

## **An Exploratory Analysis of Entrepreneurs' Social Media Usage in Small Business Practices**

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### **Abstract**

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The primary purpose of this study was to analyze practices (e.g., usage, satisfaction, and future plans) in social media implemented by small business entrepreneurs. Through responsive evaluation research, investigative steps evaluated how reactive a social media platform was to entrepreneurial businesses using it. Entrepreneurs and employees participating in the study represent micro- to small-sized enterprises in manufacturing, wholesale trade, and retail trade sectors. Empirical research using field study was implemented through surveys used for data collection. Preliminary research through a review of literature indicated seven social media channels that entrepreneurs most commonly used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Periscope and Snapchat. The study fills a void in entrepreneurial research in social media and entrepreneurship education. Findings indicated that Periscope and Snapchat are becoming more useful to entrepreneurs. We can look to those for further marketing strategies. While LinkedIn is making great strides in workplace-related products or services, Facebook flattened in usage growth, but remains steady and is still considered effective. Academics must find ways to consistently implement timely social media education in their classes. Marketing professionals should develop detailed strategies to enable entrepreneurs with limited budgets and social media backgrounds to easily and fluidly integrate the platforms into marketing efforts.

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**Key Words:** Social media, entrepreneur, small business, marketing

### **Introduction**

The primary objective of this research was to conduct an exploratory analysis of practices (e.g., usage, satisfaction, and future plans) in social media marketing by entrepreneurs and their employees. This study relates to existing work in the fields of entrepreneurship, marketing, and business education in that it fills a void in research of entrepreneurial activity in the expanding area of social media and entrepreneurial education. The entrepreneurs participating in the study represent micro- to small-sized enterprises, primarily based in Missouri, who meet the requirements determined by the Small Business Association (SBA):

- Independently owned and operated
- Not dominant in field of operation
- Organized for profit
- Operating primarily (i.e., principal office), in this case, Missouri
- Owners (officers, if a corporation), in this case, domiciled in Missouri
- A small-sized business designation: 11 to 25 employees

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- A micro-sized business designation: 10 or fewer employees

These standards, cited by the SBA, are for enterprises with employee based size standards that are part of Manufacturing (Sector 31-33), Wholesale Trade (Sector 42), and Retail Trade (Sector 44-45). While the vast majority of states saw a drop in the number of new firms created, new business creation in Missouri surged by 16% in 2013, more than any other state in the nation (Office of Governor Jay Nixon, 2015). "Here in Missouri, we've made targeted investments in our small businesses and entrepreneurs, so that they can create jobs and grow our economy," Governor Nixon said. "These innovators, problem-solvers, and risk-takers are changing the way the world does business, while creating jobs for families here in Missouri." The data, released by the U.S. Census Bureau and analyzed by the Kauffman Foundation, shows that there were 1,293 more businesses created in Missouri in 2013 (the most recent year for which data is available) than in 2012, an increase of more than 16% (Office of Governor Jay Nixon, 2015). Over the same time period, 39 states saw a decrease in new business creation. Of the states that did see an increase in the number of new businesses, Missouri outperformed them dramatically – experiencing a bigger growth in new business creation than all ten of those states combined.

In the fiscal year of 2015, Missouri ranked – for the first time – a top ten state for startup funding, according to *Forbes* (Robes, 2015). In November, 2015, Governor Jay Nixon announced that three of the four top venture capital investors in the Midwest were Show-Me State organizations. Governor Nixon explained, "This is further evidence that our bipartisan efforts have put Missouri at the forefront of innovation and entrepreneurship. Investing in entrepreneurs today gives us a stake in their success tomorrow as they build their businesses and create high-paying jobs for families in our state" (Office of Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, 2015). As a leader in startup funding and growth, Missouri represents a geographic location that supports entrepreneurship opportunities and trends. Many of these trends include a strong online social media presence for small business.

Social media is revolutionizing the way we communicate and interact. Social media sites are "virtual places that cater to a specific population in which people of similar interests gather to communicate, share, and discuss ideas" (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 169). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) pose a definition of social networking sites in their study as "user generated content by many end users." To better understand the influence of subjective norm, social media networking sites that influence connections and sharing were examined in this study. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow users to create content that others can share and comment upon through likes and text. Additionally, social networking site platforms provide the ability to share pictures, videos, and other media. They enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, and inviting friends and colleagues to join them (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Experian Marketing Services (2014), the top ten social media sites included Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google+, Yahoo Answers, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, Tumblr, and Reddit. Based on afore mentioned parameters, the current social networking sites focused on in this research include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Periscope, and Snapchat.

