Promoting your practice with social media and blogging
PROMOTING YOUR PRACTICE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AND BLOGGING

Social networking has radically changed the way we do business in the twenty first century – it’s now easier than ever to connect with the clients you want to do business with.

Mass marketing and direct mailing may still be viable ways to promote some accountancy practices. But they can be expensive ways to reach new clients. And neither tells you very much about your customers.

In the online world, social media channels and online blogs are making it easier and cheaper to have direct, personal, two-way interactions with your clients. And that’s a great way to start building relationships with target businesses – relationships which are vital if you’re going to grow your client base and expand your practice.

“The net result is that social helps interaction with potential clients. It helps engagement, it helps you put content out there that’s useful and that means your organic search rankings improve. It’s strengthened our brand and it’s meant that we’re on the first page of Google when you type in ‘Xero accountant’.”

– Simon Kallu, SRK Accounting

How social media helps to grow your practice:

So, how do you use social media and blogging to help you build these relationships? Let’s take a look.
What’s social media?

We’re talking about websites and apps like LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook – sites where you create a personal or business profile and then build up a network of contacts.

This is the social networking part: connecting with people and businesses that have a shared, common interest (and who may be interested in you). To get the ball rolling, you’ll need to set up a profile:

• Create a profile for you or your business
• Make sure the profile is complete and gives a good overview of your services
• Start connecting with people and building up a network
• Start posting regular updates, links and content

Once you’ve built up this network of connections, you have a ready made audience for any updates you post.

Got a new tax service you want to tell the world about? Write an update and post it to your followers. It really is as simple as that. And the bigger your network, the wider your message is spread.

And, importantly, your connections can comment, respond and talk to you directly. It’s a ready made way to start business conversations.

Why social media works

How does using social media help to promote your practice? Well, it’s a great, free marketing tool and a brilliant way to connect with clients and targets. And social networking really can help to raise your business’ profile in the marketplace.

“Using social media has really had an impact for us. We have our LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook contacts on the website and we’re definitely reaping the rewards in terms of wider awareness of the practice and better communication with clients. This has even resulted in us getting new work through activity on social media – so social is really helping us expand our client base.”

– Paul Miller, Cornish Accounting Solutions

Expanding your influence

• You can build up a following online – a network who listen to what you have to say
• Posting regular content gets more people listening
• The bigger your following, the more widely your updates will be shared
• The more you’re shared, the more impact your messages will have
Stay in the client’s mind

- By tweeting/updating regularly, you’ll be at the front of your clients’ minds
- You’ll be in their feeds – which raises your profile and gets people listening to you
- Happy clients are likely to retweet and share your updates, increasing the impact
- Happy clients are also likely to refer you to other businesses

Monitor the trends

- It’s not just about broadcasting, it’s also about listening
- Following clients and peers means you know what’s going on in the market
- Follow conversations and trends – jump in and answer questions
- Join in and add your own comments and insights – again, this gets people listening

WHERE TO REALLY FOCUS – LINKEDIN, TWITTER AND FACEBOOK

There are a huge number of different social media sites, all of which offer different ways to promote your practice. But there are four main players which really dominate in the small business world: LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.

“We use LinkedIn, Google+, Facebook and Twitter, mainly. And I post content to my own personal Facebook page as well. At the moment, we don’t differentiate between them: the same content goes on all these channels, but obviously the audience is different. I think most of our main contacts are on LinkedIn and our content gets updated through there.”
– Simon Kallu, SRK Accounting

Let’s take a look at how to get the most from these four.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the number one social media site used by accounting professionals.

It’s a space where professionals can list their skills, areas of interest and experience and then share them with a network of like-minded business people. It’s a powerful way to connect directly with your clients.

You can also set up a business profile for your whole practice. It’s a great way to raise the profile of the business, and to share updates about your services, offers and new content. It really helps to underline the practice’s credentials to a wider audience.
To get the most from LinkedIn:

- Have a compelling profile – make sure it outlines your skills, service and links back to your own website.
- Make connections – replicate your real-world business network and get connected
- Create and join accounting groups – keep up-to-date and add to conversations in forums
- Ask for recommendations from your clients and peers

**Twitter**

Twitter is a great way for small businesses to connect with clients.

Twitter's unique selling point is the 'tweet'. Each tweet is a short message, limited to 140 characters in length. This may not sound like much, but you'd be amazed how much you can convey in such a short amount of space.

Tweets can also include links to websites, links to videos, photos or whatever else you want to share with your followers. Your tweets appear in a timeline, in date order. Anyone who follows you will see these tweets. Tweeting topical, interesting content is the best way to build up a following – that’s what your followers will be looking for.

If someone follows you and likes your tweet, they can 'retweet' it. This forwards the same tweet on to all their followers. This is important. If you create an interesting tweet and have 100 followers, and each of them retweet your message to their 100 followers, then that’s 10,000 people who’ve heard your message.

Are you starting to see the power of this?

