Social media is a collection of online technologies and tools that allow users to interactively share experiences, content, and opinions. The following research is intended as a persuasive report for convincing small businesses and non-profit organizations that using social media can increase profits, and strengthen relationships with current and future consumers by having a direct source of interaction. Topics discussed will include information on popular websites; benefits and risks involved in using social media; and business statistics showing trends and behaviors of businesses and consumers. We will explore the projected benefits to a real-world business by attempting to conduct an actual business analysis of our own.
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Introduction: Socialize? What a Concept!

Advertising over the last few decades has been changing rapidly. Reaching consumers has become much easier for companies given the new technologies available. However, the wider the span of audience a company tries to reach, the higher the cost of resources. Social media websites offer numerous tools and applications that could greatly increase the growth of small businesses and non-profit organizations and can be much more cost-effective [30]. Social sites can be used to network with organizations to help potential employees find employment and give corporate advice among business professionals.

Social media websites can also provide many opportunities for industries that were either unavailable or very difficult for most organizations to obtain on their own. With effective strategies and guidance, companies are offered a new platform of advertisement that has the potential to revolutionize the way companies present their products and services to consumers. Corporations can establish an image of innovation that can speak to generations of all ages. Social media websites provide a direct line to the customers that not only allow for companies to present their products, but also allow companies to receive feedback from consumers. This feedback can help tailor the design of new products, update existing products and enhance how companies do business. With all the information users put online, organizations can modify their marketing strategies and better direct advertisements for specific market groups. Companies are now given another opportunity to stay in the minds of customers by simply being available on a worldwide scale. A significant number of businesses have noticed that they have spent less on advertising since they began using social sites [30]. As with any new idea, there are some disadvantages to using social media sites that must also be taken into consideration. The disadvantages of using these sites, such as productivity loss and malware attacks, bring us to the conclusion that social media marketing may not be for all businesses [13].

This study aims to provide a definition of social media and the types available, expound outlines to the advantages and disadvantages of the using social media, analyze our research to compare with our hypothesis, and produce a personalized business case to determine if our research can be used in a real-world application.
Definition and Purpose: What Is Social Media Exactly?

Social media is a term that is thrown back and forth rather loosely without much thought given to its definition. It is a broad term that encompasses quite a few different approaches to how people are relating to others and to a variety of media. Despite not having a concrete definition, social media does exhibit certain qualities that make it unique. Social media must embrace a variety of platforms such as video, audio, photo, text, and .PDF and permit interactions to cross these platforms through social sharing, email and/or news feeds. It must enable one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications and allow varying stages of engagement by the users who create and comment on material. Lastly, social media must be unbiased towards any one device, and communication must be able to take place in real-time [4]. Next, we will describe the two ideas behind social media and examples of each.

Communication

One of the cornerstones of social media is the ability for humans to be able to communicate with one another. Since the dawn of the internet, when forums and instant messengers were first coded, communicating with many different people has been a very popular activity. This need to talk is the root of social media actions like social networking, blogging, collaboration, and geosocial networking. These actions are found in most social media sites, though each site usually focuses more strongly on one action than the others. Social networking focuses on helping people find and connect with each other through messages/comments/IMs. Besides the apparent obsession for finding fellow friends online, humans also appear to enjoy being able to journal their thoughts and post them in entries on blogging sites for other users online to read and comment on. Collaboration sites address the need for people with shared goals to reach those goals by supplying tools like document editing or file storage that can be accessed online. And lastly, geosocial networking sites allow users to interact based on their current location, such as choosing to dine at a restaurant because a friend “checked in” there. Current locations are uploaded by the users themselves.

