

# Get engaged

Social networking sites are bringing about huge changes in the way businesses communicate with their customers.

Garden centre and catering consultant Doug Stewart shows you how to engage customers and boost sales the modern way

**Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide businesses with a completely new way to communicate with customers. Using these new tools we can engage with customers on a whole new level. We can talk to them, ask them questions, listen to them, get them talking to each other, tease them, entice them and effectively, use them to build our brand.**

It may be quite a claim but, in simple terms, Facebook and Twitter can build stronger relationships and bonds with customers

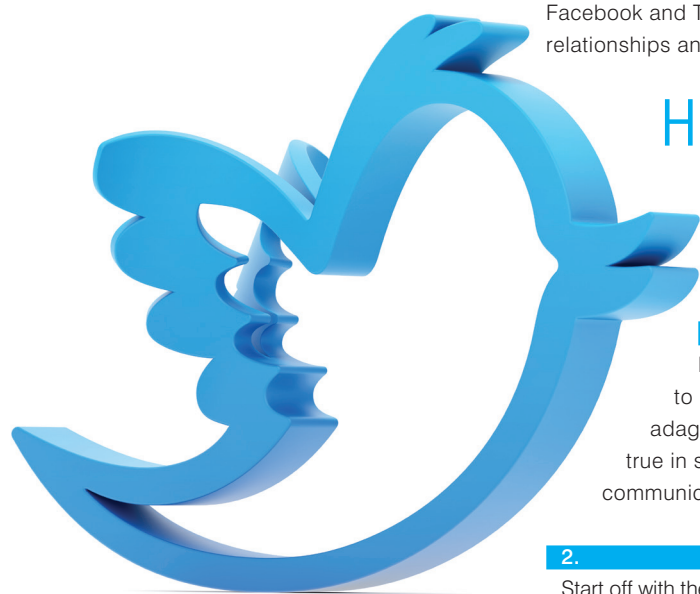
than can be achieved through any other communication channel.

The last time businesses saw such a significant change to the way they communicate with customers was in 1876 when Alexander Bell patented the telephone. Communication was no longer one way through brochures and billboards; it was now a two-way dialogue with customers. It was cheap, easy and effective.

I am often told by busy café operators that they have a website (the modern-day brochure) and so have neither the time nor the need for Facebook and Twitter. I can image such conversations in 1876 about the need for telephones: "If a customer wants to talk to us let them come in to see us," would have been a well-used phrase.

To be successful a business had to learn how to use the telephone and acquire new skills and techniques. Social networking is exactly the same; it needs a new mindset. It also needs skilled staff to make it work and just as an unanswered phone is a waste of investment, so is a Facebook page rarely updated or a Twitter account that does not tweet.

## Here are 25 ways to make Social Networking as easy as using the phone...



**1.**

First and foremost you need to have quality content. The old adage that 'content is King' is as true in social media as it is in other communication channels.

**2.**

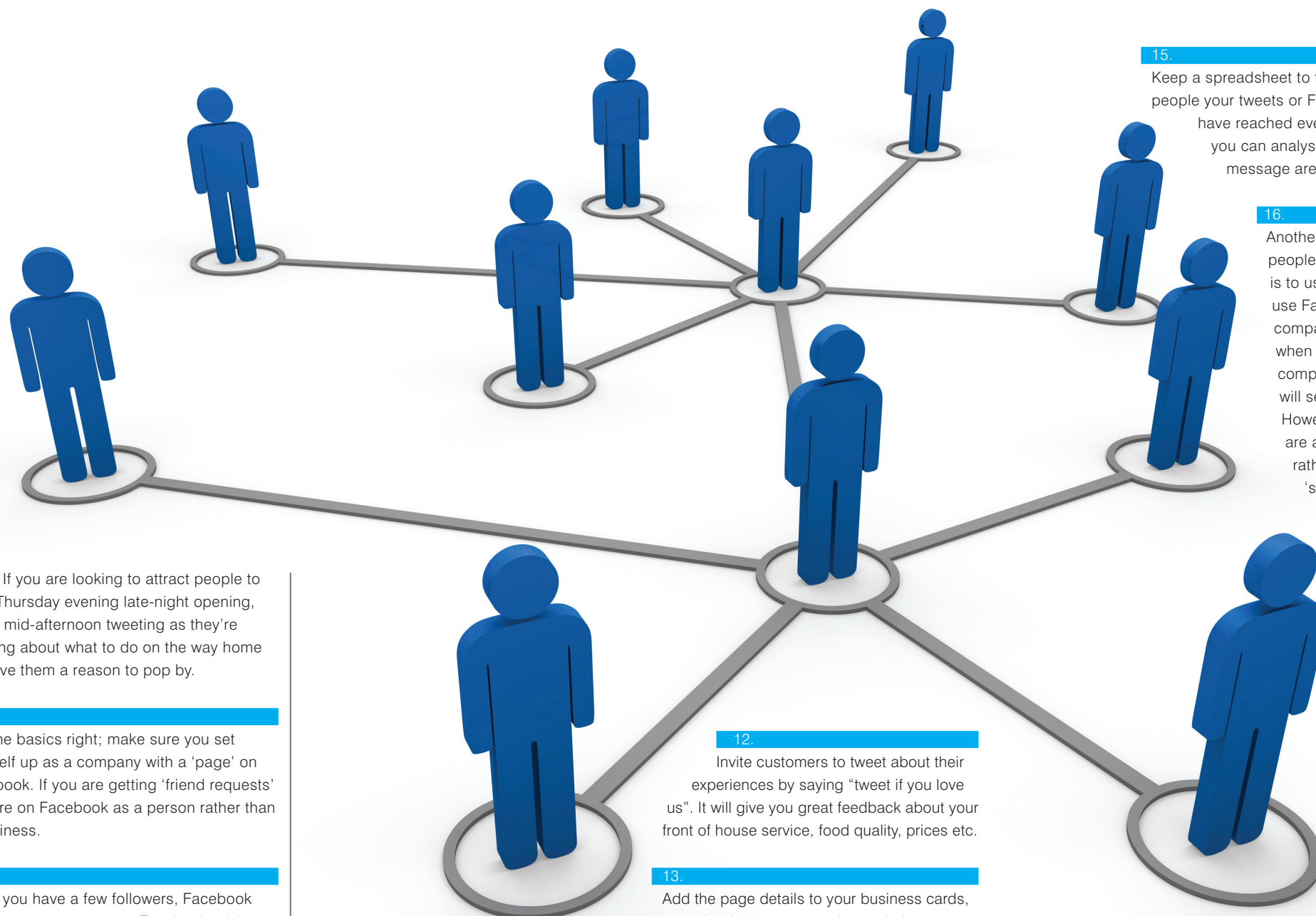
Start off with the daily special, but how about also uploading photos of suppliers, of the cows that produce the milk, or the field where the potatoes grow. It's about adding theatre and excitement, and differentiating your offer. In a nutshell, if you expect me to spend my time reading your tweets make them interesting.

