

# Social Media Best Practices Guide

*Prepared by Alexandra Tursi, September 2015, for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture.*

A collection of best practices for social media with a focus on the most used social media channels -- Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and blogs – as well as top tips for hosting a social media contest.

## Best Practices for Facebook Pages

**1. Optimize your posts.** Make the most of your posts by optimizing them for Facebook's algorithm. See "Anatomy of a Successful Facebook Post" at right. Also, more and more people are accessing Facebook on a mobile device, so make sure that your post displays well on mobile (e.g., you don't want to post an graphic with a font so tiny you can't read it!)

**2. Post every day.** It may seem excessive, but as people make more friends and "Like" more pages, your posts may be missed. Studies show posting 3-5 times a day is a good amount for pages. Check Facebook Insights to see when your audience is online. Then, try posting at optimal times, like once in the morning and once in the evening.

**3. Focus on engagement.** Social media is social! Talk to your audience. Connect with them and get responses! Ask questions, post helpful tips, and link to articles that your audience will "Like" and share. Make the posts about your audience and what they need, rather than selling you. Tag other users and business pages, too. Star or highlight posts. Use hashtags. To make posts "shareworthy," consider these top types of content people love to share: lists, infographics, how-to articles, news, images, videos, stories that solve problems, stats and facts, and quotes.

**4. Have a call-to-action.** This is critical. You want your fans to take the next step with you. So, tell people exactly what to do, such as click "Like," comment on a post, share a post, watch a video, or click a link to your website or event page. Be specific and explicit. Don't play coy!

**5. Don't oversell, but don't undersell either.** No one likes a never-ending sales pitch, but do highlight your product or service from time-to-time! Use the 80-20 rule for content/connection posts vs. sales messages. Think of fun ways to talk about your products, too. IKEA did a fun post where they published a photo of a room with their products. They then asked fans to tag themselves as the products they had. Can you say "viral"?

### Anatomy of a Successful Facebook Post



**6. Make it fun.** Facebook is a social community. People are there to have fun. Stay true to your brand, but think of ways to entertain your audience and let your hair down. Sometimes a fun or funny photo or a video is all you need to post – and you would be surprised that it gets the most engagement, but that’s because that is how your fans use Facebook. Just look at your own personal Facebook feed – what gets to you to like or comment? Let your answer guide you!

**7. Get creative.** Amp up your visuals. You can do many things to make your Facebook cover photo creative and interactive: Connect the profile picture to the cover photo, highlight a product, highlight a fan of the week, give a creative use of the product, show fans using the product or service. Also, when you post your own photos, brand them with your logo and Web URL.

**8. Follow a content calendar.** Posting regularly can be daunting. Plan ahead to avoid stressing out. Create a content calendar that includes your events, promotions and special occasions or seasonal happenings on an annual and monthly basis AND a weekly calendar that can give structure to your daily content, such as links to your own blog, third party links, photos, a question of the day, etc. As you develop your weekly content calendar, your community will also get to know your pattern and they will look forward to certain weekly content.

**9. Watch Facebook Insights.** Click on over to “Posts” under the “Insights” tab to get a good picture of your interaction levels. Look for content and engagement trends and keep posting more of what your audience “likes.”

**10. Run Facebook Ads.** While you can build a great Facebook community, the truth is that today you never quite get to communicate with it as effectively as you’d like. You can post great items on your page, but they have to compete for attention in a user’s busy Newsfeed. The best way to communicate with your audience is paid advertising on Facebook. You can target the fans of your page, but you can also target your target audience by setting up ads based on demographics, behaviors, and geography. Get started at <http://www.facebook.com/business/ads/>.

