

Business Builder #28: “Tapping Social Media for Research.”
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We've all been hearing a lot about using social media to market our businesses. But another important reason to tap into social media is to do research. Linked In, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and other interactive sites can yield valuable business information.

Here are 5 important reasons to tap social media for research:

1. Get a sampling of opinions about a current issue
2. Conduct company research about your prospects and competition
3. Obtain information about individuals – check out prospective vendors and clients
4. Monitor what's being said about you or your company
5. Identify trends in the marketplace for new opportunities

Social media is current. One of the biggest advantages of social media is its immediacy. You can tap into real time chatter.

It's real. Much of what is posted is unedited, so it's real words from real people – for better or for worse.

But it's not always representative. Keep in mind that the information and opinions you read on social media sites are anecdotal, not representative of the entire population. People who participate in social media sites are self-selected and tend to have their own agenda or bias – they have something to say and they want others to hear it. Or they are followers who echo others' comments.

Even if someone has a large Twitter following or writes a blog, there is no guarantee that he or she is an expert. And since anyone can engage, how do you sort the “pearls of wisdom” from trash?

As you read postings, here are some things to think about:

- Is the source of information well-known? Does the poster have an agenda or bias?
- Don't rely on just one source. Check other sources for inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or other perspectives.
- Check the date of the original post to see how current it still is. Contexts change with time, and the original intent of the posting can be lost or misinterpreted.

Search Engines for Social Media

Just thinking about the amount of information out there is intimidating. Happily, it's now easier than ever to search social media. Just as Google and Bing perform web

searches, there are specialized search engines just for social media. Here are a few free ones to check out:

- **Whos Talkin** – searches 60 different social media gateways, including Facebook
- **Icerocket** – does separate searches for blogs, the Web, Twitter etc.
- **Google Blogs** – has an Advanced Search option to define time period, eliminate unwanted words
- **Addictomatic** – creates custom dashboard of results, including images and videos
- **Technorati** – has its own authored blogs on current topics

You can also do exclusive searches within Yelp, Twitter, Linked In and other social sites.

This is by no means a definitive list, as new search tools are constantly being developed. My advice is to play around and pick ones that you like and find easy to use.

Alerts

Another useful tool is to sign up with **SocialMention** for free automatic alerts when whatever you are tracking gets mentioned in social media. It's a good complement to Google Alerts.

The best use of social media research is to supplement other research in business or trade publications, the news media, etc. Used judiciously, It adds another dimension and a very current perspective to business information.