To get the most from Twitter:

- Have a complete profile – make sure it outlines your skills, service and links back to your own website
- Keep your tweets short and concise – be brutal and cut messages down to be as direct as possible
- Keep a schedule for things you want to tweet about – regular tweeting will have more impact
- Hashtags are #king – use hashtags to make your tweets searchable (more on them later)
- Diversify your tweets – don’t just talk business, show people your human side
- Specials and offers – tweet about any deals you’re offering, but avoid the hard sell

**Facebook**

Facebook has over a billion users, worldwide. That’s one hell of an audience to connect with.

Facebook started out as one of the first personal social networking sites. But it’s getting to be an even more important resource for small businesses.
We’ll be focusing on the business side of Facebook, which is increasingly being used as a content platform and marketing space by small businesses. The site has added tools for advertising, targeting specific audiences and even analytics tool to measure how well you’re connecting with your customers.

With so many potential clients already on Facebook, and the additional bonus of these built in business tools, it’s a great option if you want to start turning people into advocates for your practice.

Facebook is a brilliant place to share content. You can post photos, upload videos, create adverts and link to longer pieces of written content on your own site or blog.

To get the most from Facebook:

- Have a complete business profile – make sure it outlines your skills, service and links back to your own website
- Start using the built-in tools to target a specific audience
- Use Facebook as a content platform – post photos, videos and links to content
- Focus on the social and community angles – connect with local people/businesses and promote local events to build relationships.

Google+

Google+ is growing rapidly as a network. If you have a Gmail account then you already have a Google profile, giving you access to all the networking tools offered by Google+. This includes ‘circles’ (a way of organising your contacts into groups) and ‘hangouts’ (live video chatting either one-to-one or in group chats).

Having a Google+ account also has a significant effect on your search engine optimisation (SEO) results. If you have a detailed profile on Google+ and regularly post content, you’ll be ranked higher in Google searches. That’s important. The higher you are in Google’s ranking, the more likely it is that people will find you online when looking for an accountant.

To get the most from Google+:

- Have a complete business profile – make sure it outlines your skills, service and links back to your own website
- Join communities, circles and hangouts
- Post regular content through Google+
- Segment your circles

OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA TO CONSIDER

We’ve highlighted the big four social media channels, but there’s an abundance of other options out there – some well-established, some brand new and still finding their feet. It’s important to choose the social media that work best for your practice.

Here’s a quick overview of some other options:
YouTube

YouTube is the second largest search engine (after Google). It’s the place to post your video content – these could be opinion pieces to camera, training videos for clients or even footage from your latest event.

To get the most from YouTube:

- Use keywords and tags to help people find your content – videos show up in Google results, so use keywords that people will search under
- Share your knowledge and branch out – try interviews, news updates or footage from events
- Reach a growing demographic – YouTube’s not just for the younger crowd anymore

Instagram/Flickr

Instagram and Flickr are both places where you can share your photos, and join a wider community of people who can like, share and comment on your images.

The popularity of smartphones with high-quality cameras means more and more people are using photo-sharing apps. They’re a good place for you to post your photos (alongside Facebook) and give you an alternative route for connecting with your target audience.

To get the most from Instagram/Flickr:

- Post photos on a regular basis
- Use meaningful titles, keywords and tags so people can find your content
- Comment and share other people’s photos – this is a social site, remember

Pinterest

Pinterest is possibly one of the more niche channels, but it does have potential for promoting your business.

You can think of Pinterest as an online scrapbook for images. When you see a photo, or a diagram or a product pic that you like, you ‘pin’ it. This adds it to a board on your profile, much like pinning a cutting to a pin board.

You create boards with different topics, or different themes and pin content to those boards so your followers can like and share them.

To get the most from Pinterest:

- Save charts, diagrams or infographics from presentations/seminars as picture files on your boards – your followers can then share them, raising your profile
- Think about representing important data in visual formats – people love it when difficult numbers are made easy to understand
We’ve talked about the main social media you’re likely to use when marketing your practice. Each one has its own strengths, so we’ve highlighted ways you could use them to promote your practice.

What’s a blog?

Blogs are where you post longer, opinion-based content or updates. In its most basic form, a blog is an online diary. It’s a soapbox or forum where you can express a personal opinion, talk about a particular topic or give advice and tips to your clients.

How blogging helps to grow your practice:

Our Xero blog is a great example of how you can combine opinion pieces, topical news stories and product updates all in one place. Take a look at [www.xero.com/blog](http://www.xero.com/blog)
How does blogging promote the business?

**Improves your SEO**

Blogging really helps to improve your SEO. What’s SEO? That’s ‘search engine optimisation’ in plain English. What that essentially means is that Google, Yahoo, Bing and other search engines are more likely to find your content if you’re blogging and posting optimised content on a regular basis.

Being on the first page of results from a Google search is your SEO goal. By using the right keywords in your blog titles and opening paragraphs you move yourself up the Google rankings.

