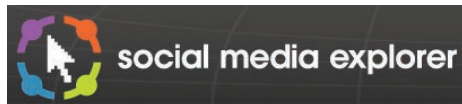


The KISS (Keep It Simple & Smart) Method to Digital Marketing Success

Jason Falls

CEO, Social Media Explorer



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past six to eight years, social media and digital marketing has gotten increasingly confusing as the “signal-to-noise ratio” has grown. In blog posts, magazine articles, interviews, conference presentations, and elsewhere, there’s a lot of noise surrounding best practices in communicating and marketing online. Experts constantly add to the volume of advice on how to manage Facebook and Twitter, do social media monitoring and listening, gather insights, and manage and market content. The experts and consultants stand on their soapboxes and lay out their (often complex) vision of all the steps you need to take to be successful. If you were to try to build a digital marketing practice based on all the advice you can get from around the web, you’d never get anything done, because you’d spend all your time consuming advice.

Instead of making things yet more complex, I recommend we marketers adopt the KISS (Keep It Simple & Smart) method of digital marketing. The KISS method separates the signal from the noise, and distills the essence of the best advice so we can use it to build our brands. If we don’t, we’re never going to get ahead because we’ll just be treading water. Reading and trying to absorb all the advice makes it too easy to get caught up in the details of how to finesse this variable and game that algorithm. Instead, we need to focus on the simple and obvious things we as marketing communicators can do that don’t require a lot of time, energy and effort, and yet are very effective. Here are my ideas on what those things are.



Five Major Areas We Over-Think

We tend to over-think our strategy and tactics for digital marketing in these five major areas:

- Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Gaming the Facebook EdgeRank
- Mobile Marketing
- Influencer Outreach/PR
- Retail Sales

The experts offer frequent and copious advice on these areas, and following it to the letter can make your job more complex than I think it needs to be. My goal is to show how to accomplish the same things, but by applying the KISS method and taking a simpler & smarter approach.

Search Engine Optimization

Here's a typical search engine results page:

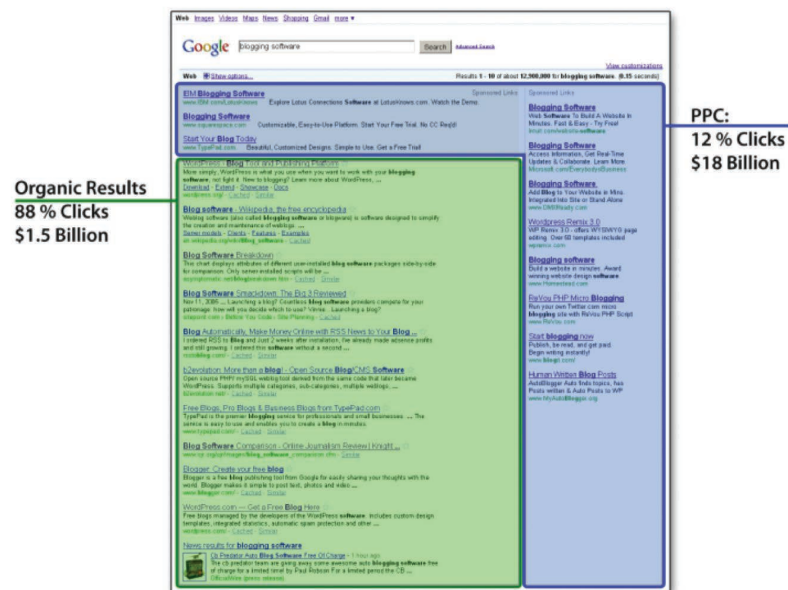


Figure 1: Google search engine results page.

The blue area is the pay-per-click area with advertisements; the green area is the organic results—relevant results the search engine delivers based on the keyword you entered. In the past several years, as search engines and search engine optimization have become such a critical component of digital marketing, we've had to figure out how to get our content—blogs, websites, forums, etc.—placed as near the top as possible, preferably in the top four results. That's what the industry experts will tell you—being among the top four results in the organic page is critical.

How do you do that? With some *on-site* SEO and some *off-site* SEO.



On-Site SEO

Here's a set of key criteria for a website that search engines can read, understand and index well.