## 1. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Generational Social Media Usage

In terms of relationship building, social media sites are leading the movement as more generations increasingly become advocates of using these platforms for daily life. First, younger generations and their social media trends are examined. According to Pew Internet, 96% of the global youth population was active on a social media in 2012 with the most popular sites being (in order of usage) Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Google+ (Brenner, 2013). At that time, social media tools gaining popularity with the teen generational group included Snapchat and Vine (Greig, 2013). Social media sites not only allow individuals to share connections with their peers and create an identity for themselves, but they also fulfill basic human needs of youth. Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) state that social media activities "go beyond the traditional realm by satisfying much more hedonic needs: the need for approval from peers, the desire for self-expression, and the desire for entertainment" (p. 351). As of September, 2014, 74% of online adults used social media sites; 76% of women and 72% of men (Pew Research Center, 2014). In 2013, 71% of users accessed social media through a mobile device (Bennett, 2013). In 2014, 71% of online adults used Facebook; 23% used Twitter; 26% used Instagram; 28% used Pinterest; and 28% used LinkedIn (Pew Research Center, 2014).

This level of activity is partially due to an increase in cell phone usage, particularly smartphones, as 40% of cell phone users access social media from their smartphones and 28% access social media on their smartphones daily (Brenner, 2013). Smartphone usage is expected to increase drastically through 2017, with 2013 boasting 975 million shipments and that number expected to compound 20% annually over the next four years (Malik, 2013).

## **2.2 Social Media and the Entrepreneur**

Companies in tune with the upswing in the popularity of social media are also increasingly using these sites as an integral aspect of their marketing strategies. Benwell states, "As social media is an alternative for expensive and time consuming marketing campaigns, small businesses have used it well (2014). In 2013, globally 93% of companies used social media for business; 70% used Facebook to increase customers; and 34% used Twitter to generate indications on business (Bennett, 2013). Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) state, "The Internet has become one of the most important communication channels in the world, and growing Internet usage is motivating some changes in the consumer purchasing process" (p. 348). The increased use of social media by businesses has generated a new trend in consumer behavior. Consumers are now placing retailers in the driver's seat as initiators of social media contacts, no longer feeling a need to seek out information regarding products and brands. Instead, they expect retailers and brands to come to them, leading to a shift from brick-and-mortar stores to online shopping (Dhanika, 2012). Brands and retailers are also picking up on this trend as "40% of e-retailers maintained a social network page, and 59% of top retailers had a 'fan page' on Facebook" in 2011 (Pookulangara&Koesler, 2011, p. 349). In that same year, nearly 80% of the top 100 retailers utilized Facebook, and almost 70% used Twitter (Pookulangara&Koesler, 2011). Companies utilizing social media for marketing and advertising, as well as for customer engagement, service, and idea innovation have nearly doubled from 42% in 2008 to 88% in 2012 (Smith, Fischer, &Younjian, 2012).

It is important for companies to inform consumers about which products are available and why they are important. Mangold and Faulds (2009) tie social media into this statement, indicating that "the emergence of Internet based social media has made it possible for one person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products and the companies that provide them" (p. 357). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), social media is comprised of two indicators; the first is self-disclosure in order to facilitate development of close relationships, and the second revolves around the level of that disclosure--self-presentation. Branding activities on social media by a business is its self-presentation. These social media activities "are trending toward becoming the main source of information for many consumers" (Kaplan &Haenlein, 2009, p. 62).

As social media sites are becoming the main sources of information for many consumers, it is of high priority for brands to align their use of multiple social media tools to increase activity among users and have extensive reach (Kaplan &Haenlein, 2009). With all social media, there is a need for entrepreneurs to monitor their companies' presence, ensuring their brands' images are consistent across all channels (Kabani, 2013). As social media increases in popularity, platforms need to become more intertwined with one another. Miles (2013) suggests that a good marketing plan would be accomplished by integrating the use of Instagram with other social media networks, such as Facebook, for longer brand exposure and better audience reach, specifically in terms of the migration of followers from one social media platform to another. For instance, many sites are connected through Facebook friends and can be shared amongst one another, increasing the possible scope of reach. In terms of reach, it is interesting to note that Facebook paid \$1 billion for Instagram in 2012. While Facebook initially offered integration to Instagram, the two platforms are still independent of each other (Rusli, 2012). It appears that even the players recognize that here is a place and need for multiple social media providers. Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) suggest social media alternatives should be incorporated into marketing mixes and state that, if companies and brands do not do that, then they are practicing poor customer service.

## **2.3 Personalizing the Experience of Many**

Through the use of social media, familiarity can be created in order to influence purchase intention. People on social media sites connect with strangers, as well as their close referential groups. They share information about themselves and their beliefs online through images, text posts, and videos in order to increase their identity as positive (Kaplan &Haenlein, 2009). Nearly three quarters of online adults in the U.S. use social media, and 53 percent of active social networkers follow a brand (McCartney, 2014).

Of these online adults, 76% are women and 72% are men (Pew Research Center, 2014). Relationships with businesses can be as personal as those with friends—those they see, those they have never met in person, and those that are business entities. Kim and Kwon (2011) studied the relationship of consumers and brands and found that consumers can have a relationship with brands as they do with people. Consumers will switch brands if they experience disappointment with the brand or other brands offer similar benefits. However, consumers will randomly select casual buddy brands without much consideration. Retailers incur fewer costs with these casual buddy type relationships and can ultimately turn them into emotional relationships (Kim & Kwon, 2011).

