



What's next starts here.

If you ask any marketer whether social media is critical to building an audience, you'd be hard-pressed to find one who would say no. Most brands have a presence on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, if not Instagram, Pinterest, Google+ and Snapchat. But a new report from [The Alternative Board](#), the world's largest provider of peer-to-peer advisory boards representing more than 3,000 entrepreneurs internationally, showed that 59 percent of entrepreneurs think social media is non-essential. Interestingly, that same survey found that business owners believe social channels advance their company's strategic goals. Confusing, right? So we sat down with The Alternative Board's Chief Marketing Officer, Jodie Shaw, to get the skinny. Here's her take on social media, along with her expert advice.

# Does Your Startup Need Social Media to Thrive?



**Connecticut Innovations: Social media seems so important to businesses today, so why do you think so many business owners have no presence on social channels?**

**Jodie Shaw:** Many business owners decide not to have a presence on social media platforms due to not receiving a return on investment of their time and money. Remember, most social media platforms are just 10 years old or less, so it is a relatively newer marketing tactic, and as a result it is constantly evolving. Business owners just don't have the time to learn new and changing marketing tactics and prefer to stick with what they know. Plus, the survey shows that small business owners who are using social media are still confused about how to measure the return on investment.

**CI: How important is social media for building an audience for a new, high-tech business?**

**JS:** Social media is an important part of the marketing mix. Not so long ago, businesses were not considered real and viable if they did not have a website. Today you need a strong website with a social media presence. Depending on

the level of investment in your product or service, potential customers will determine whether to do business with you based on what they discover online, which includes whether you have a strong social media presence. For high-tech businesses, this rings particularly true, because if you are in the technology arena you need to be have a prolific presence on the internet, including social media.

**CI: If an entrepreneur is pressed for time, should he or she choose one social media channel and stick with it, or post less often on a few social media channels?**

**JS:** Each social media platform has a unique audience. Understanding where your target audience prefers to congregate on social media channels is important before you start a social media campaign. I recommend investing in the social media channel that appeals most to your ideal prospect and mastering that before moving onto another, because [too many platforms] can water down the overall result you get from a channel. Also, remember each channel is different and requires a different approach. For instance, Twitter is extremely different from Pinterest.

**CI: Is putting your social media efforts in the hands of a novice a mistake, particularly in high-tech industries?**

**JS:** Many social media experts are relatively young, so don't confuse age with experience. I think putting your social media in the hands of people who have virtually no understanding of how the platform works, what is working on that platform, and what types of conversations and interactions appeal best means you will waste a lot of resources on creating content without understanding how that drives conversations and conversions. The person you put in charge of your social media accounts will be your company's voice. Especially in high-tech industries,

they will need a fair amount of experience not only with your industry, but with conversing with your target audience. They also need to have a deep understanding of how to engage with your customers.

**CI: If you cannot commit to social media, is it better to shut down your accounts?**

**JS:** No, because even if you cannot invest resources in your social media accounts, it is better to at least set up



a page on each platform with your company's brand. Social media pages rank high in search engine results and they will still provide you with traffic. Many business owners have trouble managing multiple social media accounts. As a result there is a whole industry of platforms that manage multiple social media accounts from one platform, making it relatively easier to manage.

**CI: Any other tips for entrepreneurs who are trying to build an audience?**

**JS:** Each social media platform should be considered on its individual merits. For instance, if you were advertising your product using print magazines and you have a high-tech product that appeals to millennials, a magazine like *Good Housekeeping* may not be your best choice. Same with social media. There are a lot of different channels to

The Alternative Board surveyed hundreds of business owners, and found that 59% think social media is “Nice to have, but not essential.” Other interesting stats:

- 18% of business owners have no social media presence
- The majority of small businesses (67%) are putting their social media efforts in the hands of beginner-intermediate users
- 64% of small business owners are monitoring their social accounts one time a week or less; 22% only check it a few times a year (yikes!)

LinkedIn was cited as the most effective platform (38%) over Facebook (32%), Google+ (17%) and Twitter (6%).

choose from—just make sure you are choosing the best platform for your audience. I see many business owners who lump all social media together and (depending on their result) rate it as either a good investment or a bad one. If you advertise a product in a magazine that your target audience does not read, it will not matter if you have a well-designed ad with a great offer. Same thing goes for social media. Do your research and choose the platform where your audience congregates.

## Three experts on smart and completely free ways to build an audience.



### **Chris Rinaldi, a digital strategist at [ZAG Interactive](#), says:**

**Start a blog.** Since entrepreneurs are investing most of their time and money into getting their startups going, it’s understandable that they are looking for efficient ways to gain more exposure for their innovations. My recommendation for quickly and easily growing an audience is not Snapchatting or the latest niche social media tactic—it is good, old-fashioned blog article writing.

A blog article is like the “buffalo of content” in its versatility and usefulness. It can be posted on any number of free blogging sites with built-in tools for sharing. Then the business owner can post quotes, factoids and other interesting sound bites from the article on his or her social media channels coupled with a link to read the full piece on the blog. Plus, online publications in the industry will often run articles from guest bloggers, increasing exposure for the high-tech startup.

You can easily derive content from a company event, a product description, an industry trend, a how-to list or some other unique point of view that comes naturally from your area of expertise. Because the high-tech startup is often trying to promote a new product or service that can be difficult to grasp, writing a blog article about it gives you, the entrepreneur, a chance to explain technical concepts in a more engaging, storytelling manner.

**“Committing to frequent blog writing will establish the startup business owner as a thought leader, increasing credibility in the marketplace. A scalable, cost-effective solution for growing one’s audience, the effort of blogging is worth the investment for startups.”**



**Elliot Volkman, a journalist for [Tech.co](#) and a digital marketing manager for [Blue Acorn](#) says:**

**Get social.** Growing audiences on social media comes down to just a few simple things. Who is your intended audience, and what do they care about? Sure, you may want the vice president of marketing at a large organization to be interested in your platform, but that won't draw in their attention. Appeal to what they care about, not just professionally, but also personally. Find common ground, incorporate it into your targeted personas, and find and create relevant content. Beyond that, just reach out and have conversations without the hard sell. The startup Zaarly did a great job of this. Each major city had a community manager, who would randomly reach out and start chatting with the personas they targeted.



**Ruthie Thomas, founder and CEO of [Birds of Paradise PR](#), says:**

**Earn some ink.** The decision to embark on the entrepreneurial journey can be a thrilling yet daunting experience. To grow your business, a solid public relations campaign is critical. An effective PR strategy can help raise your visibility and ultimately attract clients and customers.

To develop a winning PR campaign on a shoestring budget:

- 1. Differentiate through your brand.** To get the attention of potential clients, you must set yourself apart. Enlist the help of a graphic artist, copywriter and web designer to create a logo and website that is both unique and user-friendly. Make sure your unique value proposition (why you're different and why people should trust you) is clearly spelled out.
- 2. Develop relationships with local media outlets.** The way to a media professional's heart is reliability. Serve as a knowledgeable source. Offer consistent, timely material on issues being discussed in your industry and proactively share comments on relevant stories to remain in the spotlight. (To build relationships with reporters, read what they write. Follow them on Twitter, and, once you're familiar with their work, comment! You can also join a free service called [HARO](#), which hooks up reporters with experts like you.)
- 3. Book speaking engagements.** Share your expertise and experiences by securing speaking engagements at industry trade shows (many allow you to submit topics for their consideration online), or at your local Chamber of Commerce, professional associations or even your alma mater. Remember to keep your speech educational and tone down the promotional stuff. If what you say is useful, the leads will come.