## Best Practices for Twitter

- 1. Optimize your tweets.** Data show that the tweet sweet spot is between 120 and 130 characters. This also leaves room for a link as well as for 1-3 hashtags.
- 2. Mention other users.** If you're sharing a quote, stat, or article from a brand or user, be sure to include that brand or user's handle in the tweet. This will increase the likelihood of them seeing your tweet and retweeting it to their own audience. The more your content is shared, the more following you'll gain, and the more your message will be spread.
- 3. Understand replies versus mentions.** To know how your content is being shared, you need to know how your content is being seen. When you place a Twitter handle directly at the beginning of a tweet, you're directly sending a message to a user, but it is not a private direct message. That tweet can also be seen by anyone who follows *both* your account and the account you're tweeting to. If you want everyone to see your tweet, regardless of whether they are following both you and the person you're mentioning, a common tactic is to add a period as a character at the start of the tweet.
- 4. Use hashtags wisely.** As if seeing #every #other #word in a #tweet as a #hashtag isn't irking enough, [a report from Salesforce](#) even revealed that tweets with one or two hashtags receive 21 percent higher engagement than those with three or more hashtags.
- 5. Incorporate visual content.** An [analysis from Simply Measured shows](#) that while photos are not shared as frequently as normal tweets (tweets that are solely text-based), tweets with photos receive the highest engagement. While this could be related to the fact that fewer photos are shared than text-based tweets, it's important to test out using visuals. In fact, Hubspot's analysis has shown that tweets with images see a 55 percent increase in leads! Be sure to upload photos in the proper size. For the perfect image appearance in a user's activity stream, upload photos 440 pixels by 220 pixels.
- 6. Place links in the middle of your tweet.** Place links about 25 percent of the way through a tweet. [Data from Dan Zarrella shows](#) that links placed earlier in a tweet receive much higher click-through rates than links placed at the end of a tweet. Presenting the link earlier catches a reader's attention faster.
- 7. Shorten links for cleaner tweets.** Shortened links host tracking information for you to assess the effectiveness of your tweets, and they also appear much cleaner in a tweet. A link can be around 20 characters before Twitter crops the tweet with an ellipsis.

**8. Optimize your publishing calendar.** As important as how you tweet is when you tweet. Key tweeting times are between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. Monday to Thursday. The data also shows that the best time to get retweet is from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Fridays.

**9. Gain insights from Twitter Analytics.** Measure engagement and learn how to make your tweets more successful in the same way you use Facebook Insights. You can use Twitter Analytics to learn more about your followers (their interests, locations, and demographics) and how to use “Twitter Cards” to drive clicks and retweets. Knowledge is power as they say – use it!

**10. Test Twitter Ads.** These ads are a fantastic way to grow your follower base, drive website clicks and conversions, increase engagement, and find leads. And, they are relatively inexpensive to purchase. Totally worth a test run!

## Best Practices for Pinterest

- 1. Choose an optimized company username.** Optimize your Pinterest business account for search by choosing a straightforward username. Usernames are confined to 15 characters. If your full company name fits – great! But, if it doesn't, choose something memorable, keyword-conscious, easy to spell, and clearly associated with your business.
- 2. Optimize your "About" section.** You get 200 characters of prime keyword real estate, so use it wisely. In addition to being descriptive and keyword-sensitive, your 'About' section should be simple, succinct, and specific. Cover the who, what, and where of what you do. Don't forget to add your website URL in the space provided!
- 3. Include links back to your website.** Always, always, always include a reference link back to your website with your pins! Including a link back to your website reinforces that the image is associated with your brand AND it also opens up a direct pathway to purchase your product or learn more about your services.
- 4. Differentiate your pinboards.** Break through the pinboard name clutter and be specific and keyword-smart in the selection of your board names. Align board names with what end users might be looking for. You can do a Pinterest search to conduct a little research. Thoughtful board names will help you stand out from the massive clutter of default or unoriginal board names.
- 5. Speak your customers' language.** Use terms your customers use in their everyday lives. Understand what they are looking for, what they are most interested in buying or pinning, and what related industries or topics the pinner might be seeking out. Your boards should not be an advertising board for your products; instead, make it a space that's curated around the needs and lifestyle of your customers.
- 6. Use pin descriptions wisely.** The biggest opportunity for text-based content on Pinterest is the description area for each individual pin. You get 500 characters to describe each pin, and people pay attention. HubSpot [researched 11,000 pins and found](#) that the most re-pinned and commented on items were accompanied by descriptions ranging from 200-310 words.
- 7. Make sure images have descriptive names.** Don't use default names (e.g., an image named "1.13.13Shootimage722.jpg"). It doesn't help you at all in search (while a clearly named "maple-mocha-latte.jpg") can help a search engine decipher what your image is about much more easily. Similarly, if you pin an image from your website, make sure that image has clear alt text associated with it. The same pin descriptions rules apply here: use naming conventions your customers will identify with. If a product