Familiarity can be created in order to influence brand awareness and purchase intention through social media. Shoppers want their favorite retailers to connect with them through social media to deliver a more personal experience (Amato-McCoy, 2011, p. 10). Engel, Bell, Meier, Martin, and Rumpel (2011) propose that, within the “new marketing ecosystem” involving social media and online shoppers, young shoppers are expecting retailers to stay in contact and connected with them “electronically at all times” (p. 24). Social media is a culture that can reach the masses one at a time. It has the ability to turn brands into buddies, and buddies into buying consumers. It allows users, both entrepreneurs and consumers, to connect on a personal level. Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) went as far as to say that social media is “a massive convergence of culture and the evolution of a new culture.” Who are some of the major social media players in this new culture? Next, a review of seven social media platforms of interest to small business entrepreneurs is presented.

## **2.4 Social Media Platforms**

### **2.4.1 Facebook**

Founded in 2004, Facebook is an online social networking service, in which users may create a personal profile, add other users as friends, exchange messages, and receive notifications when activity occurs on their profiles. In 2015, Facebook had over 1.55 billion monthly active users worldwide (Facebook, 2015). Facebook is used by brands and businesses for marketing by publishing images within photo albums (rather than individually) which remain on the retailer/brand page longer and encourage followers to click through all the photos. Facebook also offers the option to advertise on Facebook to encourage initial fan following which can then be cultivated into more personal relationships once the fan base is established (Kabani, 2013). Facebook’s key motivational factor as a marketing tool is the ability to turn marketing efforts through messages into personal, humanized experiences. Facebook presents a stage where brands appear to be real, not just a brand image. Information can be personalized and individualized to site users. Information that would not, or could not, be conveyed in an advertisement or website can be shared on Facebook. Engagement, entertainment, sales, and branding can all be utilized on Facebook, creating a new forum for building a real connection with its users (Indvik, 2011).

### **2.4.2 Twitter**

Twitter is a social media tool that allows users to send, receive, and read tweets, short messages that are 140 characters or less. In 2013, Twitter overtook Facebook as the most traveled social media channel amongst teens (Greig, 2013). With Facebook becoming more popular for older adults (often monitoring their teens’ activity), teens have made the switch to Twitter as the “most important” social media tool (Greig, 2013). In 2013, among Twitter’s 215 million monthly active users, there was an astounding increase in people ages 55 to 64, resulting in a 79% increase in activity from 2012 to 2013 for this age group (Bennett, 2013). In 2015, Twitter reported 320 million monthly active users using 35 supported languages (Twitter, 2015).

Similar to Facebook, Twitter creates a channel of communication that can bring the general public into a more intimate relationship with a company or brand. In contrast to other social media platforms, a tweet can live for only a few minutes, while an image posted on Instagram can stay on site for a month, and much longer on Facebook (Miles, 2013). Compared to Facebook, Twitter provides a more direct, two-way form of communication, allowing Twitter users to follow a company, or a brand, in the exact same manner they can follow an individual. The result is a tightened relationship that places the customer and the company (or brand) on an equal level, much like an extension of their family or peer group (Stephenson, 2009). Twitter followers gained three new experiences in 2015. A “likes” system, “moments” of the best of what’s happening on Twitter, and the ability to make donations through a tweet were added (Twitter, 2015).

### 2.4.3 Instagram

Introduced in October of 2010, Instagram is a mobile photo and video sharing network that is restricted by app use, or the use of a downloaded application that can only be accessed on a mobile device such as a smart phone or tablet. A year and a half later, it had 50 million users, then 50 million more users within the next nine months (Malik, 2013). In 2015, Instagram had 400 million users with more than 75% of them living outside of the U.S. (Instagram, 2015). Instagram users spend triple the amount of time on social media than Pinterest users do, and double the amount of time Twitter users spend on its site. It is significant to business owners that Instagram users are 25% more likely than average Internet users to be in the top income quartile (Cohen, 2014).

Instagram has proven in a very short time to be a key marketing tool for businesses. Consumers prefer short messages that are high in visual value, and this is exactly what Instagram provides. Instagram is a vehicle for businesses to send short and fast messages in photo form to their target market/followers (Sprung, 2013). According to Kabani (2013), it is ideal for sharing teasers, or previews, of upcoming lines and encouraging fans and followers to get involved by sharing images of their own related to the retailer. Instagram is a place where a company can portray its personality and tell the story of its brand to potential and current customers. By creating a wider audience through the mobile market, companies can create engagement with customers and followers through contests and promotional codes. Instagram provides a channel to feature customers, creating a closely tied, meaningful, and real connection. Through event promotion on Instagram, companies can also secure fans and, ultimately, turn them from casual buddies into paying customers (Sprung, 2013).

