? How could people get in touch with you or tell us a little bit about your agency?

Curtis Howe: 30:17

So we do. We have a few different things that we do. One is, of course, managing social media for businesses who want to have it done for them. Most businesses just hire us for that. You can go to our website, smrt.social, to learn more, or find us smart social on all the social media sites. We're out there so people can find us and look at our content and understand more about social media and things. We do offer coaching for businesses who want to do it themselves or have a team, that they just need their team to be helped in understanding how to make this work properly. We do coaching for that And we have an online class that we teach to just help people

understand how to do all kinds of online marketing tips and ideas to help them grow their business better.

Janice Hostager: 31:02

That sounds great. I mean, it's so hard for me and I live and breathe the marketing world. It's so hard for me to keep up with all of this. So I'm glad that we have professionals like you in the world that can help us out with this whole vast world of social media. So thank you so much for joining me today, Curtis. I appreciate you, I appreciate your time.

Curtis Howe: 31:27

You're welcome, Janice. I appreciate it very much too, thank you.

Curtis Howe: 31:30

And that's a wrap. I hope you learned something new about social media today. I know I sure did. For more information on Curtis or for a link to his classes and website, visit my show notes at myweeklymarketing.com. forward slash 16. And I would love it if you could do me a favor. If you know anyone who would benefit from this information, I would appreciate it so much if you would send them a link to this episode. My goal is to help more small business owners conquer marketing, and social media is a big part of it. Thanks for joining me today. See you next time. Bye-bye.