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Social Media

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Getting to know social media

[Social media is unique.](#) Therefore, before engaging with this space, users require some understanding of what it is. This doesn't necessitate grasping all aspects of how it works but more appreciating the distinctiveness it holds. Social media provides for many platforms that offer different activities in diverse contexts that make defining what it is challenging, as it can't be easily described. Ask ten people what social media is and you'll probably get ten different answers. None will be completely right or wrong, but this makes it problematical to pinpoint and describe what it is.

Although social media can be described as online media (web or mobile based) that allows two-way communication, a blending of technology and social interaction, this doesn't fully grasp it. A different way to look at social media, is not by defining 'what it is' but by understanding 'what it provides'. This subtle distinction offers better awareness of social media and the certain characteristics that shape it, which separate it from traditional media. It is these characteristics that provide understanding of how to utilise social media.

Four of these characteristics include the following:

1. Openness

The Internet is built on the openness concept. Social media is no different. Opinions, contributions and sharing of information (that is free to access) are the core aspects of social media. [Businesses that interact and engage with consumers via this space must get to know and understand their audience.](#) They must build relationships based on respect and integrity and they must be genuine in their interactions otherwise they will [experience reputation damage.](#)

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2. Participation

Traditional media is a linear medium that broadcasts or prints information to an audience in a one-to-many structure. Social media is collaborative with contributions from the audience (user generated content) allowing them to participate in a two-way interaction of sharing, contribution and conversation. This participation blurs the traditional line between the media (producer) and the audience (consumer). Today the audience is the user and is both the producer and the consumer in a many-to-many structure.

3. Community

Groups are formed very easily in social media to develop communities that are based on shared common interests (i.e. political, sports, hobbies and so on). These communities share information and engage according to their topic of interest. People feel a real sense of belonging that they are able to interact with like-minded people, and in the virtual world this allows people to link on a large scale.

4. Connectedness

Social media flourishes on being connected. Not only are you connected to the people in your network, you're also linked to their connections. Thus, users are able to utilise links, resources and people from a vast network on a scale that hasn't been possible before, connecting a substantial number of people. This connectedness occurs instantly and quickly.

Understanding these four characteristics and [accepting that social media operates on principles of conversation and connection will take you a long way to interacting effectively with your audience](#). Social media is 'social' first, marketing and advertising second. It is through conversations that you develop trust and build customer relationships, which hopefully increases the audience's confidence in what you do. That is why social media does not give fast results. To genuinely engage with people takes time, effort and commitment. If business is not prepared to engage with the four principles in mind, they'll miss the wealth of opportunities that exist in the social media space.

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Anna Cairo is the founder of a boutique business (Anna Cairo Consulting) which focuses solely in the online communications domain. She specialises in online copywriting and social media for small business working with clients to increase their social media presence and tailoring services to suit their business needs.

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