### 2.4.4 Pinterest

Launched in 2010, Pinterest is a social media tool that allows members to share images through themed "pinboards." Users capture and pin images to boards based on themes, such as events, interests, and hobbies. They can also browse the pin boards of other users, "re-pinning" images to their own boards and "liking," or commenting on images. Pinterest reported in 2015 that that numbers of pinners doubled in a year and a half and that around 70% of people are actively doing something on the site – finding items, clicking through, saving them for later, etc. (Yeung, 2015). With the introduction of the Pinterest app for mobile devices in 2013, there was a shift from web-based "Pinteresting" to mobile "Pinteresting" that led to a surge in users as the site continues to break records. In 2015, Pinterest was valued at \$11 billion and had 100 million active monthly users with 45% of its pinners international (Yeung, 2015).

Pinterest is an important social media for entrepreneurs because users can link directly to company websites from the pin boards. Pinterest is using its success to create a global marketing platform for businesses. "Now it's time to use that reputation to seduce ad buys from brands and small businesses" (Constine, 2013). Each country has a "country manager" who coordinates the Pinterest site. U.K.'s Country Manager states, "Pinterest is powerful for discovering new products and prospective experiences" (Benady, 2013). In 2013, Pinterest expanded into experimental marketing campaigns, adding advertising opportunities for brands and subtle ways to connect with consumers and influence purchase intentions (Constine, 2013). While Pinterest generously markets and advertises businesses and products, its techniques are considered less intrusive than those of other social media companies (Isaac, 2015).

### 2.4.5 LinkedIn

The mission of LinkedIn is to "connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful" and has more than 400 million members in over 200 countries and territories around the globe (LinkedIn, 2015). At its core, LinkedIn is a professional social network. It is intended to generate career development, professional connections, industry discussions, and other types of business-related activities. As Angeles (2015) states, "It's not like other social media marketing platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram; there, businesses have direct access to consumers that they can easily market to with status updates, images and other casual posts" (2014). While blatantly pushing a business or hard selling is frowned up on LinkedIn, entrepreneurs are successfully using the social media site to find new customers, create new contacts, and grow their businesses.

Tim Peters, Director of Marketing at IntelliResponse states, "The targeting on LinkedIn is unparalleled in the realm of digital advertising. Small businesses can zero in on the exact industry, company size, and job role [of the people] that they know typically would buy their product or service" (Angeles, 2014).

#### **2.4.6 Snapchat**

Snapchat is a photo- and video-messaging app launched in 2011. It is unique in that all photos and videos only last a brief amount of time before they disappear, though users can take a screenshot to save images and videos. Snapchat's Chief Executive Officer Evan Spiegel announced in 2015 that it had close to 100 million daily active users in developed countries (Tweney, 2015). Spiegel also stated that 65% of them are actually contributing content – snapping pictures, sharing stories, etc. (Tweney, 2015). Snapchat reported 6 billion daily views in 2015 (Weiss, 2015). Businesses targeting young people began using Snapchat to promote their products and services, and there is now evidence it is increasingly being adopted by mothers (Solomon, 2015).

#### **2.4.7 Periscope**

Periscope is Twitter's live-streaming video app that allows its users to watch and broadcast live video from all across the globe. Periscope saves the finished video streams so that they can be viewed for up to 24 hours. It was launched on March 26, 2015, and was joined by one million users in the first ten days (Omnicores, 2015). It has 10 million users with 1.85 million of them who use Periscope daily (Omnicores, 2015). Twenty-nine percent of Periscope URLs are posted by women, and the top three countries in which Periscope users reside are the United States, Turkey, and Brazil (Omnicores, 2015). In a survey of 47,743 Internet users, 49% of the respondents who reported using the Periscope app were between the ages of 25 and 34 (GlobalWebIndex, 2015).

### **2.5 Social Media as Marketing and Branding Tool**

In regards to small businesses, social media is a useful tool that can put them at the same level of competition as larger companies in terms of target market advantage (Gourdreau, 2012). According to Amy Martin, author of the social media book *Renegades Write the Rules*, "Entrepreneurs are especially poised to gain from social media because it provides easy access to potential customers and partners, facilitating free marketing and market research and efficient customer service" (Gourdreau, 2012). Additionally, Martin states that the best steps for entrepreneurs to take to leverage their online platforms include connecting to customers in a humanized way and using social media platforms for proper customer service, crowdsourcing, and product development (Gourdreau, 2012). Martin also suggests conducting research on a business's followers and target market, a necessity to be certain that consumer and business perceptions are synchronized.

Baird and Parasnis (2011) surveyed both customers and business executives to understand perceptions regarding social media interactions between these two groups. It is interesting that significant gaps exist between what customers say they want from social media and what businesses report their customers care about. Their findings suggest that small businesses should move away from using social media to get closer to customers and toward a broader approach social customer relationship management (social CRM). Toombs and Harlow (2014) add further that, under social CRM, organizations create emotional appeal to customers and motivate those customers to share their experiences with others.

