So now you need to create a social media marketing plan. No easy task, right? Many of us struggle to iron out exactly what that is, let alone how to build one from scratch.

Put simply, every action you take on social networks should be a part of a larger social media marketing strategy. That means every Tweet, reply, like and comment should all be guided by a plan and driving towards pre-determined goals. It might sound complicated, but if you take the time to create a comprehensive social media plan, the rest of your social efforts should follow naturally. Everyone can do this if they approach it correctly.

Learn what a social media marketing plan should include, and follow our 6-step plan for creating your own:

**What is a social media marketing plan?**

A social media marketing plan is the summary of everything you plan to do and hope to achieve for your business using social networks. This plan should comprise an audit of where your accounts are today, goals for where you want them to be in the near future, and all the tools you want to use to get there.

In general, the more specific you can get with your plan, the more effective you’ll be in its implementation. Try and keep it concise and don’t make your social media marketing strategy so lofty and broad that it’s unattainable. This plan will guide your actions, but it will also be a measure by which you determine whether you’re succeeding or failing at social media. You don’t want to set yourself up for failure from the outset.

**Step 1: Create social media objectives and goals**

The first step to any social media marketing strategy is to establish objectives and goals that you hope to achieve. Having these objectives also allows you to quickly react when social media campaigns are not meeting your expectations. Without these goals, you have no means of gauging your success and no means of proving your return on investment.

These goals should be aligned with your broader marketing strategy, so that your social media efforts all drive towards business objectives. If your social media marketing strategy is shown to drive business goals forward, you’re more likely to get executive buy-in and investment. They should also go beyond vanity metrics like retweets or Likes, in favour of more advanced metrics like leads generated, sentiment or website traffic referred. Strive to approach these goals using the SMART approach, meaning they should all be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound.

A simple way to start your social media marketing plan is by writing down at least three social media goals. Make sure to ask yourself what the goal will look like when completed, and use that to determine how you will track it.

**Step 2: Conduct a social media audit**

Prior to creating your social media marketing plan, you need to assess your current social media use and how it is working for you. This requires figuring out who is currently connecting to you via social media, which social media sites your target market uses and how your social media presence compares to your competitors’.

We’ve created a social media audit template that you can follow for each step of the process:

Once you’ve conducted your audit you should have a clear picture of every social account representing your business, who runs or controls them, and what purpose they serve. This ‘living inventory’ should be maintained regularly, especially as you scale your business.

It should also be evident which accounts need to be updated and which need to be deleted altogether. Reporting fraudulent accounts will help ensure that people searching for you online are only connecting with the branded accounts you manage and your approved messaging.

An important part of your social media marketing plan will be to create mission statements for each social network profile. These one-sentence statements will help you focus your attention on a very specific goal you want to accomplish using Facebook, Twitter or any other social network. They will guide your actions and help steer you back on track when these profiles become less effective. They also force you to realize that not every social network is good for the right thing. Instagram might be great for selling a clothing brand, but for construction supplies Facebook might be a better medium. Take the time you need to determine the purpose of every social profile you have. If you can’t figure out its purpose, you should probably delete that profile.

Mission statement example: We will use Instagram to showcase our company culture to recruit new talent.

To help with creating these mission statements, learn about your audience on each profile by using Forrester’s Social Technology Profile Tool. This will provide you with data that classifies consumers into seven levels of how they engage with technology. By profiling your customers’ habits on technology, you’ll be able to gain a clear perspective on where each of your social media profile stands with your customers.

**Step 3: Create or improve your social accounts**

Once you’ve audited your accounts, it’s time to hone your online presence. Choose what networks best meet your social media goals. If you don’t already have social media profiles on each network you focus on, build them from the ground up with your broader goals and audience in mind. If you do have existing accounts, it’s time to refine them and update them for your best possible results.

We’ve created a guide on How to Set-up Facebook, Twitter and Every Other Major Social Network to walk you through that process. Every social network has a different audience and should be treated definitely. See how you can optimize your profiles themselves to meet any of your business goals. Optimizing profiles for SEO can help generate more web traffic to your online properties. Cross-promoting social accounts could help you grow the reach of content. In general, social media profiles should be filled out completely, images and text optimized for the social network in question.

