Chapter 1

Explaining the Why, Who, and How of Social Media Engagement

In This Chapter

▶ Recognizing the benefits of social media engagement

▶ Identifying the many roles of social media

▶ Deciding how your organization can best use social media

Social media engagement (SME) is the "stuff that happens" during your social media marketing campaigns. SME is an essential part of social media marketing. If you don't connect with others in social networks — and if they don't respond to you — you don't have engagement. Without engagement, you're simply broadcasting messages that fall on deaf ears. Nobody wants that to happen, right?

In this chapter, we help you start thinking about SME, including the benefits of engaging with customers. We outline who participates in SME. *Hint:* It isn't just you. We also introduce concepts that explain how SME happens — or how it should happen — if you're using best practices.

If you're being thoughtful about the way you communicate with — and connect with — others online, you'll have greater success in reaching customers via SME. But first you need to understand what it is, how it works, and what your role is in making it happen.

Seeking the Benefits of Social Media Engagement

When will it ever end? Technology changes constantly and so quickly that it feels like the moment you gain a new skill or figure out how to use a new online tool, everything changes again and your newly acquired skills seem obsolete. Let's face it: Social media engagement seems to change daily.

Simply put, social media engagement (often abbreviated as SME) is the process by which online communications and the content you post online help you build connections with other people within online communities. Social media engagement involves the use of the tools of social media — social networks, for example — to build relationships with others that, ideally, result in some kind of reaction, interaction, or action.

You may be wondering why you should consider using SME. Maybe you're satisfied with your current marketing strategies that involve concrete numbers and set dollar amounts. Maybe you're buying advertising in traditional media such as print, television, or radio and even though you've witnessed its declining effectiveness over the years, it's what you know.

Maybe you're committed to advertising online with banner ads, skyscraper ads, and interstitial *(pop-up)* ads. Sure, the number of click-throughs on your ads has declined, but you chalk it up to people being busy with publishing their own content and being too distracted by Facebook and Twitter activity to pay attention the way they used to do.

You might even be concerned about losing control of your content or copyrights. Nobody fully controls information that's published online. SME acknowledges and encourages not only the consumption of the information you put out there but also lets others interpret, remix (by adding their own ideas), and share it. You can still protect your copyrights and trademarks in social media as you have been doing over the past several years on the Internet. But in SME, you want people to spread your message, and you need to let them do it in their own ways.

Let's face it: This isn't your grandparents' marketing campaign. The world of marketing online as you once knew it has changed drastically since social networks entered the scene, and it's changing even as you read this chapter.

Keeping up with changing consumer needs

Today's consumers are using the Internet for both personal and professional activities, and they're savvier than ever about the way companies like yours are trying to reach them. Though they're inundated and overwhelmed by blatant advertising that tries to pull at their attention, they now tune out most ads, especially the ones that aren't relevant to them.

Finding out how your customers use the Internet

To reach today's consumers online, you must understand how they use the Internet, which sites they visit online, what they're looking for, and how they behave. Spend time pinpointing your ideal customer's online habits. A study in 2012 by Experian shows that more than 91 percent of adults who go online use social networks regularly:

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http://go.experian.com/forms/experian-digital-
          marketer-2012
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That number is up from 65 percent from earlier in the year, as reported by Pew Internet Research in April 2012:

