

Leveraging Social Media for Small Business Marketing: The Case of Ablaze Naturals

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents a case study of Ablaze Naturals, a small, natural skincare company facing marketing challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case explores how the company can leverage social media to increase brand awareness and sales when traditional marketing avenues are disrupted. Students are tasked with developing a social media marketing strategy for Ablaze Naturals, considering the company's core values of sustainability, ethical sourcing, and natural ingredients. The chapter provides discussion questions, assignment options, and teaching notes to guide instructors in using the case to teach business communication, marketing, and social media skills. By engaging with this case, students learn to create content for various social media platforms, understand platform-specific best practices, and develop integrated marketing plans. The case emphasizes the importance of digital skills in today's job market and prepares students to navigate the dynamic digital landscape, regardless of their major.

INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of companies currently have an online presence in some fashion, from Facebook to a website to extensive and coordinated digitalized marketing plans. Large and mid-sized companies have social media managers to organize and

promote their online marketing, but not all companies have the staff or budget for such positions.

Disruptive events, whether economic downturns, cultural shifts, or other unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can rapidly alter consumer behaviors and force companies to pivot their marketing strategies. During times of rapid change, businesses must quickly pivot and often focus on connecting with customers through online channels. Companies may redirect marketing budgets and tactics to match changing audience expectations around products and services in the digital environment. For example, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Quantum Metric showed “online orders have surged by 108 percent year-over-year in February” (Pastore, 2020, para. 1), and engagement with online advertisements rose 15%, according to Williams (2020). Companies quickly promoted at-home and delivery services and responded accordingly to these shifts in consumer behavior and expectations (Talbot, 2020). Ultimately, companies need this type of marketing agility to deftly respond to the dynamic digital environment and emerging consumer trends.

In this dynamic environment, instructors of business and professional communication and marketing courses need a way to prepare students to enter the business world where they may be called upon to create content for social media and digital platforms. Regardless of their programs of study, recent college graduates are often seen as digital natives who are recruited in part for their skills and ability to keep pace with digitalization (Olsson & Bernhard, 2020). Businesses often expect new graduates to have competency and literacy with social media since it plays an increasingly important role in business strategies (McHaney et al., 2015).

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ 2019 *Job Outlook* survey, “digital technology is the fifth most essential competency,” (Gray, 2021, para. 4) just behind teamwork/collaboration and oral/written communications. Technology skills employers want include “the ability to understand and utilize social media effectively” (Digital Marketing Institute, 2024, para. 10) and efficacy for creating social media content, which is reliant on written communication skills (Doyle, 2024). Digital skills can be used in any job role; it is not solely the domain of marketers or sellers (Digital Marketing Institute, 2024).

Students in marketing and business fields need to have a basic knowledge of how to create content for social media, including understanding of audience, tone, clarity, and voice. The teaching case presented in this chapter can help students understand how to use social media for business purposes. The case may be used in a variety of ways: as a research project or basis for an integrated marketing plan, as a compare/contrast exercise, or as a discussion touchpoint.

In this case, a small company was beginning operations at the time COVID-19 hit. The company had to refocus its growth efforts to online platforms as pandemic restrictions removed many traditional forms of reaching customers. The case focuses

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