- **Site Organization**—Best practices include having a “flat” website, where most pieces of content are within one or two links or layers from the homepage.
- **URL Structure**—URLs need to contain the keywords you're trying to win for that particular site or page. Thus, for example, if your keyword is “search engine optimization,” your URLs would be “website.com/search-engine-optimization” or “search-engine-optimization-advice-page.” Numbers and characters in the URL won't work because search engines can't use that information to determine what's on the page.
- **Keyword Richness**—You need keyword richness for the web page and throughout the site based on the keywords you're trying to win. More on this in the section below on “Copywriting for SEO.”
- **Internal Linking**—Internal linking helps search engines know what's on your site and makes your site more discoverable. If you write that your site can be found in five locations, the five locations should hyperlink to your locations page where there's a map, and it should be tagged appropriately so that Google and the other search engines can see which link points to which page.
- **Reliability**—For Google and the other search engines, reliability is an issue. (Google still owns about 75-80 percent of the search market, so we typically default to saying Google when talking about search engines in general.) If your website is on slow servers, or if you have slow page-load times, or if your website goes down on a regular basis and the web spiders catch that, Google is going to discount or dock your site's ranking. So make sure your servers are up and running, and that you're using a cloud-based configuration with replication and backups and other reliability measures.
- **Age**—The age of your site, or at least the age of the domain name you buy, affects your placement in search results. Many organizations renew their domain names every year, which actually hurts your results. The reason is that if the search engine company searches the WHOIS database and finds out that your domain name is purchased for 10 years as opposed to one, then the algorithm reasons that your company is serious and trustworthy, which is better for your ranking.

Copywriting for SEO

If you're going to blog or provide content on a regular basis, you need to make sure the content is strategically focused on winning certain keywords. Every page needs to be keyword rich. You need to put a keyword or two in the title or headline of the page and in the first paragraph a couple of times. Although you should focus on one keyword, you should supplement the copy on that page with other keywords you're trying to win. Make sure every piece of copy you write has some keyword relevance.

There's more: You need to write custom title tags to make sure they show up correctly on search engine results. Your meta description has to have fewer than 160 characters, because if it doesn't, you're going to have an ellipsis on the end. When you add images, you have to remember to put in anchor text that includes the keywords you're trying to target, because that's another signal telling the search engine that this page and this image is about a particular subject.

When you're inserting links, especially to internal links within your own website, you want to add a title in the link because, again, that's another opportunity for you to tell the search engines, “This is what this page I'm linking to is about.” Those titles are another signal they use to determine a page's rank for specific keywords.



All these layers of information are something you need to know and understand as a marketer, let alone as an SEO specialist.

The figure shows three examples of on-site SEO copywriting with red arrows pointing to specific elements:

- Example 1:** [EMA: The Envelope Manufacturers Association](#) (Custom Title Tag). The text below is the Meta Description: "the envelope manufacturers association (ema) was formed in 1933. the purpose of ema is to share knowledge of envelope manufacturing, produce programs to ...".
- Example 2:** [Gary C. Johnson, PSC](#) (TITLE). The text below is the DESCRIPTION: "At the law firm of Gary C. Johnson, PSC, our lawyers provide comprehensive client service in the aftermath of serious accidents. ...".
- Example 3:** [Locations - CRI - Carr, Riggs & Ingram](#) (Custom Title Tag). The text below is the Custom Meta Description: "CRI has twenty-three locations across the southeastern United States ready and available to serve for all your accounting needs."

Figure 2. Key elements of effective on-site SEO copywriting.

Keyword Research

How do you find the keywords you want to focus on? By going to Google's Keyword Tool [<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>]. It's actually for pay-per-click advertising, but it gives you intelligence on what keywords people are actually searching for in relation to websites like yours or the keywords you're interested in. It also tells you how many people a month are searching for them. So you can prioritize: For example, you'll decide that you want to win a specific keyword and you'll note that there are 3,600 people searching for it every month. So you know there's competition, but it's possible for you to improve your search engine ranking for that keyword if you do a good job with it.

To be clear, all this keyword research and strategy is part of the layers upon layers of information available to all of us, which makes search engine optimization complicated, especially for the marketer whose primary job is not SEO.



Off-Site SEO

Off-site SEO is the second piece of the puzzle. If you weren't overwhelmed with advice already, this should do it.