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http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Digital-differences/
          Main-Report/Internet-activities-Those-already-
          online-are-doing-more.aspx
```

Your customers and your prospects want you to be available to them whenever they go online. Just as they expect a search engine to give them instant results for information they're seeking, consumers who go online to search for your company expect that you'll have not only a website but also a presence on at least one of their favorite social networks.

TIP

Add social media icons representing the social networks where your company is present and participating, including links directly to each network so that visitors to your website can connect with you in the way they prefer. In Figure 1-1, you can see that The Gap embeds social media icons in the footer of its website so that they appear on every page.
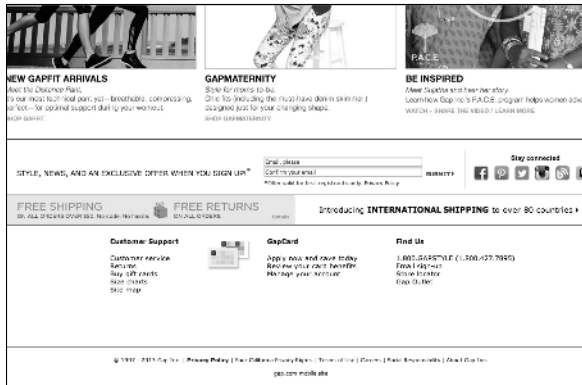
Figure 1-1: Typical social media icons on a website.

Knowing what customers want from you

Today's consumer takes their expectations a step further than when they were limited in how they could respond to companies marketing to them: They expect you to

✓ **Hear them when they praise you:** People willingly post both positive and negative statements publicly about you, your products, services, or company on their favorite social networks. You need to listen.

- ✔ **Respond quickly:** If someone comments about a company online, that person expects a response — and may instantly receive responses from *their* friends, fans, and followers. You want to be part of that conversation.

- ✔ **Provide a forum for them:** Calling a 1-800 customer service line is no longer the way consumers want to ask questions, air grievances, or lavish praise on a company. Your presence on a social network can provide customers with a new way to communicate with you. We realize that it may seem intimidating, but they want to communicate with you publicly.

- ✔ **Offer communications choices:** Consumers want multiple options for connecting with you. Offer them a variety of options based on their preferences.

In short, the very people whom you're trying to reach — your *target market* — are expecting you to be present in major social networks and not only to lurk there but also to be ready to interact with them.

Humanizing your brand in the marketplace

You may have heard the word *authentic* tossed around in blog posts, articles, workshops, or lectures as an important aspect of social media engagement. We understand the term to mean *real,* as in genuine, honest, and transparent rather than fake, overly commercial, insincere, or shady. We state it this way: Be human.

"Of course, I'm human," you say. "And so is my team. We're *all* human." We know that you're human; however, you need to be human in social networks. Don't subscribe to a regimented formula, set stringent restrictions, or automate every possible action to avoid investing the time and effort it takes to truly engage — and to be engaging — in social networks with your following.

Putting faces to names

Being human in social media engagement starts with people, involves people, and ends with people. No social network functions without people who love to use it connecting with other people through it. For example, the cable television company Charter posts customer service hours on Twitter and shows the people behind the brand. Figure 1-2 shows how Charter features a photograph of its social media specialist (whose Twitter handle is @CharterAbby) as its Twitter icon and a photograph of its customer service team on its Twitter page to come across as friendly and approachable.

Figure 1-2:
Charter
offers a
human
touch on
its Twitter
page.

Your main goal in SME is to be human, real, and responsive so that people want to connect with you and your company in the same networks where they connect with their family and friends.

Attracting and engaging people

You're entering people's inner circles when they let you into their content streams. These content streams are the new online spaces where people are paying attention. To stand out to followers and engage them, you need to:

✔ **Attract their attention.**

News feeds on social networks move quickly, and most people now skim the feeds or reorder them to see only what they want to see from the people they know and like. Use strategic and relevant words and images to get them to notice.

✔ **Entice them to come to you.**

You want people to click on your links or images to move them away from the main news feed and over to the source — your website, your Facebook Page Wall, or another place that you own where you can provide them with more detailed information.

✔ **Compel people to take some kind of action.**

After people notice you and click through to the destination of your choice, give them something to do that is measurable — preferably, something that connects them with you for the longer term, such as sign up for your e-newsletter or like your Facebook Page.

✔ **Give people a reason to return.**

Based on where you've directed them, provide incentive for them to come back to you. If they've signed up for an e-newsletter, draw them in with your messages or invite them to one of your social networks to continue the conversation.

✔ **Convince people to do business with you.**

Continue providing value, be responsive, and interactive, and prove that they should stay in touch with your brand. Close the sale, but don't look at the sale as the end of the road. Converting a fan to a customer is only the beginning of a longer-term relationship.

In the age of information overload online, social media impressions must be even more attractive and more constant and consistent to make a dent in someone's attention. And it all begins with a human touch and with genuine, human connections made via social networks and other social media tools and platforms.