Here are some examples of largely-known websites in 2012 that focus on the actions previously described:

- Facebook – Social Networking – General audience [8]
- Twitter – Blogging – General audience [31]
- LinkedIn – Social Networking/collaboration - Businesses and professionals, also business collaboration [17]
- MySpace – Social Networking - Teenagers, underground musician-type networking [19]
- LiveJournal – Blogging – General audience [18]
- Foursquare – Geosocial networking – General audience [10]
Entertainment

In addition to enabling people to communicate, social media opens the door for users to actually hear and view what is going on in the world around them. On these sites, a story can be told in a few pictures or a 30-second video that would take 10,000 words to blog. Emotions like humor or beauty can be displayed more accurately than any story could describe. Multimedia hosting sites make this possible. These sites encourage users to upload pictures, audio, or videos of whatever they choose, and then these items are made available for other online users to view or hear. This multimedia hosting feature is also now part of many social networking sites, though it did not start off that way. The dedicated multimedia hosting sites also sometimes offer editing capabilities that social networking sites do not.

Some of the most popular multimedia hosting sites today in the USA are:

- YouTube – Video hosting [32]
- Spotify – Music hosting [29]
- Flickr – Photo/video hosting [9]
- Photobucket – Photo/video hosting [22]
- Pandora Radio – Music hosting [21]
- DailyMotion – Video hosting [5]
- deviantArt – Photo hosting (specifically for displaying user-created artwork) [6]
- SoundClick – Music hosting [28]

In an ironic contrast to social media’s purpose of getting people to communicate and work together, social media also can be held responsible for users immersing themselves in the internet and in online communities, and ceasing to communicate face-to-face with those around them. In online games and virtual worlds, players create characters tailored to their own likeness that can travel between buildings, towns, and worlds to carry out business or leisure activities. Communication is usually textual, but real-time voice communication is also possible. In games like SecondLife, people can earn an income through marketing products or services sold in the virtual world [27].
Advantages

The advantages of small businesses using social media sites are clearly significant. Ninety percent of 3300 businesses analyzed by Social Media Examiner stated that social media sites were important to their businesses [30]. The biggest advantage of social media sites is the ability to get the organization out to a tremendously large audience, which is supported by the 88% who were able to observe the increased awareness [30]. Social sites connect organizations with millions, if not billions, of people from across the world at one convenient location online. Searching for new potential customers and outsourcing opportunities becomes far easier to connect to at little or no cost to the company. This advantage alone develops more benefits that can help stimulate or contribute to the growth of an organization. These benefits include topics such as advertising, networking, and researching consumers.

Advertising

Advertising in business is a common necessity. The most popular and cost efficient form of advertisement is word-of-mouth. In business, word-of-mouth is described as a person spreading their opinion about a company’s product or service to another person. An example would be a man telling his friend about a restaurant that makes great burgers or a woman calling a family member to talk about a great place online to purchase clothing. So naturally, the more satisfied customers a business has, the more positive advertisements it will have walking around. When considering sites such as Facebook, in which on December 31, 2011, hit 845 million monthly active users and is projected to reach one billion by August 2012, social sites can be a very powerful tool in marketing [26]. If any organization can provide a quality service or product to people, joining a social media site can amplify the word-of-mouth effect to increasingly large numbers of people.

Networking

Most organizations do not go without some outsourcing, which is another task that can be made easier with social media sites. Sometimes, businesses on social media sites such as Facebook can be informal and not as business-oriented as a professional may need. However, there is a solution. LinkedIn is a professional website that brings together businesses and organizations from around the world to one convenient location online. As a member of LinkedIn, one has access to business resources and information that can assist with career searching tools such as portfolio and résumé building or business growth advice from CEOs from various Fortune 500 companies. Employees can collaborate on projects, share data, and gain new insights from other likeminded professionals [16]. Currently, LinkedIn has over 150 million users and is the largest professional site in the world [17]. With all the available information from successful business professionals, LinkedIn provides more than enough adequate resources.
Research