- **Inbound Links**—Links from other websites are very important in determining where your content ranks, so you've got to figure out how to acquire them.
- **Directory Listings**—These are a good way to get inbound links, because directory listings are very important to figuring out and giving you lead-ins, which are signals that the search engines like—for whatever reason, because nobody really uses directories anymore. But if you don't have a link from a directory, that's probably a couple of points deducted in search algorithms.
- **Domain References**—Inbound links from .gov and .edu websites are more trustworthy in the eyes of a search engine because these are government organizations or educational institutions, and links from those domains carry more weight than a link from a .com or .org or other URL domain.
- **PageRank References**—Google assigns a PageRank from one to ten to every website, with ten being the best and zero the worst. An inbound link from a PageRank Five website is better than an inbound link from a PageRank Three website, and one from a PageRank Eight is a lot better than the Five, and so on. So it's not just about collecting inbound links, it's about collecting quality inbound links, and there are several ways you can do that. Some of them are White Hat, which means ethical and above-board, and some are Black Hat. Some are even Gray Hat.
- **Social Signals (of user)**—Social media and signals from social channels are now coming into the consideration set for search engine results. In Figure 3, you can see that someone shared this piece of content on Twitter. If I'm connected to that person on the internet, that might show up. This layer of social media becomes part of the SEO mix, which makes for even more confusion.



Figure 3. Social media as part of search results.



The Simple & Smart Solution

All these layers of information, advice and best practices can be overwhelming and confusing for marketers, so we hire outside firms or full time employees to focus on SEO. Admittedly, SEO isn't simple. But there is a simple solution to SEO, and you'll see it over and over again in companies that are winning the search results competition. The simple solution I recommend to clients is that, instead of worrying too much about on-site/off-site and all the other considerations, just focus on one thing: writing and posting great content.

The content could be video, images, or text, but the better your content and the more compelling it is for your audience, the more visits and more links to it you'll get. When your content is outstanding, you don't need to ask people to link to it. That's why infographics are so popular these days—because when companies produce images that compare and contrast subjects or explain how to do something in a very visual and compelling way, people naturally want to link to it. It solves a problem, it's easy to digest, and it's easy to share.

When you write great content, you automatically put yourself in a position to win search engine results because people are going to link to your content so they can share it with others. People are also going to write about your content on Facebook and share it on Twitter, which sends social search signals as well.

Obviously, you can't simply write great content every single day without any regard to other search engine optimization techniques; you still need to understand keywords and internal linking and so on. I'm not suggesting you completely disregard the need to understand SEO. But keep it simple & smart: Write great content and see what that does for you.

Gaming the Facebook EdgeRank

Facebook EdgeRank is similar to the Google algorithm, and this is what it looks like (Figure 4). I found this on the EdgeRank site [<http://edgerank.net/>], but Facebook also gave out this equation at its User Conference in March 2012.

EdgeRank

$$\sum U_e W_e D_e$$

Affinity Score between viewing user & edge creator

Weight for this edge type (create, comment, like, tag)

Time decay factor based on how long ago the edge was created

@ladyxtel

Figure 4. The Facebook EdgeRank algorithm.



There are three categories that go into determining EdgeRank, which is an algorithm that ranks the social content individuals see in their news feed. When an individual logs in to Facebook, it ranks the content from all their friends as well as “likes” and brand connections and determines a rank for each piece of content, just like a search engine would.

As a user, you can set your account to see everything in your news feed in reverse chronological order. But the default is to see your news feed in the order that Facebook’s algorithm determines, which is “most important content first.”

The components of the EdgeRank algorithm are *affinity score*, *weight*, and *time decay*.

- **Affinity score**—Facebook determines how frequently you connect with the person in question and how important they are to you. Your spouse, your best friend, your mother—anyone you communicate with frequently on Facebook—is going to have a higher affinity score for you than, say, someone you went to college with but don’t communicate with often. The more frequently you interact with someone and their content on Facebook, the higher their affinity. So their content is going to be prioritized in Facebook’s eyes.
- **Weight**—This component is about the actions people take with certain content. You can “like” something, you can “share” it, or you can “comment” on it. If it’s a picture or a video you can “tag” it with certain people. These actions are called “weight actions” in Facebook, and for every piece of content, each of those actions has a score. For two given pieces of content, if the affinity score is the same, Facebook looks at the weight of the content to determine how high it ranks. Facebook will give a higher rank to content with more “likes,” “comments” and “shares.”
- **Time decay**—The more recent a piece of content is, the more reliable it is (in theory), and the better it is because it reflects the most up-to-date knowledge. Google uses this same reasoning for search engine results. A piece of content that is two days old is not going to rank as high as something published an hour ago.