## **2. Methodology**

An online survey questionnaire of 27 questions was compiled and disseminated to the owners and employees of small businesses in the Midwest region. Approximately 1,500 respondents were solicited through direct emails sent by the Small Business and Technology Development Center and One Million Cups, both located in Springfield, Missouri. In addition, the survey link was emailed to sample targets through LinkedIn, and a status announcement and the survey link was posted Facebook. A total of 114 usable surveys resulted.

The survey consisted of questions asking respondents to indicate what social media they use and how often. Example of questions include "In terms of using social media for your business, do you feel more or less connected with your customers today than five years ago?," "When posting to social media sites, from which activities do you receive the highest response rate from customers?," and "What type(s) of social media do you use for your business?"

Once all surveys were collected, frequencies were conducted to determine descriptive analyses of entrepreneurial business social media usage and considerations.

### 3. Results and Findings

A total of 114 usable survey responses were collected and analyzed from entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial employees, primarily in the Midwest; mainly in the Springfield, Missouri (n=64), region, other areas included Kansas City and St. Louis, MO (n=2), Texas (n=3), Chicago (n=1) and New York City (n=1), and other/unidentified (n= 44). Of the respondents who answered the question identifying their roles in their respective companies (n=84), 67.9% were entrepreneurs/business owners (n=57), 25% were business employees (n=21), 7.1% were self-designated as "other" (n=6). The remaining respondents did not indicate their affiliation with the small business they represented with their answers (n=30). Businesses in this study ranged from retail to nonprofit and consulting to marketing firms. Of the participants who answered (n=83) the question about business types, they identified their businesses as follows: 36.1% had both a virtual and physical small business (n=30); 38.6% were solely brick and mortar (n=32); 20.5% were online only (n=17); and the balance was designated as "other" (n=4). The remaining respondents did not indicate a response (n=31). See Table 1.

**Table 1: Frequencies of the Respondents**

		N	%
Role of Respondent (n=)	Business Ow	57	67.9
	Business Em	21	25.0
	Other	6	7.1
Type of business (n=64)	Virtual	17	20.5
	Physical	32	38.6
	Both	30	36.1
	Other	4	4.8

Of the seven social media platforms provided in the survey, 79.8% indicated using Facebook in their marketing strategies (n=91), 42.1% used Instagram (n=48), 50.9% used LinkedIn (n=58), and 45.6% used Twitter (n=52). Showing much lower usages, 23.7% of the respondents reported using Pinterest (n=27); 4.4% used Periscope (n=5); and 8.8% used Snapchat (n=10). It was reported that 2.6% (n=3) use no forms of social media, and 7% (n=8) use "other." Other forms of social media indicated in one respondent's comments included: YouTube, Google+, Google Business, Vine, Etsy, Poshmark, Tumblr, and Quara. See Table 2.

An item in the survey asked entrepreneurs to report which form of social media they most used five years ago to better understand the changes in the popularity of these specific channels to market small businesses. Of the respondents, 46.5% indicated they used Facebook at that time (n=53), 7% indicated they used Twitter (n=8), 2.6% used Instagram (n=3), 1.8% used Pinterest (n=2), and 10.5% used LinkedIn (n=12). The remaining social media channels of Periscope and Snapchat were indicated as not being used at all. This is understandable due to the fact that these platforms were nonexistent at the time. Only 35.1% (n=40) of the respondents used social media five years ago, and, among responses, 6.1% (n=7) used "other" with only one explanation which indicated using Myspace. See Table 2.

**Table 2: Social Media Used Now and Five Years ago (n=84)**

Platform		Now		5 Years Ago	
		n	%	n	%
Facebook	Yes	91	79.8	53	46.5
	No	23	20.2	61	53.5
Instagram	Yes	48	42.1	3	2.6
	No	66	63.1	111	97.4
LinkedIn	Yes	58	57.9	12	10.5
	No	56	50.9	102	89.5
Periscope	Yes	5	4.4	0	0
	No	109	95.6	114	100
Pinterest	Yes	27	23.7	2	1.8
	No	87	76.3	112	98.2
Snapchat	Yes	10	8.8	0	0
	No	104	91.2	114	100
Twitter	Yes	52	45.6	8	7.0
	No	62	54.4	106	93.0
None	Yes	3	2.6	40	35.1
	No	111	97.4	74	64.9
Other	Yes	8	7.0	7	6.1
	No	106	93.0	107	93.9

When asked about customer interaction through social media, an overwhelming 64.0% (n=73) of respondents indicated that they received the most positive customer interaction on Facebook, followed by Twitter (16.7%, n=19), LinkedIn (14.0%, n=16), Instagram (20.2%, n=23), Pinterest (2.6%, n=3), and no interaction on all social media platforms cited in the survey (7.9%, n=9). For Snapchat and Periscope, respondents indicated that no customer interaction was present. This is understandable for two of the three platforms, Snapchat and Periscope, as they are new social media platforms. One participant indicated "other," and commented that the most effective activities to engage customer interaction were word of mouth and email. See Table 3.

