

BUILDING YOUR BRAND WITH SOCIAL MEDIA



BY CHRISTINE PILCH MANCINI

Social media can make or break the brand of a professional. Your conduct and presence there put you in a spotlight as never before.

Everybody has a brand, be it good, bad, or indifferent. It's not your logo or stationery, although those are physical elements of it. Your brand is what people perceive you to be. It's your reputation, and it's earned through everything that you do every day of your life. And once it's uploaded, nothing ever really goes away. It's most likely instantly catalogued by search engines and stored in databases, so it's especially important to protect your online brand through careful social media involvement.



Brands can be crafted, however, and social media is a great leveler. You're on equal footing with your competitors on the social media front, at least from a starting point. From there, it's up to you to build your brand (earn your reputation) through your attitude and the things you choose to share. Let's face it, someone who speaks exclusively of herself—the book she just wrote, his own this and that—is going to come off as cold and selfish both in person and online. But someone who shares industry information, is helpful, friendly, and engages with others is bound to be more popular.

When people look for an advisor regarding their retirement goals, the first thing they usually do is Google anybody referred to them. Your goal, therefore, is to fill that first page of search results with positive information about you. In addition to your own website, your social media profiles should appear there, and those profiles should provide plenty of great information about what you can do to benefit a prospective client.

LINKEDIN

LinkedIn is the professional standard. It's your online resume, complete with references, and it's available 24/7. If you're not there with a thoughtful and complete profile, you're shooting yourself in the foot because people expect all professionals to be there these days. LinkedIn is such a powerful database that it might even come up first in a search for your name, so don't neglect it.

Building your brand on LinkedIn starts with a 100 percent complete profile. Don't skimp and don't be humble. List your schools and former jobs to make it easy for people to find and connect with you. On LinkedIn, the bigger the network the better, and you definitely want as many people as possible to have access to you when they search for someone with your skills.

Answers and Groups are very good opportunities for you to stand out on LinkedIn as someone who's knowledgeable and helpful, so make a plan to spend a certain amount of time there weekly and start building a

brand that makes people think, "I can trust that person to help me."

BLOG

A blog provides a great opportunity to brand yourself as an industry expert. Regularly posted articles can help educate your prospective clients and reassure existing ones that you remain their go-to resource for information and retirement solutions. A word of caution, however: If you're not a strong writer, hire a professional to write about the topics that you provide, and spend your time on tasks better suited to your skills.

FACEBOOK

Love it or hate it, Facebook is something that can't be ignored by professionals who make their living from referrals. You don't need to over-share, but Facebook does provide a significant opportunity to educate your family and friends about what you do. When asked now, even those close to you likely say, "Oh, she's does something financial ..." Through a little clever Facebooking, via status



updates and comments, you can let people know what you do and how you can help them and their friends.

Facebook is the default and preferred means of communication for millions of Americans these days, and since people are more likely to contact someone referred to them by a friend, you're missing terrific marketing opportunities if you stay off Facebook.

TWITTER

Twitter is like a giant chat room, and unless you're a celebrity, those who are successful in gathering large followings of people who actually pay attention to them engage with those people often. The quickest way to put people off and be unfollowed is to become preachy and try to sell your services. People on Twitter don't care about what you have to offer. They're there for entertainment, advice, assistance, and friendship. A preachy, cold sales person who only posts links to his own materials and brags about what he does will quickly develop a reputation that will damage the brand he so carefully tried to craft offline.

You may think it's a big waste of your time to commit to participating in a venue where hard sell isn't tolerated. But if referrals are important to you, it's probably worth your while to have as many people as possible like and trust you for being helpful, kind, and friendly. It's also perfectly acceptable to post industry-related materials, articles, and videos, in addition to your own, to help educate your followers about what you can do for them. This kind of soft sell works well on Twitter.

YOUTUBE

Do you provide information through seminars? What about the information you share with people at a first meeting? Then record yourself and put that information online. Video is a wonderful way to enhance your brand by making you more relatable. Prospective clients can listen to your voice and watch your mannerisms. They gain

confidence in your level of expertise. You also have the advantage of editing out any flaws, which isn't possible while speaking live.

PINTEREST

Pinterest is an online bulletin board of sorts. People pin pictures from the web and create descriptive captions, and then the embedded links take users back to the original website—your own blog, for example. Pinterest can become a major driver of traffic to your blog, so it's important to select your photography carefully. Don't underestimate the power of pictures of happy retirees to make people think, "Hey, I want that to be me in 10 years," as well as charts and graphs that can help them visualize their goals.

How does this help build your brand? It provides an additional opportunity to position yourself as a great resource for information through informative links, which people share with their own networks, creating a viral component that drives more traffic to your blog.

The significance of building your brand through social media can't be exaggerated. The online networking opportunities alone make social media a very important means to develop your referral network.

But be careful to protect your brand by consistently projecting a persona that's friendly, helpful, professional, and informative. Never argue, be rude, use foul language, or offend anybody, because your online brand needs constant massaging to grow and prosper. Diligent persistence can provide business opportunities that you never dreamed possible 10 years ago. **PC**



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