Facebook takes these three factors into consideration to rank where content will appear before each individual user when they log into Facebook. No one knows the actual computation of the EdgeRank algorithm with the exception of Facebook. Many people are trying to figure out how to game the algorithm: How do we get more affinity? More weight? More information on where we’re ranking so we can rank higher on our fans’ pages?

Gaming the EdgeRank Algorithm—Or Not

Marketers work themselves into a tizzy over EdgeRank: “We’ve got to drive more likes on Facebook, so we’ve got to post really compelling content that’s going to get more likes, and we have to ask our fans to like our content. We’ve got to get more comments and so we’ve got to start asking questions, and maybe we’ve got to do polls, and then we’ve got to just drive more comments because that’s going to add to the weight factor, and the more weight factor, the better we can rank. And we’ve got to take more pictures because that’s more engaging content ...”. And so on. It makes your head spin.

Marketers think if they don’t do all those things they’re not going to rank well and only 13 percent (or some other unacceptably low number) of their fans are going to see their Facebook content. Maybe they’ll be so desperate for followers that they’ll go *buy* some. They could spend \$29 and get 500 targeted fans, and they’ll look for other ways to game the system and cheat their way to having more fans and followers, because that will give them more eyeballs, which will get more likes, comments and shares.



Checking Your EdgeRank—Or Not

Marketers naturally want to check their EdgeRank score to see how they're doing, which they can do by going to EdgeRank Checker [<http://edgerankchecker.com/>]. By the way, EdgeRank Checker is not a service of Facebook—it's an independent company that thinks it has figured out the EdgeRank algorithm. They haven't sent me any results yet, so I don't know for sure, but allegedly they'll analyze your Facebook fan page and tell you what your EdgeRank score is. The only problem is, they don't know if they're right because Facebook doesn't reveal that information to them. So there's really no way to check your EdgeRank, even though there are companies trying to make marketers think they can. Even if you *did* know your EdgeRank, you don't know other people's EdgeRank, so you can't compare your content to theirs anyway, so what's the point?

But there's a simpler & smarter solution for doing well in the Facebook EdgeRank algorithm, and it's the same one that enables you to get better search engine results: Write and post great content. If you post a compelling video, photo, question, or opinion, people will like it and comment on it. They'll share it and respond to it. If you do that frequently enough, you'll have *affinity* because people are interacting with your content and you'll have *weight* and *recency*. So the KISS solution applies again here: Write good content consistently and you'll rank well in your fans' news feeds on Facebook. Keep it simple & smart.

To be clear, I'm not saying you shouldn't understand EdgeRank; it's important to look at the tools that might help you determine how you can rank better. I'm also not saying don't use EdgeRank Checker or other tools that claim they might help you. I'm just saying that the simplest method is often the best. Quit worrying about all the ways to game the system and do the only thing that you know you can do to rank well, which is to write great content.

Mobile Marketing

If you're in the mobile market, you may be thinking, "We've got to have an app and be in the app store. And we've got to make sure it's on both platforms, iPhone and Android. And we've got to put a QR code on it. And we've got to do mobile payments. I don't know what NFC stands for, but we've got to have a little device that makes people wave their phone in front of it and pay for their stuff because that's mobile marketing."

Mobile marketing is not simple; it's complex and it's layered. You need to learn a lot of different things to know how to do mobile well, especially mobile websites. Or ... you could follow the KISS method for digital marketing and keep it simple & smart. When we do mobile design for our websites, let's make it intuitive and easy for people to use them.

Papa John's website is an example.