In regards to the least helpful social media in generating interaction with customers, a substantial 93.9% (n=107) of respondents indicated that one or more of the platforms were helpful in some way; however, some are more helpful than others. Most notably, all of the social media platforms provided received rankings from 6.1% to 28.9% for least helpful in generating customer interaction. It can be assumed that most respondents believe that the social media channels, in general, are more helpful than no. Snapchat was considered least helpful in customer interaction at 28.9% (n=33), followed by Pinterest at 26.3% (n=30), and LinkedIn at 21.1% (n=24). Periscope (15.8%, n=18), Twitter (13.2%, n=15), Facebook (12.3%, n=14), and Instagram (12.3%, n=14) were the mid-range of least effective choices. "Other" was selected by 6.1% of respondents (n=7). These participants commented that other social media forms which were least helpful included Google+, Linked In, and Periscope. Two respondents indicated that social media training was needed in order to ensure these platforms to be effective. See Table 3.



**Table 3: Customer Interaction Most and Least Helpful (n=84)**

Platform		Most		Least	
		n	%	n	%
Facebook	Yes	73	64.0	14	12.3
	No	41	36.0	100	87.7
Instagram	Yes	23	20.2	14	21.1
	No	91	79.8	100	78.9
LinkedIn	Yes	16	14.0	24	15.8
	No	98	86.0	90	84.2
Periscope	Yes	0	0	18	15.8
	No	114	100	96	84.2
Pinterest	Yes	3	2.6	30	26.3
	No	111	97.4	84	73.7
Snapchat	Yes	0	0	33	28.9
	No	114	100	81	71.1
Twitter	Yes	19	16.7	15	13.2
	No	95	83.3	99	86.8
None	Yes	9	7.9	9	7.9
	No	105	92.1	105	92.1
Other	Yes	1	.9	7	46.1
	No	113	99.1	107	93.9

Participants were asked to assess whether or not, as business professionals, they feel more or less connected with their customers through social media efforts. A majority 71.1% (n=81) of respondents felt that they were more connected while 14% (n=16) felt there was the same connection level. Finally, 2.6% (n=3) believed they experience less connection with their customers due to social media. See Table 4. Regarding whether or not respondents have placed more funds into social media in the last five years, 32.5% (n=37) of respondents indicated no change in funding. However, 24.6% (n=28) of respondents did increase funding somewhat, and 8.8% (n=10) increased funding significantly for promotions and marketing on social media. In contrast, 8.8% (n=10) found a decrease in spending for social media marketing somewhat, and 8.8% (n=10) decreased this spending significantly. See Table 4. When evaluating if social media use was significant to the growth of their businesses, 41.2% (n=47) indicated it was very significant; 30.7% (n=35) replied it was somewhat significant; 8.8% (n=10) indicated neutral; and 2.6% (n=3) stated it was not significant at all. Of the respondents 16.7% did not answer (n=19). See Table 4.

When asked whether or not customer interactions have increased since their businesses implemented a social media presence, 37.7% (n=43) of respondents said somewhat increased, 31.6% (n=36) indicated definitely increased, 12.3% (n=14) answered not at all. In terms of brand loyalty, 36% (n=41) indicated there was no change in customer loyalty since a social media presence had been established; 30.7% (n=35) believed customers were somewhat more loyal, 14% (n=16) felt they were much more loyal, and .9% (n=1) cited a decrease in customer loyalty. This indicates the possibility that social media generates a greater number of consumers; however, they are not necessarily loyal repeat customers, but may be simply casual shoppers. Of the respondents 18.4% did not answer (n=21). See Table 4.

Regarding types of posting to social media sites and their relationship to number of customer responses, 42.1% (n=48) of respondents indicated that photos had the highest response rate. This is a very high contrast to the remaining options, as follow: 7% (n=8) believed that sharing from other sites has the highest customer response rate (i.e., reposting); 5.3% (n=6) reported the best customer responses to texts and status updates; 7.9% (n=9) indicated promotion and contest postings generate the highest number of responses; 6.1% (n=7) designated posting videos as generating the greatest number of responses; and 13.2% (n=15) indicated "other." In the response category of "other," one respondent commented that photos with status updates, with a share from another site, or with videos received the most responses. Four respondents who selected "other" indicated that all of their social media posts generated a similar response rate. One respondent cited blog posts written by the business and shared on social media as most effective, while another found videos of infographics as having the highest response rate. Of the total respondents, 18.4% (n=21) did not answer the question. See Table 4.

When asked if they offered promotions on social media, respondents indicated that this is not a common practice as 32.5% (n=37) never offer promotions through social media. Of the remaining respondents, 25.4% (n=29) offer promotions monthly; 13.2% (n=15) offer them yearly; 8.8% (n=10) offer them weekly; and .9% (n=1) offer daily promotions. Though not a common practice, for those businesses that do offer promotions through social media, 42.1% (n=48) of the respondents indicated they had a positive effect on the business. In contrast, 17.5% (n=20) did not offer promotions; 15.8% (n=18) believed they had no effect at all; and 1.8% (n=2) reported a negative effect. Of the respondents, 22.8% did not answer (n=26). See Table 4.