you're pinning has an obscure name, isn't broadly known or intuitive, skip it in favor of a potential keyword search term.

**8. "Pinjack" relevant search terms and images.** "Pinjacking" trends and events can be a great way to increase your organic search. For example, one of the top organic Google search results for "DIY Halloween costumes" comes not from Walmart, Target, or some costume shop, but from [goodwill industries of western Michigan](#). Do some search research to see what trends you can jump on!

**9. Add Pin it buttons and widgets to your site.** The pin it button lets people pin an item from your website to Pinterest. It helps site visitors share your site's visual content more easily on Pinterest. No brainer!

**10. Measure for success using the Pinterest Analytics.** With Pinterest Analytics, you can see what users like from your profile and what they save from your website. You can also get data about your audience, too, so you can learn what your customers really want.

## Best Practices for Instagram

**1. Post regularly.** Fifty-seven percent of the world's top 100 social brands post at least once per week; 28 percent post five times per week. Post often to keep your audience engaged through a frequent and regular flow of content. They will get familiar with you as they see more content – and be more likely to like and comment!

**2. Use hashtags.** Instagram is hashtag heaven. If you have a small audience, hashtags are a great way to grow your audience by putting yourself in front of users who are searching those terms. Also think about your own hashtags (branded hashtags, campaign hashtags, event hashtags, industry hashtags, product hashtags, and location hashtags). To keep the user experience optimal, post your hashtags as the first comment on your Instagram post. That keeps your message from getting lost in a sea of hashtags.

**3. Put a filter on it.** Instagram is first-and-foremost a photo-editing app, so use it! You can create beautiful images pretty easily. Be mindful of lighting, object positioning, colors, and filters – how your Instagram post has a big impact on engagement. The top filters are those that give a photo a warmer feel – like Mayfair.

**4. Repurpose marketing and advertising content.** Already creating an ad campaign, or a marketing piece? Figure out how to re-use it on Instagram. Use a photo from your ad photo shoot!

**5. Post timely and relevant content.** For everything there is a season – Halloween, holidays, spring-cleaning, and bathing suit season – the list could go on and on and on. Link your Instagram post to a seasonal trend or current event. Watch what is trending on Instagram. Become a part of the conversation AND be relevant to your community.

**6. Engage with the community.** Use your photo and video captions to ask questions that may encourage comments and feedback. For example, a coffee shop might post a photo or video of a barista making a latte and caption it: "Which pumpkin pastry would you pair with our signature Pumpkin Spice Latte? #PSL"

**7. Keep engaging!** When you start to receive comments, acknowledge and reply – keep the conversation going. Ask follow-up questions, answer questions, provide advice and guidance. Just like you would in a real-life conversation.

**8. Run contest and giveaways.** This is a great way to build your audience and

increase engagement. Set contest rules that help you do that: require that they follow you on Instagram, that they like or comment on a post, repost one of your photos, or use a certain hashtag. You can also inspire user-generated content by asking users to submit photos with a specific contest hashtag. Ben and Jerry's does a great job with that.