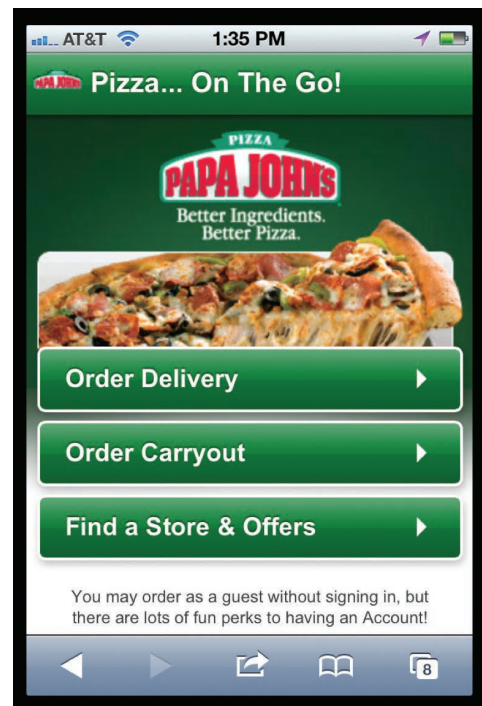


Figure 5. Papa John's mobile website.



This is Papa John's mobile website; it's not an app. If you go to PapaJohns.com on a mobile phone, this is what you'll see. This interface follows the KISS rule because it gives you three choices and only three choices: Order for delivery, order for carry-out, and find a store and offers. That's because Papa John's knows when someone looks up Papa John's on their mobile phone, they don't care about investor relations or back stories or other links that might be on the website. They just want to do one of those three things.

Here's another example of KISS digital marketing. It's an app called Over [<http://www.madewithover.com>], which is a way to put text over pictures.

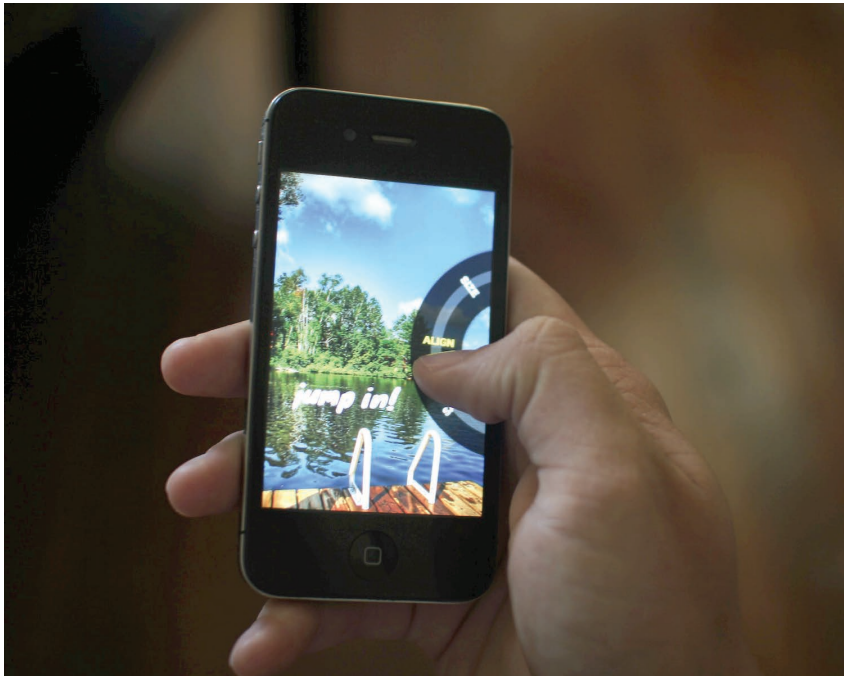


Figure 6. The app named Over, for putting text over a photo.

I love that it's very simple and intuitive to use. Notice in the photo that the navigation for this app is a wheel that rests on the right-hand side of your screen. Nobody else had thought of such a simple design that improves the user experience. The wheel is on the right because that's where your thumb is when you're holding your phone. It's easy for you to navigate with your thumb. This is a very simple execution that turned out to be a beautiful app.



Influencer Outreach/PR

It's not simple to figure out who your influencers are. You can consult Klout [<http://klout.com/home>] and Kred Story [<http://kred.com/>] and measure website traffic and figure out who writes for what magazine, and take lots of different factors into consideration. Public Relations practitioners over the last five or six years have been spending hours and hours doing online research to find out who's got the most followers, the most blog readers, the most subscribers, and the higher Klout score. Then they put all of the numbers into a grid and do the math. At the end of the day, what this process gives you is a spreadsheet or a ranking of influencers. But what you haven't done, even though you've spent all those hours, is given these influencers any information about your company that they can write about. You've spent a lot of time on the front end figuring out who you want to talk to—but you've never actually talked to them.