**Step 4: Get social media inspiration from industry leaders, competitors, clients**

One of the most important reasons for being active on social media is that your consumers already are. That usually means, so are your competitors. That might not be comforting, but it actually means that there’s a wealth of knowledge already available to you which you can integrate into your social media marketing plan. Turn to your competitors for inspiration when it comes to what content types and information get the most social media engagement. Also, use social media listening to see how you could distinguish yourself from competitors and appeal to consumers they might be missing.

Consumers can also offer social media inspiration, not only through the content that they share but in the way that they phrase their messages. See how your target audience writes Tweets, and strive to mimic that style. Also learn their habits, when they share and why, and use that as a basis for your social media marketing plan.

A final source of social media inspiration is industry leaders. There are giants who simply do an incredible job of social media marketing, from Red Bull and Taco Bell to KLM Airlines and Tangerine Bank. Companies in every industry imaginable have managed to distinguish themselves through advanced social media strategies. Follow them and learn everything you can. Don’t be afraid to do research and see if they’ve shared any social media advice or insight elsewhere on the web.

Here are a few suggested sources of inspiration:

Content marketing: Unbounce, Virgin

Social media customer service: Tangerine, Warby Parker

Social media advertising: AirBnB, the American Red Cross

Facebook strategy: Coca-Cola, Walmart

Google+ strategy: Cadbury, National Geographic

Twitter strategy: Charmin, Oreo

Instagram strategy: Herschel Supply Co., General Electric

**Step 5: Create a content plan and editorial calendar**

Great content will be essential to succeeding at social media. Your social media marketing plan should include a content marketing plan, comprised of strategies for content creation and content curation, as well as an editorial calendar.

Your editorial calendar lists the dates and times you intend to post blogs, Facebook posts, Twitter messages and other content you may plan to use during your social media campaigns. Create the calendar and then schedule your messaging in advance rather than updating constantly throughout the day. You want to work hard on the language and format of these messages anyways. Be spontaneous with your engagement and customer service rather than your content.

Make sure your calendar reflects the mission statement you’ve assigned to each social profile. If the purpose of your LinkedIn account is to generate leads, make sure you are sharing enough lead generation content. Hootsuite’s Senior Director of Social Media Jaime Stein recommends establishing a content matrix that defines what share of your profile is allocated to different types of posts. For example:

50% of your content will drive back to the blog

25% of your content will be curated from other source

20% of your content will drive enterprise content

5% of your content will be HR and culture

If you’re unsure of how to allocate your resources, a safe bet is to follow the Social Media Rule of Thirds.

⅓ of your social content promotes your business, converts readers, and generates profit.

⅓ of your social content should surface and share ideas and stories from thought leaders in your industry or like-minded businesses.

⅓ of your social content should be based on personal interactions and build your personal brand.

**Step 6: Test, evaluate and adjust your social media marketing plan**

To find out what adjustments need to be made to your social media marketing strategy, you should constantly be testing. Build testing capabilities into every action you take on social networks. Track your links using url shorteners and utm codes. Use Hootsuite’s social media analytics to track the success and reach of social campaigns. Track page visits driven by social media with Google analytics. Record and analyze your success and failures, and then adjust your social media marketing plan in response.

Surveys are also a great way you can gauge success. According to Jaime Stein, these work both online and offline. Ask your social media followers, email list and website visitors how you’re doing on social media. This direct approach is often very effective. Then ask your offline customers if social media had a role in their purchasing. This insight might prove invaluable when you look for where to improve.

The most important thing to understand about your social media plan is that it should be constantly changing. As new networks emerge, you may want to add them to your plan. As you attain goals, you may need to adjust them or find new goals for each network. New challenges might present themselves that you need to address. As you scale your business, you might need to add new roles or grow your social presence for different branches or countries. This is a plan that is meant to change, so be flexible and open to these changes. Rewrite your strategy to reflect your latest insight, and make sure your team is aware of what has been updated.