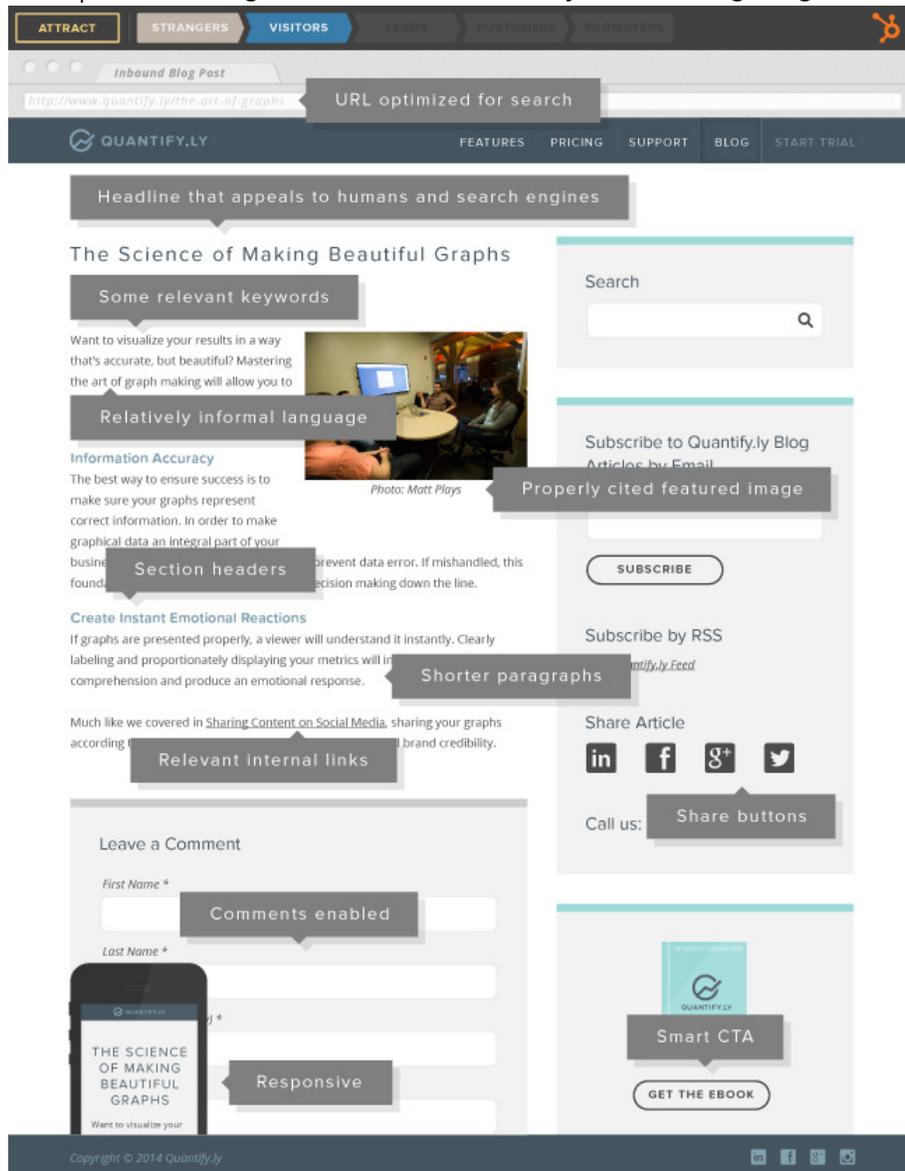
**9. Link your feed to Twitter and Facebook.** This way, you can easily share your Instagram photos on both platforms. Sharing posts can help you drive traffic to your Instagram page by letting your audience know you are there.

**10. Promote your Instagram profile!** Use your marketing channels to drive traffic to your Instagram. Consider how you promote it on your website, in email marketing, your blog and other marketing content and materials, from newsletters to business cards.