Strengthening connections with customers

Social media engagement requires you to create meaningful impressions to build awareness, gain trust, and increase customer loyalty. Social media engagement also provides your happy customers with the means to spread the word about how great you are to their friends, fans, and followings — all of whom may be potential customers for you. More than anything, well-executed SME helps you close sales and then keeps the conversations going.

Consumers won't be engaged if you give them the impression that you care only about sales. They're interested in having a relationship with the brands they love, not in consuming commercial after commercial. For ongoing engagement, find interesting topics to talk about and share.

When you build your presence in social networks, keep in mind that people aren't only connecting with you and your brand and its representatives by liking your Facebook Fan Page or following you on Pinterest — they're also connecting with other people who like your brand.

By way of social networks, people can display their affinities — the things they like — in their feeds or content streams and on their profiles, pages, timelines, and walls. What they like is a reflection of who they are, and it connects them with like-minded people for online interaction. You want people to show how much they like your brand, to display their connection to you, and, in turn, to expose your brand to their online connections. When a person likes a Facebook Page, the action appears in that person's News Feed, and the Page icons for the brand are displayed on their timeline, as shown in Figure 1-3.

Figure 1-3:
Page likes
displayed on
a Facebook
timeline.
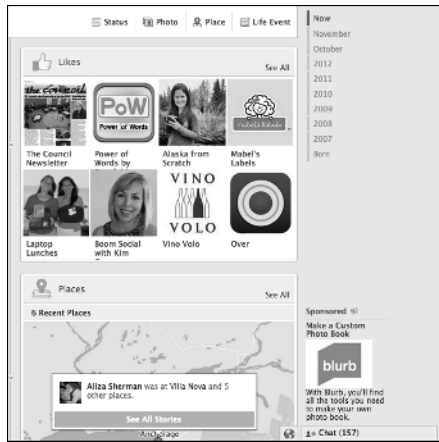
Provide people with a place to connect with you via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and other social networks that are appropriate to your brand. Cultivate communities of engaged fans and followers — wherever you've built your company's social media presences that feel welcoming to customers and prospects alike. By making strong and consistent connections with your customers, you're laying the groundwork for turning customers into evangelists and avid ambassadors for your brand.

Tapping into new markets

Social media engagement includes using online networks and tools for outreach and interactions. The nature of many of the networks you use for engagement provides you with a built-in reach beyond your immediate audience. Some networks have features that amplify your messages and reach better than others.

For example, on Facebook when fans of your Page like, comment on, or share your posts, their friends can see signs of their interaction with your Page. You have the potential to increase your reach exponentially to your fans' friends. On Twitter, if someone retweets your message, it's amplified to people beyond your own following. It's the same principle with Pinterest repins, YouTube thumbs-up votes, and LinkedIn or Google+ shares. Whenever people pass along the information they read, watch, or hear online from you, your content and brand gain more exposure.

One action that's important to successfully expand your outreach is to publish content worth sharing and to regularly remind your followers that they can share the content you've put out there. Even more important to SME is to interact with your immediate audience in meaningful ways so that they're more attentive, responsive, and willing to share.

Figure 1-4 shows how the stationery company TinyPrints hit the engagement jackpot with a post that received numerous likes, comments, and shares — clear signs that it was well-received and amplified by the company's fans. This great content — in this case, promoting a bakery with a beautiful image of cupcakes — produces strong connections and a lot of sharing. This type of engagement activity can translate into exposure for your brand and growth of your fan base, including people you might not be able to easily reach directly.

Figure 1-4:
A post that resonates with its audience.

The most popular social networks offer paid advertising options to reach highly targeted audiences. You can reach the right audience based on not only demographics but also their affinities, and in some cases, their connections to your friends, fans, or followers.

Reaping the rewards of an engaged community

An engaged community is attentive and responsive. That kind of attention and responsiveness can be leveraged for your business in many different ways:

✐ **Customer feedback:** Receive immediate input from your customers about their needs to better serve them or to identify business and marketing opportunities.

✐ **Market research:** Ask your community to answer questions, take polls or surveys, and fill out questionnaires to produce on-the-fly market research that you can apply to your business.

✔ **Brand evangelism:** Someone who feels connected to your brand often voluntarily talks about you with their friends, fans, and followers.

✔ **Brand ambassadorship:** Provide exclusive perks and incentives to turn your brand evangelists into ambassadors for your company. A brand ambassador program requires a strategic plan and mutual benefit to work, but it starts with identifying your most engaged fans and followers in your social networks and paying attention to them.

WARNING!

Negativity ignored breeds more negativity. Don't focus only on the people who say positive things about your brand and ignore the naysayers and critics. Look for opportunities to address unhappy customers and turn around their opinions.

A natural offshoot of SME and an engaged community is social sharing. When you're interacting with your followers online and you're publishing content that they in turn share with their connections, your content gets distributed within trusted networks.