“**It’s definitely a collaborative approach with our SEO agency. We set the headline and the topic, we collaborate with the agency on the content and then it will go out as the result of this teamwork. So we definitely have a lot of input on what goes out, content-wise. And we want to maintain that personal touch without turning into a corporate machine**”

– Simon Kallu, SRK Accounting

**Enhances your reputation**

Getting a regular audience for your blog will do wonders for your professional reputation. Blogging regularly with your opinions, insights, experiences and ideas about accountancy really adds weight to your credentials. Businesses will look to you as a trusted source for advice.

Keep things short and concise. Aim for less than 500 words so you get straight to the point and don’t lose people’s interest.

**Creates brand awareness**

Effective blogging can have a great impact on brand awareness. Regular blog posts get your name and the practice’s name ‘out there’ in the marketplace.

It’s this regularity that really builds up a following: we’re talking weekly posts, at the very least. Become a regular fixture in your follower’s timelines and cement your brand name in people’s minds. And when they do need accounting advice, guess who they’ll come to first?

**Getting your blog content right**

Having a real variety of topics on your blog helps to keep things interesting and will get people coming back for more.

“I think you need to be clear about putting out useful content. It can’t be a sales message. It needs to be about giving people something – and enough of something that it’s actually useful – and allowing them to come to you to find out more. And that’s as opposed to something so short that it’s not actually useful, or something that’s just a disguised sales message.”

– Simon Kallu, SRK Accounting
Think about posting:

- New information about the practice – have you introduced a new service you want to promote? Have you changed your pricing?
- Introductions to new employees – get new members of staff to blog
- Thought-provoking content – tackle the big topics of the day and get your opinions and insights out there
- Useful tips, tricks or resources – help your clients with planning, training or new processes
- Upcoming events – promote your events and tell people why they should be registering
- Use your social media channels (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook) to promote each blog. Share the link as widely as possible.

**GETTING THE MOST FROM SOCIAL MEDIA**

**Learn to take part**

One important thing to grasp when using social networking sites is that you have to take part. You need to be an active part of the network.

The more you put in, the more you’ll get out. This is vital if you’re going to get the most out of the business opportunities. Regular updates, tweets and posts raise your profile and put you at the front of people’s mind. People will soon unfollow you if it looks like your profile isn’t being used.

**Learn to listen**

You also need to listen. It can be tempting to just be in broadcast mode, posting things to your followers and missing what’s being said by other people. Listen to what your network’s talking about – it’s the best way to spot potential conversations and opportunities.

Join LinkedIn groups, or follow trending topics on Twitter and get up-to-speed with the conversation. Listen to what’s being said and help to answer the questions, or point people towards the resources they’re looking for.

**Hashtags and why you should use them**

Hashtags (this thing: #) are a way of categorising tweets or updates around a specific theme. Why’s that important? Because it means that people searching for that particular topic will find your tweet/update/link.

You can use hashtags in both LinkedIn and Twitter (although, Twitter is probably where you’ll see them used more often). By adding the # symbol in front of a phrase (without gaps or punctuation) you can create a way for like-minded people to find your message.

So, if you’re tweeting about a VAT opportunity, put #VAT somewhere in the message. Anyone who searches for VAT will now find your tweet or update in their search results.

Pretty useful, eh!
So, you’ve now seen the benefits of embracing social media and blogging. Posting regular, insightful content, videos and links is an extremely effective way to connect with your client base.

And listening to the comments you get back is a vital way to improve the targeting and quality of this content – as you can see in this diagram:

The virtuous circle

By connecting with your clients, and listening to their issues, concerns and feedback, you can drive your practice in the direction that’s most needed by your customers. And happy customers – more customers.

Getting the most from your content

So, let’s just summarise what we’ve learnt. To really get the most from social media and blogging:

Choose the social media channels that will work for your particular practice and audience

- Create profiles which summarise your practice, skills and services, with links to your website
- Connect with your clients and start building a professional network
- Post useful updates, videos, photos and links to content on your website or blog
Follow people, groups and forums that focus on accountancy – and listen to their conversations for potential opportunities

Write insightful, opinion pieces for your blog that help your clients and raise your profile and credentials

Listen to the comments and feedback you get – take them on board

Tailor your services and your content in line with your client’s feedback – keep your clients happy

Keep your content topical, insightful and helpful – raise your brand profile as trusted business advisers

Once you’ve started connecting with your clients through social media, you won’t look back. As an approach, it’s fast, it’s direct and – crucially – it’s a valuable two-way channel with your customers.

You can find out more about growing your accountancy business in our series of Xero practice guides.

You can find out more about the benefits of cloud-based accounting in our series of Xero guides:

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- Phasing in value-based pricing
- Growing your practice with an entrepreneurial mindset

If you’d like to find out more about how Xero can support your cloud-based practice, please do get in touch. You can find us at www.xero.com or drop us an email at partnerteam@xero.com