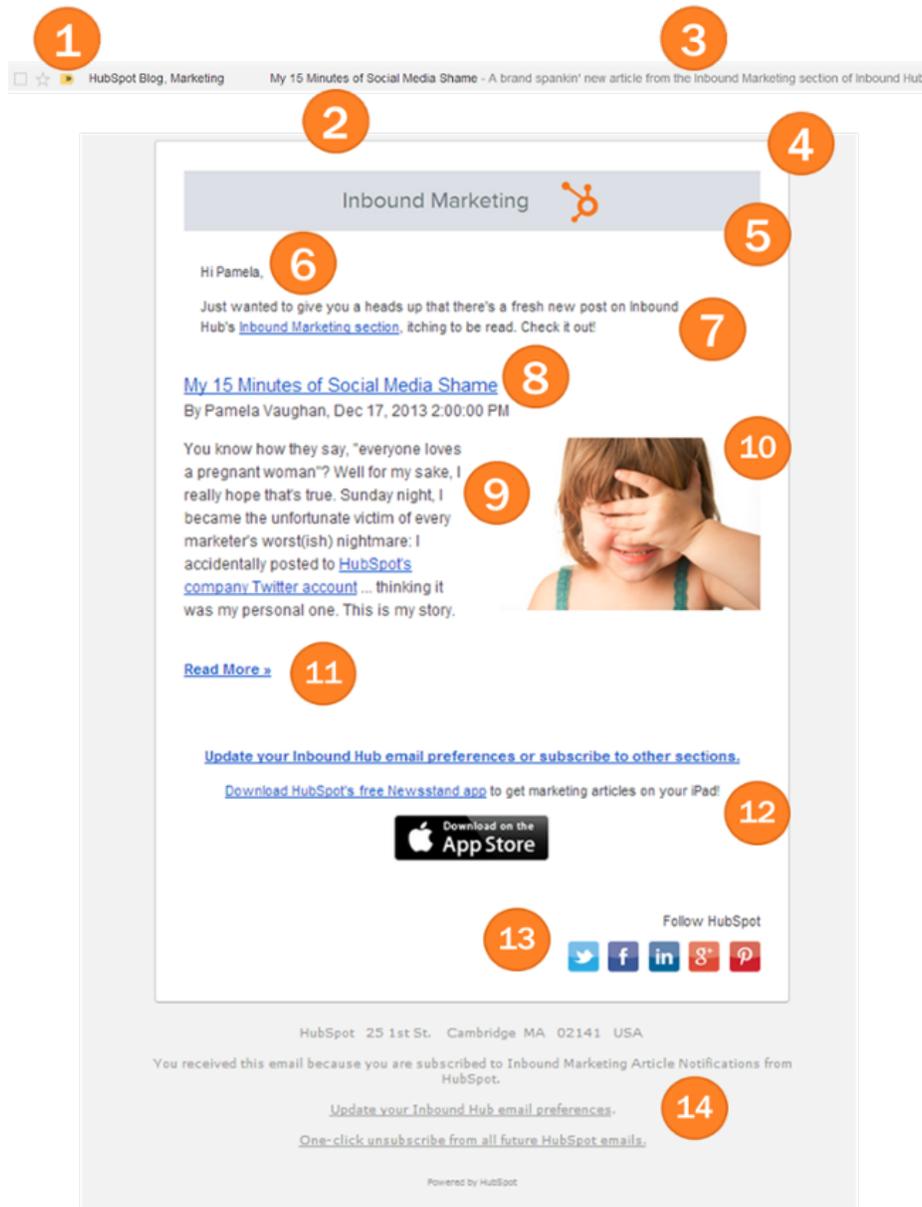
# Best Practices for Blogging

**1. Who are you writing for?** Determine who your audience is – ideally, your potential customers. Who are they? What do they do? What do they want? They are reading your blog for engaging, relevant, and timely information and content. Think about what they want and what they are interested in! Let that guide the types of content you publish. In doing so, remember to be helpful, unique, tell stories, quote experts, and respond quickly to trends or news/current events. The top formats for blogs are the “curated collection,” the “how to” blog, the “list-based” blog, and the “newsjacking” blog.

**2. Publish quality content.** Make sure your blog content is searchable and findable. Optimize your blog posts for search engines and a good user experience. Review the “Optimized Blog Post” below to ensure you are doing it right!