People who receive your content from their friends are more likely to welcome it than if you push it out to them unsolicited. Spreading information by way of peers is far less commercial and can be much more intimate than using typical online advertising tactics.

Social engagement is not a "quick hit" or short-term folly. The best SME takes place over an extended period, building slowly, evolving as you go (to adapt to the responses from your online community and throughout), and helping achieve mutually beneficial goals.

Seeing How People and Organizations Engage with Social Media

Many people are involved in the exchanges that make up social media engagement. Every person goes online with different needs and different expectations. Knowing what motivates people as they use the Internet helps you better engage with them. Pinpointing your own motivations for being online and using SME to reach customers and prospects is also vital.

Not all roles in SME are set in stone. Both people and entities have presences online and in social networks and all of them contribute to the engagement process in different ways.

Individual consumers

In today's social web, individuals have more power than ever. Consumers are increasingly aware of the power they hold: A person with a blog can review products, build awareness of a brand, and drive sales. Someone can share their opinions about a brand on their favorite social networks and their thoughts can spread exponentially.

New consumers expect more from you and your company, particularly if they're your customer or a prospect. An individual in the mix of SME is looking for these qualities:

- **Respect:** Every person responds well to a respectful approach. A simple thank-you is a good place to start.
- **Response:** Someone who asks a question expects to receive an answer.
- **Rewards:** Though everyone has a different concept of *rewards* or perks, people like to feel appreciated.

If you're worried that you're at the mercy of individuals who can potentially make or break your company by publishing their opinions online, don't panic: Understanding how people online act and react is a lesson in human psychology. Your own actions toward engaging others online should be thoughtful and positive to generate positive results. Throughout the book, we address all of these issues further.

Online communities

Online community is the collective, a virtual place, and the groups of people who fuel social media engagement. Your SME efforts cannot happen in a vacuum. The activities of SME happen within online communities, even communities composed of only two people, such as you and someone else.

Social media platforms and tools convert an individual person into a network of people, interconnected as friends, fans, followers, or other types of connections. Social networks link people to others whom they know personally, but just as often to people they don't know. The connection between individuals in social networks may be another person or even a shared interest. Brought together, they form a community.

To move from broadcasting or publishing online into SME, someone else must be "present" to

- **React:** Reaction differs from network to network and can include superficial responses such as liking or favoriting or clicking the thumbs-up icon. This requires the least amount of effort.

✔ **Interact:** Interaction, which takes a little more effort than reaction, shows a certain degree of commitment such as repinning, retweeting, or commenting.

✔ **Act:** Action requires a higher level of effort from a fan than reaction or interaction. Action can mean having the confidence to share your content with others or providing detailed responses to your questions, furnishing contact and personal identifying information, or closing a transaction of some kind including a sale.

Without reaction, interaction, or action in response to what you "broadcast," you don't have social media engagement.

Online communities have been around as long as online tools have helped people congregate and communicate among themselves. Understanding the dynamics of online communities is critical to successful SME.

Your business

Any interaction has by definition more than one participant. In social media engagement, your company or organization can be one of the participants. "But a company isn't a person," you might say. True. Therefore, your challenge is to make your company — a corporate entity or the brand that represents it — more human and to understand some basic rules of engagement, both implicit and explicit.

To foster relationships by way of social media — even if you're engaging via your business identity or brand — keep these principles in mind:

✔ **People want to connect with people.** You're putting your company or organization on social networks; however, you and other company representatives need to be there interacting, person to person.

✔ **Your brand needs a clear voice.** Appropriate and effective communications online starts with basic branding guidelines to ensure that the way you participate in online conversations is consistent and in keeping with your brand personality. A clear brand voice is especially important when multiple people or third-party consultants or agencies are managing your social presences.

✔ **You need your own rules of engagement.** Every organization using SME needs both a set of internal guidelines and policies and external community guidelines that spell out which content is allowed and not allowed in the social networks you use.

✔ **You need a plan.** For quality interactions, develop a game plan for whom you will engage, where you will reach them, and what you will do regularly, also considering what you want your followers to do. Use tools such as a social media calendar to schedule messaging in advance that dovetails with your overall goals. (See Chapter 5 for how to develop a social media calendar.)

Publish social content that encourages social sharing. Think of the material you post online as the beginning of conversation, not simply content that you broadcast for others to passively consume.