Many respondents provided comments regarding promotions on social media. A majority of respondents agreed that promotions tapped into customers they may not have otherwise accessed. As one participant stated, "We are quickly able to communicate promotional offers to hundreds of people." Another participant commented, "People get more excited when they can interact with my business." As a result, an assumption can be made that promotions through social media can offer benefits to small businesses by providing customer contact that is not available just anywhere. Another respondent agreed and commented, "It instantly reaches an audience we would otherwise miss." On the opposite side, a respondent stated, "Giving promotions causes your customers to view your product at the sale price and no longer the original price." Some (n=4) indicated that social media is a useful tool, but that they did not have the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective marketing on social media. One respondent stated, "I really believe getting immersed in social media will benefit greatly; I just haven't been knowledgeable about getting started."

**Table 4: Frequencies of the Data**

Item		n	%
Customer connection	More	Yes 81	71.1
		No 33	28.9
	Less	Yes 3	2.6
		No 111	97.4
	Same	Yes 16	14.0
		No 98	86.0
Social media costs	Costs decreased significantly	10	8.8
	Costs decreased somewhat	10	8.8
	Costs have increased significantly	10	8.8
	Costs increased somewhat	28	24.6
	No change	37	32.5
	No answer	19	16.7
Social media significance to business	Very significant	47	41.2
	Somewhat significant	35	30.7
	Neutral	10	8.8
	Not significant at all	3	2.6
	No answer	19	16.7
Customer interaction increase	Definitely	36	31.6
	Somewhat	43	37.7
	Not at all	14	12.3
	No answer	21	18.4
Customer loyalty	Much more loyal	16	14.0
	Somewhat more loyal	35	30.7
	No change in loyalty	41	36.0
	Customer loyalty has decreased	1	.9
	No Answer	21	18.4
Highest response medium	Photos	48	42.1
	Videos	7	6.1
	Text/status updates	6	5.3
	Promotions/contests	9	7.9
	Shares from other sites/reposts	8	7.0
	Other	15	13.2
	No answer	21	18.4
Promotions offered	Never	37	45.1
	Yearly	15	15.5
	Monthly	29	28.2
	Weekly	10	11.2
	Daily	1	.9
	No answer	22	19.3
Promotion effect	Positive effect	48	42.1
	No effect at all	18	15.8
	Negative effect	2	1.8
	I do not offer promotions	20	17.5
	No answer	26	22.8

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they posted on their social media platforms. The majority, 17.5% (n=20) reported that they posted once per week on Facebook; 15.8% posted two to three times a week (n=18); and 14% posted daily (n=16). Less popular was posting "once a month" (7.9%, n=9) or "two to three times per month" on Facebook (8.8%, n=10). "Once a year or less" was selected by 1.8% of respondents (n=2), and "never" was indicated by 4.4% (n=5). Surprisingly, 30.7% (n=35) reported that they never posted on Instagram, and 35.1% (n=40) indicated they never posted on LinkedIn. Not as surprising was that 62.3% (n=71) of respondents reported never posting on Periscope, 43% (n=49) never posted on Pinterest, and 57% (n=65) never posted on Snapchat. However, the most surprising result was the 27.2% (n=31) of participants who responded that they never post on Twitter, particularly when 45.6% indicated using Twitter for marketing purposes. Of the respondents, there were varying numbers that did not answer (Facebook: n=26, Instagram: n=32, LinkedIn: n=35, Periscope: n= 35, Pinterest: n=35, Snapchat: n=36, and Twitter: n=33). See Table 5.

**Table 5: Post Frequencies**

	Never		Once a year		Once a month		2-3 times per month		Once a week		2-3 times per week		Daily		Several times		No answer	
	n	%	n	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Facebook	5	4.4	2	1.8	9	7.9	10	8.8	20	17.5	18	15.8	16	14.0	8	7.0	26	22.8
Instagram	35	30.7	3	2.6	6	5.3	7	6.1	12	10.5	12	10.5	2	1.8	5	4.4	32	28.1
LinkedIn	40	35.1	7	6.1	20	17.5	6	5.3	6	5.3	6	5.3	1	.9	0	0	28	24.6
Periscope	71	62.3	3	2.6	1	.9	2	1.8	2	1.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	30.7
Pinterest	49	43.0	6	5.3	12	10.5	2	1.8	5	4.4	2	1.8	3	2.6	0	0	35	30.7
Snapchat	65	57.0	2	1.8	0	0	3	2.6	2	1.8	3	2.6	1	.9	2	1.8	36	31.6
Twitter	31	27.2	7	6.1	5	4.4	8	7.0	9	7.9	11	9.6	4	3.5	6	5.3	33	28.9

In terms of customer response patterns to posts, 25.4% (n=29) of respondents indicated that customers had no pattern to their responses; 26.3% (n=30) believed their customers responded best to daily posts; and 23.7% (n=27) indicated their customers responded best to infrequent posts that occurred between once a week and twice a month. Of the respondents, 24.6% did not answer (n=28). See Table 6.

