

Social media fuel small businesses from startup stage

September 27 2011, By Ina Paiva Cordle

Laid off after 23 years in the mortgage lending business, Dede Parise couldn't find a job. So she took a marketing class to reinvent her career, and before long she turned an assignment into a company.

Parise invented "The Bandee," a headband women wear while playing golf and other sports. She sells her product mostly on the Internet, [working from home](#).

Her audience is vast, and growing. In a year, using Facebook, she has parlayed her reach into 15,000 fans.

For small businesses like Parise's, social media has become a portal to success.

"It's really important," said Parise, 49, of Weston, Fla. "It's just the way the [market](#) has gone."

No question, the use of social media by businesses is booming.

According to a recent study by EMarketers, 80 percent of leading companies will participate in social-media marketing in 2011, nearly double the number from just three years ago.

And a 2011 Social Media Marketing industry report by SocialMediaExaminer.com found that 90 percent of marketers said social media is important for their business. Eighty-eight percent said it

generates more business exposure, and 72 percent said it brings increased traffic to their site.

The most commonly used social [media tools](#), the 2011 report found, are Facebook, Twitter, [LinkedIn](#) and blogs, in that order.

Parise didn't have - or even want - a personal Facebook page a little over a year ago. But she knew she needed one for business.

Now, she says Facebook is the main contributor to the worldwide reach of her sales.

"Sometimes they say, 'I saw you on Facebook,' " she said.

When Kelly Lyles launched a website in July to begin selling her [invention](#), "Tip Top Shoe Savers," she went immediately to social media to get the word out, garner feedback and drive people/customers to the website.

She posted on Twitter and Facebook to pique interest in her product - small shoe forms that women can place inside their pointy shoes to avoid creases and preserve the tips.

"One person putting a 'like' on your product or your page reaches hundreds of people because someone will see it on their page and say, 'I like that,' " said Lyles, 34, of Aventura, Fla.

What's more, Facebook gives her a weekly update of how many people visited her site and how many people "liked" her product.

And she can link Facebook and Twitter, so that her postings go out on both.

"So, if I say, 'Come visit Tip Top Shoe Saver at the Summer Sale,' it goes out to Twitter," Lyles said. "It's cross-promoting."

Even more-established companies that sell to other businesses can get a boost from social media.

"It is a way to keep people engaged with the website and engaged with us," said Valerie Holstein, chief executive of CableOrganizer.com, a nine-year-old Fort Lauderdale-based cable management products company with 45 employees and \$16 million in revenue.

"Customers use it to get tips and use it to tell their other friends if they are happy with the product," said Holstein, 36.

One woman recently shared a story about how her cat was always getting tangled in cables. She had no idea such products existed, and she was thrilled that she could now keep her cat safe.

"We use it for promotions we are running, but it is really more conversations of how to help people if they have an issue with a product, or they are looking for solutions and don't know how to go about it," Holstein said. "They ask us for advice."

Social media users say it's amazing how fast businesses can gather followers.

Holstein said that when CableOrganizer.com redesigned its two-year-old Facebook page this summer and launched it recently with a giveaway, it got 250 "friends" in two days.

Other advantages for social media are that it offers a free alternative to advertising, can be written creatively and has a never-ending reach, said Martha Dominguez, a Miami Beach, Fla.-based social media consultant

who handles postings and blogs for Miami-area clients like Art Fusion Galleries and Trinity Cathedral, as well as other clients as far away as Germany and Switzerland.

For Art Fusion Galleries, Dominguez sends a flyer out to a database of 30,000 emails, then links it to Facebook. She also puts the galleries' artist of the week on Facebook, and tags the artist in that post to cross-link the artist and the gallery. She posts photos from art openings on an album on the website, little by little, to get more hits, and also searches for creative quotes from artists and posts them.

"When you post a status (update), you get a lot of responses, then they repost it, which brings people to our page," she said.

Businesses have to do some planning before they jump into social media, said Jillian Tobias, a senior account executive with Plantation, Fla.-based Boardroom Communications who specializes in social media.

"The first thing I always advise my clients is to outline goals: Are you looking to reach customers? Are you looking to have more exposure? Are you looking to sell a product? What is the purpose of your social media campaign?" Tobias said. "I always recommend you choose sites wisely. You can't be on everything, so choose one or two sites and do it well."

She also advises businesses using Twitter to carefully choose hashtags that connect their conversation to their audience. They should remember to consistently update Facebook or a blog, and if they use an outside resource, to maintain the same tone or voice.

"Social media is becoming increasingly important in the success of businesses today, but I do think it needs to be strategic in the way companies decide what to do about it. It doesn't make sense for every

business to be on [Twitter](#)," Tobias said. "Social media is not going to save your business if you don't have a good product or a good business plan. But it can supplement, in a good way, what you are doing."

SOME TIPS TO HELP SMALL BUSINESSES USE [SOCIAL MEDIA](#)

1. Don't wait to begin; just start. Create your personal brand from the moment you consider starting a business.
2. Be cautious when choosing the name of a professional Facebook page.
3. Keep your personal page and your business page very separate.
4. Spotlight others on your [Facebook](#) business page. Give credit to employees and clients.

Source: Schedulicity, a company that provides online appointment scheduling for [small businesses](#).

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