Researching potential consumers can easily be one of the most extensively difficult parts of marketing. Trying to understand and track the trends of people of all ages can help give an organization direction in advertising strategies and product/services development. Unfortunately, trends tend to change so fast that after information is gathered on them, it might not be relevant or beneficial. Now, Facebook can be of some assistance with various tools and apps for businesses. Facebook gives the options for organizations to purchase information on trends and popular topics of its members. The information gathered can help businesses get an idea of what is important to their consumers and what marketing strategy to use on what specific type of consumer. Also, tools such as FeedBurner and Gydget are available and can really help promote a business. These applications provide the friends of the companies’ pages with news updates, promotion information, videos, and other information that consumers may be interested in knowing. This availability of information and the personal interaction can make consumers feel like they are more of a valued consumer than just another dollar. Social media sites also help individuals to do their own research on a particular business by making it easier to be found on the web. To increase its ranking on search engines, a business must build more links to its pages, and social media sites help to do just that. Sixty-two percent of businesses surveyed by the Social Media Examiner found a rise in search engine rankings, and 72% indicated increased traffic.

Disadvantages

In light of the overwhelmingly positive evidence supporting the use of social media in the business world, it must be said that no action is without risk. In general, issues related to using social media in the workplace are not associated with the sites themselves; instead, problems lie internally with the employees. Parts of a business that could possibly be adversely affected include its reputation and confidentiality, its productivity level, and the security of its networks. With that being said, it is the company’s responsibility to extensively research and protect against these potential threats to protect the welfare of the company and its employees.
Business Reputation and Confidentiality

In business, image is everything. Many years are spent building a positive reputation that can be shattered with one bad remark. The situation is made worse when that remark is posted on a Facebook page for the world to see. When choosing to incorporate social media into one’s business, one must decide if his or her business is resilient-enough to bounce back from any negative feedback that will eventually be posted. A tarnished reputation is very difficult and expensive to redeem. Also, allowing employees to access social media that bears ties to the company can be a dangerous choice. An employee who is excited about a breakthrough at work may accidentally post a joyous remark, along with confidential product details online for all competitors to see. Or, a member of management could be fired then decide to liberate how he feels about the company in 160 characters, the maximum amount in a Twitter post. Whether written by a customer or an employee, negative feedback or the release of confidential information can wreak sometimes irreversible havoc on a company’s reputation.

There are other methods through which employees can directly and indirectly create problems for a corporation through using social media sites. For example, a business may be the target of unwanted attention from the media if they are shown to take adverse action against employees using information obtained from their employees’ social media profiles [14]. Or, if an employee is found to have not hired a job applicant based on viewing the applicant’s social-networking web site, the applicant may assert claims against the organization [15].

Employee Misuse

The key purpose of including social media in the workplace is usually to improve networking or occasionally to improve the company image. But almost always, the purpose is to increase productivity and profits. This becomes quite difficult when many employees are on Facebook instead of working. A study has shown that companies essentially lose 1.5% of total productivity when employees are allowed access to social media sites while working. Eighty-seven percent of the 237 employees surveyed could not justify the average 15 minutes they spent on Facebook with any business-related intent. Of the 87% that were on Facebook, 6% admitted they did not access their profile anywhere else. This reveals that 1 in 33 employees built their entire Facebook profile while on the clock [20].

However, it is not surprising that the loss of productivity is so high since 72% of companies out of 120 in a 2011 survey report not monitoring any employee’s time spent on social media sites whatsoever [25]. In another survey in late 2011, barely 59% out of 4,640 companies worldwide stated having any kind of policy in place regarding the use of social media. Of those companies with policies, only 57% state they actually enforce them. The most-stated reason for no enforcement was not having adequate resources to monitor compliancy [23]. Employers must implement clear, detailed policies referring to the use of
social media sites in the workplace. Relying solely on employees to make the right decisions will ultimately result in conflict [24].