To effectively draw the reactions, interactions, and actions that make SME work for you, get people talking — to you and to each other.

Survey your friends, fans, and followers online to understand why they connect with you, to determine what topics interest them, and to see what they expect to hear from you. Look for the intersections between what you need and what they need and focus on common areas for better engagement.

Your employees

Even if you're the only person engaging via social media for your company, anticipate that employees or team members or assistants or even agencies will, at some point, complete these tasks on your behalf. Spell out your ground rules for online engagement now rather than wait until you need to hand off the duties to someone else.

Your company's internal guidelines for social media engagement will often look similar to the public guidelines you post for your online community to follow. That's because the basic tenets of good community behavior work well regardless of the participants or environment.

This list describes some issues to address to cover the way your employees handle SME for your company:

- ✔ **Frequency of participation:** Even if you already have a posting schedule, you need guidelines to specify how online communities and conversations should be integrated into people's day-to-day work.

- ✔ **Approved content:** Let your social media editorial calendar (see Chapter 5) be your internal guide for developing and publishing approved content.

- ✔ **Tone of conversations:** Your brand guidelines inform your messaging map (detailed in Chapter 5) to provide more than the visual elements of your logo — they also guide the personality, tone, and voice of your brand in social media, down to the key words and phrases to use online and the types of content to post, depending on who you're targeting.

- ✔ **Response style:** Every social network and online communications tool has platform-specific ways to respond and interact. Spell out the way your team needs to respond, such as when to like people's comments on Facebook or how to respond to a retweet on Twitter.

- ✔ **Chain of command:** Establish a clearly defined system to determine who's in charge. If your organization has different team members,

> specify who is an employee's direct supervisor and which activities or actions need to be approved or considered by a manager.
>
> ✔ **Policing process:** Outline steps for removing inappropriate content or comments online, and spell out who has the power to delete material. Many social networks do not provide different levels of administrative access, so your rules and guidelines will dictate roles, responsibilities, and permissions.

To a certain degree, allow employees to use their best judgment when interacting online. As long as everyone is aligned in terms of values, tone, and overall goals, your team should be able to respond and act as needed, especially if you — or their supervisors — aren't available to respond promptly. Delays in responding can create a negative situation in social networks. Attentiveness and responsiveness can help avoid potential problems.

Address the likelihood that your employees use social media in their personal lives. Add to the employee handbook specific rules for content that your company allows and doesn't allow for at-will employees about their behavior in social networks on their own time and within their own, "private" online networks.

We say "private" because nothing that's posted online is truly private. Even the most locked-down Facebook or Twitter account or e-mail message can produce fodder that's distributed across the Internet. After material is released from a secure computer onto the Internet, the reality is that it can potentially be revealed to the online world.

WARNING! You aren't immune to the dangers of careless online communications and inappropriate exchanges in social media. One mistake can snowball into an avalanche of trouble for your company. Watch what you say and publish online, and be a role model to your employees in terms of appropriate online behavior.

Setting Goals for Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement is an essential part of social media marketing — it's the way you share content online in social networks and the way others respond to that content. SME consists of several parts, like pieces in a puzzle:

✔ **Audience:** The people you want to reach and engage

✔ **Content:** The type of information you put out there

✔ **Reaction, interaction, and action:** The ways people can respond to you

✔ **Outcomes and measurement:** The results of engagement

SME is the "stuff that happens" during your social media marketing campaigns, but also the way you do things to make that stuff happen. We've identified five goals of social media engagement. All these goals involve interactions with people, as we discuss in the following sections.

Building trust and credibility

Online, as in life, you can build better relationships and have more positive outcomes in communications if the people who are communicating trust each other. Trust in the offline world is built over time, and trust in social media engagement is no different.

The need for transparency in SME is huge. More people have greater access to information about anyone and any company because of the Internet. Material that you previously could hide behind your company firewall can now become fodder in social networks in the blink of an eye. Even trusted brands risk tarnishing their reputations with missteps in how they communicate and engage online as much as in how they behave offline.

Both trust and credibility are built on consistency and on follow-through, as we discuss in Chapter 4. Do what you say you're going to do. If you ask for feedback, address head-on whatever you hear. If you "overhear" somebody complaining about your company publicly on a social network, be attentive and responsive. Sincerity and the human touch go a long way toward building trust and credibility and toward laying the foundation for your efforts in SME.