**3. Get subscribers.** Once you have started to gain readers, convert them into dedicated subscribers who consistently receive your blog content. You want them to keep coming back for more – and share your blog content. Learn about [“The Anatomy of an Optimized Blog Subscriber Email”](#) by clicking here and referring to the visual below. Be sure to also have a “blog subscriber email” call-to-action on your blog!



**4. Maintain a routine publishing calendar.** A blog will be your most labor-intensive effort, so plan wisely. You do not need to publish daily, but you will want to publish regularly (2-4 posts per month is a great place to start).

**5. Find topics your readers are interested in.** Here, you have to do a little

research. Use Google's Keyword Tool to see what people are searching for, ask your customers what they would like to see on your blog (ask by survey or on your other social media channels), look at others in your industry to see what they are blogging about.

**6. Use visuals.** We are visual learners, so augment your written content with visual content. Create original images, make images more effective with text overlay, and invest in your blog's design.

**7. Link to new posts from old posts.** If you're writing about a topic that you've written about before, give your new post a little extra SEO authority by linking to it from a relevant older post. Once you've published your new post, just update your old post with an appropriate internal link (and relevant anchor text) pointing to that new post.

**8. Invite others to participate.** Work with guest bloggers and influencers who may have a larger following than yours to build your blog following, invite a customer or association member to write about an interesting experience, ask questions at the end of your blog post.

**9. Repurpose and reuse your blogs!** You are going to spend time and effort on your blog posts – so make the most of them. Include them or link to them from your website, email newsletters, email signatures, social media posts, presentations, videos, ebooks, and checklists. Also, be sure to share newsworthy blogs with the media.

**10. Use the best blogging platforms and tools.** Wordpress with Google Analytics integrated is your best bet! Use comment plug-ins like Disqus to encourage social media commenting.

## Best Practices for Running a Social Media Contest

1. **Choose a Prize and Entry Method.** It could be a gift card, a product, or a service OR it could be something status-oriented, like being selected as an official brand blogger or being featured on your website or other marketing and brand materials. Whatever you choose, make it brand-relevant so you may promote your product or service in the process.

Next, how will people enter your contest? There are three main ways:

- Contact details: Require that entrants submit contact information, like an email address.
- Contact details + user-generated content: Ask entrants to enter photos, video or text to enter. You can use the content in future marketing, ask other users to help pick a winner, and simply get your fans to spread the word.
- Contact details + social referral: Boost entries by requiring entrants to refer or share the contest with "X" number of friends.

2. **Build Your Contest Page.** Keep it simple, but exciting – and above all easy to enter. Come up with an attention-grabbing title that is short and phrased as a call to action ("Enter to Win a \$50 Gift Card From X Brand"). Also, use graphics of your prize to entice people. Be sure to include entry and prize information, an entry submission form, share buttons, and official rules.
3. **Promote and Share Your Contest.** Once you have the contest set up, it's time to spread the word. Send an email blast, promote your contest on all of your social networks, add a banner to your website home page, create a Facebook ad, list your contest on contesting websites.
4. **Monitor Your Contest.** You will want to track entries and social conversation to meet your contest goals. You can do so by using Facebook Insights, Google Alerts for mentions of your contest, and/or use a contest management and reporting tool (e.g., WooBox).
5. **Post-Contest Follow-Up and Promotion.** When your contest is over, you still have some to dos: Announce and profile your winner on your website and social media, create a video showing you choosing the winner, send a follow-up email or post a follow-up social post to all contest entrants, and share your plans for any future contests.
6. **Understanding Facebook Promotions Guidelines.** Facebook has very explicit guidelines to follow when running a contest. Chief among them:

- You must have a written disclaimer stating that the contest is in no way associated with Facebook.
- You cannot use a Facebook feature as an entry method (e.g., Page like, Post like, Post comment, Post share).
- Facebook contests must be housed within a tab or app on your Facebook Page. You cannot, for example, run a contest in which people must write something on your Facebook Page's wall. Everything has to happen inside the app.