**External Security Risks**

Providing numerous work-related and personal details is an intrinsic requirement of social media sites. This makes them big shiny targets in a sea of attackers looking to steal personal information. From an attacker’s point of view, access to this type of valid information makes the user ideal for a popular form of attack known as spear-fishing. Spear-fishing is an attempt to deceive the user into performing an action that launches an attack, such as opening a document or clicking a link. Any email addresses collected would be perfect for spammers due to the fact that the addresses are almost guaranteed to be “real” and frequently checked. The personal information can also be incorporated into the spam emails to aid in bypassing spam filters [2]. Attackers who target organizations can use spear-fishing and spamming to infiltrate the organization through its weakest point: its employees. Information leaked through social media sites is the most dangerous because it allows attackers to effortlessly find key employees of the organization, use social engineering methods to befriend them, collect information about their organizations and employees’ credentials, and invite the employees to use an application that actually installs Trojans or backdoors to gain greater access into the organization’s networks [1].

**Advanced Persistent Threats**

An advanced persistent threat (APT) is described as a wealthy, well-organized espionage that is financially motivated, and employs social engineering techniques and zero-day exploits. Its purpose is to breach networks that are monitored less than others in hopes of establishing its presence long-term inside the company’s perimeter. APTs target employees that are part of senior management, who appear to know valued information, or appear to have exploitable weaknesses such as an addiction to drugs or alcohol [1]. These details are easily obtained on social media sites, even in a short period of time. A study by Ponemon Institute revealed alarming results in which 65% of the surveyed individuals do not set high security or privacy settings, 40% share their detailed home address, and 60% are unsure if the social network(s) they belong to include(s) only people they know and trust. Nearly 90% of responders believe there is very little risk of identity theft from using social media sites [3]. After gathering needed information, APTs will try to get employees to divulge information or click links to install malware. This malware allows the attackers to obtain valid employee credentials that shield them from being detected [1]. While many other methods of network entry are being heavily-guarded through firewalls and anti-virus software, social media sites seem to be deemed as innocent as Twitter’s little bluebird mascot, but do not be fooled, these sites could easily be what bring down an entire organization.
Conclusion

Social media websites can be a great asset to businesses of all sizes. Small businesses and non-profit organizations can especially benefit from all of the tools of social sites have to offer. Most organizations can reap the benefits of social sites if they understand the pros and cons and plan their usage accordingly. Even with the disadvantages of social sites, a company can help avoid problems with some general tips. First, an organization should have a high customer or member satisfaction level to help prevent negative comments for other potential customers to see. Or, it should be adequately prepared to handle and neutralize any negative feedback posted. Businesses should have an idea of what kind of information they would like to include on their profile and what can be offered to potential and current customers. Lastly, plans of how the organization’s profile will be used, the confidentiality of personal and company information, and description of how employees should handle their time online are only a handful of topics that should be covered in a company policy. Our team encountered several difficulties in regards to the promised real-world business analysis. It proved quite difficult finding a business that met our qualifications for the trial. The business we were searching for could not have any social media profiles. It also had to be small enough that every bit of its resources was considered crucial for success. We wanted this because the benefits of using social media could then be justified. We would have preferred a business whose customers or potential customers were more likely to search online for services instead of inquiring other sources. In the end, we found a small business, J’s Lawn and Landscaping of Lawton, OK, that qualified as a prime example of a business that could profit from social sites [12]. Though we were not able to collect enough evidence to empirically prove that social media is beneficial, we did communicate our beliefs to the owner, who proceeded to establish his company’s presence online. We look forward to following up on the progress of the social site profile’s effect on the organization. In the future, our desire is not to convince all small business and non-profit groups to join social sites, but instead to suggest a better understanding of what social sites have to offer and guide their decisions on whether or not their organization should invest time and resources in to social sites. Our desire is that this research, with necessary modifications, can be used to help develop a universal standard for organizations to help classify whether or not a company can benefit from social sites. And finally, the tips and information provided can be the first steps in effectively helping organizations bring their product and services to the world.
Works Cited