I'd argue that you need to take a simpler approach. Sometimes you need to go with your own sense of who the influential people are in the industry you're looking at. We can quickly ascertain that from doing a couple of Google searches and asking a couple of people in the industry for their opinion on just who are the big writers, the big bloggers, the people on Twitter who talk about your key topics the most. Sometimes you have to go with the One Big Fish strategy, which is, let's pitch this idea to One Big Fish, and let's make the pitch so sensational and so good—just like the great content we've been writing—that the big fish says Yes.

Here's an example. Aaron Mitchell was launching *Over*, the text-over-photo app covered above. He worked with Geben Communications, a PR firm in Columbus, Ohio, and they decided that instead of spending hours trying to figure out which influencers would write about a text-over-photo app, they would come up with an exclusive and a compelling pitch that would persuade a key website like TechCrunch to write about it. Their pitch to TechCrunch was, "Hey, we're going to launch this app, and if you guys want to write about it, we won't give this story to anybody else until your story runs. We'd love for it to be on TechCrunch because we think you reach the people that are going to be the fire-starters for information about this app. They're going to tell their friends about this."

Their KISS strategy worked: TechCrunch covered the launch of *Over* and the dominoes started to fall. All of a sudden influential blogger Chris Brogan is talking about *Over* and using it and writing about it on his Facebook page and maybe even on his blog. And several other tech journalists and blogs and websites started to write about it.

The lesson is that sometimes you can spend a lot of time trying to find the top 25 or 50 or 100 influencers or media members in a given space, and sometimes all you need is that one to push the first domino over. If you take this approach, sometimes you'll find that influencer outreach becomes simpler. Not necessarily easier, but simpler.

Speaking from personal experience, I get a lot of pitches from social technology companies because I write about social products on my blog. The PR people almost always pitch me on the product, which is not the best approach. They'd get better results if they tied their product into a meta-trend that I'm covering anyway. My advice would be to find that meta-trend and pitch media members on that, instead of on your product. In their coverage, they'll most likely find it necessary to mention your product in reviewing the trend. So think about pitching the trend not the product, and pitch the one big domino that's going to knock all the other ones over. It's not always the right approach, but often it is, and it's certainly simpler.



Retail Sales

In the world of internet marketing, lots of people are offering advice on how to sell your product online and offline. You'll find this advice not only in the social media space or the blogosphere, it's also in traditional media outlets such as print, TV and radio. Facebook is pushing companies to sell products using their new ad platform. Many companies are trying to get businesses and brands to use promotions to drive more likes and clicks and conversions for webinars and whitepapers. Everybody's looking for a gimmick, everybody's looking for a coupon.

It's my observation that marketers, when it comes to retail sales—whether online or offline—are focused on the sale itself. When that's your focus, you often lose sight of the two most important things you should be thinking about: the buyer and the product, in that order. If you think about the buyer and think about the product, you're going to prioritize your thinking properly and the sale is going to happen as a natural byproduct. The sale is not the goal; the sale is the result of good marketing.

Product Advertising

Product advertising is an opportunity to focus on the buyer and the product. Applied here, the KISS method results in advertising that communicates the product benefit in a very simple & smart way. Let's lose the clutter around the sale itself, let's stop thinking about the gimmicks and discounts and coupons and all the things we can do to make people buy our product even though they may not want to. Instead, let's start thinking about how to communicate our product's key benefit in a simple, memorable way.

The ad below is an example of compelling advertising that does that. The product is dental floss. You understand immediately what it can do—get strawberry seeds out of your teeth. A very simple execution to let people know what the product does and who it might benefit.

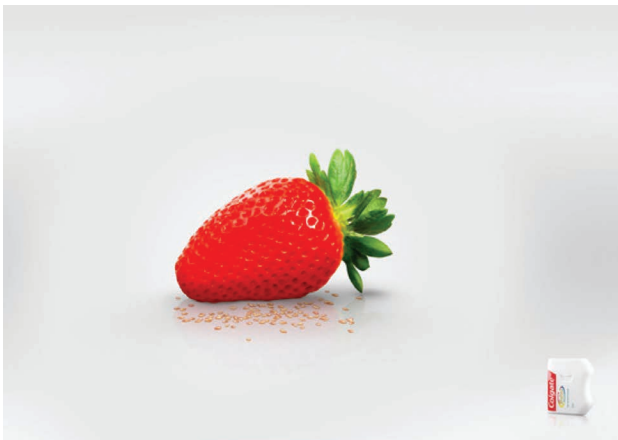


Figure 7. Effective product advertising clearly communicates benefits.