**Table 6: Customer Response to Posts (n=67)**

	N	%
Respond best to frequent posts (daily)	30	26.3
Respond best to infrequent posts (once a week)	27	23.7
There is no pattern to their responses	29	25.4
No Answer	28	24.6

Respondents were asked an open-ended question: to speculate on what the next big social media platform to use for business will be. A majority of respondents indicated they didn't know (19.3%, n=22). Others indicated Periscope and Instagram (6.1%, n=7), Pinterest and Twitter (4.4%, n=5), LinkedIn and YouTube (3.5%, n=4), and Facebook (4.4%, n=5). Other written responses (n=1 each) included: ecommerce, Snapchat, Vimeo, Google+, personal apps, texting, guerilla marketing, and instructional videos. When provided with the opportunity to comment at the end of the survey, many of the respondents had interesting ideas about the future of social media as it related to their businesses. One respondent indicated, "I believe a lot of my generation (I'm 25) is jaded by the overuse of social media, especially in business. I have had little to no success marketing my business, a recording studio, online. Genuine personal marketing and networking has been much more fruitful for me. Paid ads have been implemented in nearly every social media outlet and they're being ignored, much like Internet banner ads 15 years ago."

#### 4. Discussion

Of the social media platforms presented, approximately 80% of respondents indicated using Facebook in their marketing strategies. LinkedIn was next, followed by Twitter, then Instagram. Showing much lower usage were Pinterest, Snapchat, and Periscope, in declining order. If the intent of using social media is to communicate with existing and potential customers, then social media appears to be helping entrepreneurs accomplish this goal. The majority of entrepreneurs, over 70% indicated that they were more connected with their customers through social media efforts, compared to five years ago. Additionally, the same number indicated that social media use was significant to the growth of their businesses.

Over 60% indicated an increase in customer interactions since their businesses implemented a social media presence. Among those who offer promotions through social media, nearly half believed they had a positive effect on the business in that promotions can tap into a new customer base. When asked what the next big social media to use for business would be, 19.3% of respondents indicated they didn't know. The remainder selected Periscope, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn, in declining order. Other written responses included: ecommerce, as well as Snapchat, Vimeo, Google+, personal apps, texting, instructional videos and guerilla marketing. When asked to comment at the end of the survey, many of the respondents had interesting ideas about social media as it related to their businesses, particularly in the area of education needs.

#### **4.1 Strengths and Limitations**

Strength of the study was its focus on Missouri entrepreneurs. As most of the U.S. saw a decline in the number of new firms created, new business creation in Missouri increased more than any other state in the nation (Office of Governor Jay Nixon, 2015). For the first time, Missouri ranked as a top ten state for startup funding in 2015 (Robes, 2015). As a leader in startups and growth, Missouri represents a geographic location of entrepreneurial growth and business trends.

A limitation of this study was the fact that some of the surveys were completed in person, rather than online. In many of these cases, respondents did not answer all questions or wrote in answers. Additionally, many of the entrepreneurial businesses surveyed were of different types—from Internet to apparel sales. Further research should include comparing separate types of small businesses to understand which types of social media works best in each sector. For example, retail companies, marketing services, and consulting firms may find very different social media platforms to be most effective for selling their products or services. Another limitation is the specific geographic area in which the surveys were disseminated.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Facebook led the survey in terms of usage and preferred outcomes. The majority of participants in the study believed they are more connected with their customers through social media than they were five years ago. Nearly half indicated that their businesses were positively impacted through social media usage. The vast majority indicated they do not know what the next big thing is in social media, but know "it" is coming. They also know that "it" will take time to learn and apply—time that is hard to come by. What once was considered an effective marketing strategy, social media seems to be changing in effectiveness according to this research. Many of the respondents also indicated that they were too busy trying to set up the business to have adequate time for social media. This brings up a valid point. Perhaps social media cannot be a key consideration of smaller business owners due to a lack of human resources, a factor that is not seen in "big business" with its plethora of employees. Many of the respondents called out for more education on social media and how to use it effectively for their businesses. They indicated that social media is a useful tool, but that they do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective marketing in this realm. This is a consideration for future research in terms of whether or not social media education for small businesses is a void that needs to be filled.

#### **6.1 Directions for Future Research**

Findings indicated that Periscope and Snapchat are becoming more useful to entrepreneurs. Future research in further marketing strategies on these two platforms is recommended. While LinkedIn is making great strides in workplace-related products or services, Facebook flattened in usage growth, but remains steady and is still considered useful. Finding new and time efficient ways to use Facebook as a marketing and branding tool for small companies will be significant to its continued use in business. Academics must find ways to consistently implement timely social media education in their classes. Marketing professionals should develop detailed strategies to enable entrepreneurs with limited social media backgrounds and limited budgets to easily and fluidly integrate the platforms into marketing efforts.

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