Being present with a human touch

Technology tools exist to automate many tasks, but still no substitute exists for actual human interaction. Even the best artificial intelligence software cannot fully replicate human sentiment, emotion, and sensitivity. Many aspects of social media engagement can be automated, but without the human element — the personality, emotions, reactions, and responses — engagement can fall flat or even utterly fail.

As we mention in Chapter 5, a major challenge of being present online is time. You may feel that you don't have enough time to add engagement via social media to your lengthy to-do list. If you want to turn prospects into customers, build strong and lasting relationships with customers, and convert happy customers into avid evangelists, you — and your team, employees, or representatives — need to personally engage regularly.

REMEMBER

Use canned messaging and automated responses sparingly to supplement, not dominate, your presence in social networks. You cannot expect others to be present and to engage with you online if you aren't there as well.

Creating connections

You want more friends, fans, and followers in your social networks, but don't think that amassing sheer numbers gets you closer to achieving your business goals. Bigger numbers may look attractive on the surface, but if the wrong people help you accumulate them — individuals who aren't in your target demographic and who aren't interested in what you have to say — those "connections" are empty and meaningless.

For SME to be successful, you need to be connected with more of the right people — the individuals who willingly align themselves with your brand, who pay attention when you share content online, and who gladly pass along the content you've shared. To attract the right people, start by creating an online presence that reflects your brand and that is focused, attractive, interactive, and intrinsically valuable to the audience with whom you want to connect.

As you begin your outreach to gain friends, fans, and followers, follow the people whom you want to follow you. To boost your outreach, leverage the highly targeted advertising options on the most popular social networks to hone in on the right audience to build your fan base.

Social media engagement works best when you respect your connections and understand that their time and attention are valuable — and often stretched to the limits. Your connections in social media are only as strong as the effort you invest in obtaining and cultivating them over time. Without strong and attentive connections, you can't have real or lasting engagement. For more on the importance of connections, see Chapter 6.

Sparking conversations

We may use the terms *broadcasting* or *publishing* or even *sharing* to describe sending information by e-mail, via the web and social networks, or by using mobile devices. When you're participating in social media engagement, though, you're *conversing*. Everything you post online should be thought of as the beginning of a conversation.

If you want to engage with others via SME, you have to be willing — and able — to be part of the conversation. Your engagement efforts begin, as always, with your business goals, who you're trying to reach, and what you're trying to get them to do. But then your challenge becomes converting your key messages into meaningful conversation starters and maintaining conversations to foster relationships with your connections.

A great way to start a conversation is by telling a story. Storytelling in SME is a powerful tool — you can do it by using words, images, audio, and video. Tell stories that are compelling enough for others to want to pass them along.

Conversations are happening online *all* the time. Some of these conversations involve your brand — whether or not you're part of them. Listen more to what is being said about you, and find appropriate ways to be a part of those conversations.

You can't control all the conversations happening around your brand, but you can engage people who are talking about you outside of your networks, address their comments or concerns, and invite them to continue the conversation in more direct ways including e-mail, website forums, social networks, and even by phone or in person if it makes sense.

Turn to Chapter 7 to see how to start and manage conversations in social media.

Driving interaction

The activity that goes hand in hand with sparking a conversation happens during the conversation and after it ends. You have business goals — we get that. You want people to take action, whether it's to click on your web ad banner, sign up for a prize or content, contact you, or make a purchase. All these actions require deliberate effort — they don't happen automatically. Any telephone salesperson who initiates cold calls can tell you that hang-ups and rejections are much more common than actual sales.

Social media engagement is both the warm-up and the marathon. Attracting more than a passing glance online and making a deliberate action to connect — to like or favorite your content — is only the first step in driving interaction. That one-time action of clicking the Like button doesn't help you reach your goals.

Turn those quick-and-easy liking and favoriting actions into greater commitments of time and trust — into comments and shares. You accomplish this task by executing a well-planned approach to content development and publishing, thoughtful outreach, consistent presence, meaningful conversation, and subtle and not-so-subtle encouragement. Give people a reason to continually interact with you. Understand what motivates your audience to interact. Social engagement starts with you, but interactions aren't only about you. (We dig into this topic in detail in Chapter 7.)