Instead of worrying about all the gimmicks you can use or promotions you can run, think about what the customer needs and how your product fills that need. Do that, and you're going to be really relevant. And when you're really relevant, people are going to buy your product, especially if you deliver on your promise to fill their need.



The Big Picture

As a marketer, you have to connect what you're doing to three things, because they're the only things CEOs and executives really care about: sales, revenue and cost. How much of the product am I selling? What revenue results from those sales and what's the profit margin? What's the cost of my marketing program, and is that a savings over other approaches?

If you can show your executives that your social media marketing is succeeding in one or more of these three areas, then you're probably going to be able to get adequate budgets, keep your job, and get raises and promotions and all that good stuff.

Here's an example of how the KISS approach of keeping it simple & smart can translate into increased sales and revenue at a low cost. Miss Shirley's [<http://www.missshirleys.com/>] is a restaurant in Baltimore, Maryland, that has a great Sunday brunch. There's a line out the door and a two-hour wait for tables sometimes on Sunday mornings. But they needed more business on other days.



Figure 8. Miss Shirley's restaurant increased weekday business with a simple social media promotion.

In talks with their agency, they realized they could go through iterations of complicated strategies for SEO and Facebook EdgeRank, they could try to drive awareness and put up billboards, and so on. What they did instead was take the KISS approach.

They looked at available communication tools and opportunities and happened upon foursquare [<https://foursquare.com/>]. Foursquare is an app you download to your phone so you check in and tell your social networks that "I'm at this place." That may seem a little superficial, but it triggered an idea for Miss Shirley's. On foursquare, if a person checks in more frequently than someone else over a certain period of time, that person becomes the "mayor" of that location, which again, seems superficial and maybe even stupid.



But what Miss Shirley's did was find a way to make that simple app work for them. They produced table tents and email messages and posters that advised their customers to download the app and tell everyone when they came into the restaurant. The incentive for customers to reach mayor status for a Miss Shirley's location was that they got to jump to the front of the line on Sunday mornings.

The program has been very successful in driving people to eat at Miss Shirley's on days other than Sunday. The restaurant had a problem of low retail sales during the week; they solved it with a social media tool that has very simple functionality. The program has resulted in a 427 percent increase in foursquare check-ins over three months. More importantly, it increased sales by 18 percent over the same period. It's a real-world success story of a business applying the KISS method to keep it simple & smart and still get great results.

KISS Complex Social Marketing Goodbye

The world of digital marketing becomes more complex all the time, and the tidal wave of advice leaves a marketer at a loss for separating the signal from the noise. The approach I'm proposing is to keep it simple & smart: Be successful by using straightforward tools and techniques—especially writing and posting great content that people enthusiastically like, comment on, and share. Stay focused on that, KISS complex social media marketing goodbye, and get results that build your brand.



About The Author

Jason Falls is an author, keynote speaker and CEO. He continues to be a name that surfaces at or near the top of conversations and lists of thought leaders and top thinkers in the emerging world of social media marketing. And for good reason. He is one of the few industry professionals with awards for social media strategy under his belt, having won a 2009 Sammy Award for his work on the Jim Beam “Remake” project. A public relations professional by trade and prodigious content producer, Falls has advised Fortune 100 brands, regional corporations and technology startups since the “early days” of social media marketing in the mid-2000s.



About NetBase

NetBase, the C2B Company, delivers the enterprise social intelligence platform that global enterprises use to monitor, understand, and engage with customers in real time. Using a high-precision natural language processing (NLP) engine combined with text analytics and machine learning, the NetBase platform processes billions of social media posts to extract structured insights for business decisions. NetBase enables marketing, public relations, market research, customer service, sales, and product innovation leaders to craft winning strategies faster. Clients include Coca-Cola, Kraft, HP GfK and J. D. Power & Associates. NetBase powers the weekly Sentiment Tracker in the Wall Street Journal and its solutions are sold globally by SAP AG.

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 [@NetBase](#)  [NetBaseInc](#)  [NetBase Solutions, Inc](#)  [NetBaseInc](#)

NETBASE

NetBase Solutions, Inc.

2087 Landings Drive

Mountain View | CA 94043

P 650.810.2100

F 650.968.4872

www.netbase.com