**3.**

Communicate regularly, it's never going to work if you only post once a month. There is always something interesting to say about your menu, your supplier, your specials, your staff and your recipes so aim to create a post at least once or twice a week, if not every single day.

**4.**

Think about the time of the day that people are at their computers working. In a recent survey it was reported that the average worker is engaged in social networking sites every 15 minutes or so when they are at



work. If you are looking to attract people to your Thursday evening late-night opening, some mid-afternoon tweeting as they're thinking about what to do on the way home will give them a reason to pop by.

**5.** Get the basics right; make sure you set yourself up as a company with a 'page' on Facebook. If you are getting 'friend requests' you are on Facebook as a person rather than a business.

**6.** Once you have a few followers, Facebook allows you to set a smart Facebook address - facebook.com/mycafe - which should be used on all of your promotional materials.

**7.** Once you have 30 Facebook 'likes' you can access insights, which will tell you who your 'likes' are, which towns they live in, whether they are male or female and which age groups they fall into; all very useful information to allow you to tailor your message to your audience.

**8.** Work smart, we always set up clients' accounts so that one Facebook update goes from the Facebook account to their twitter account and then onto their LinkedIn account, finally ending up on the news page of their website.

**9.** Make sure customers are aware of the opportunity to follow you on Facebook, not just on the homepage or the contact page, but on every page of your website.

**10.** Another very simple way to inform people of your Facebook page is to add a link to each of your social networking sites to your email signature file.

**11.** Don't expect customers to search through Facebook to find you, add your Facebook address to the bottom of the menu, on all promotional literature, till receipts and any printed items such as the menu, sugar sachets etc.

**12.** Invite customers to tweet about their experiences by saying "tweet if you love us". It will give you great feedback about your front of house service, food quality, prices etc.

**13.** Add the page details to your business cards, some businesses even print up their own 'like us on Facebook' cards with the timeline masthead on the card and, of course, their Facebook address.

**14.** If you are looking for a quick and easy way to increase your 'likes', (500 – 1000 would be a good target to aim for), simply ask your current fans (the people who have 'liked' your page are called fans) to share your page with their friends. If that sounds a little bit lame, one of our client's Facebook site has a healthy 655 fans. However according to Facebook insights those 655 fans have a total of 94,364 Facebook friends, so simply asking those 655 people to share your page with their friends could reach 94 364 people. How much would that cost in conventional marketing spend?

**15.** Keep a spreadsheet to track the number of people your tweets or Facebook updates have reached every week, that way you can analyse which types of message are most effective.

**16.** Another good way of telling people about your page is to use the option to use Facebook as your company. With this option when you post on other companies pages people will see your name. However make sure you are adding to discussions rather than making 'spammy' comments.

**17.** Add your Facebook page as your website address to LinkedIn and other social networking sites to drive traffic to your page and so increase the number of people who 'like' you.

**18.** Don't just tell your fans what you are doing, ask them what they like. People who just talk at you are boring, however people you can have a conversation with are much more interesting, so having started by posting that today's soup is courgette and mint, you could move onto "We are preparing our summer menu at the moment, what is your favourite summer soup?" Or why not publish one of your recipes and ask people to upload pictures of the dishes they create. This is a really effective technique to build up your number of 'likes' as not only does it engage customers, whenever someone comments on your post or uploads a picture then their Facebook friends see this as well, and who knows, they may visit your page and end up clicking that all important 'like' button.

**19.** Reward people for liking your updates or for linking your page. There are many third party sites such as Social Whispers, which allow you to offer voucher rewards in return for likes.

**20.** Learn from the masters. If all of this seems new and bewildering start following operators such as McDonald's, Pizza Express, and Starbucks. Look at how they are using Facebook and Twitter to personalise their offer and responding individually to people, making a big brand personal. We visit competitors to see what they are doing all the time, but do we do the same on line?

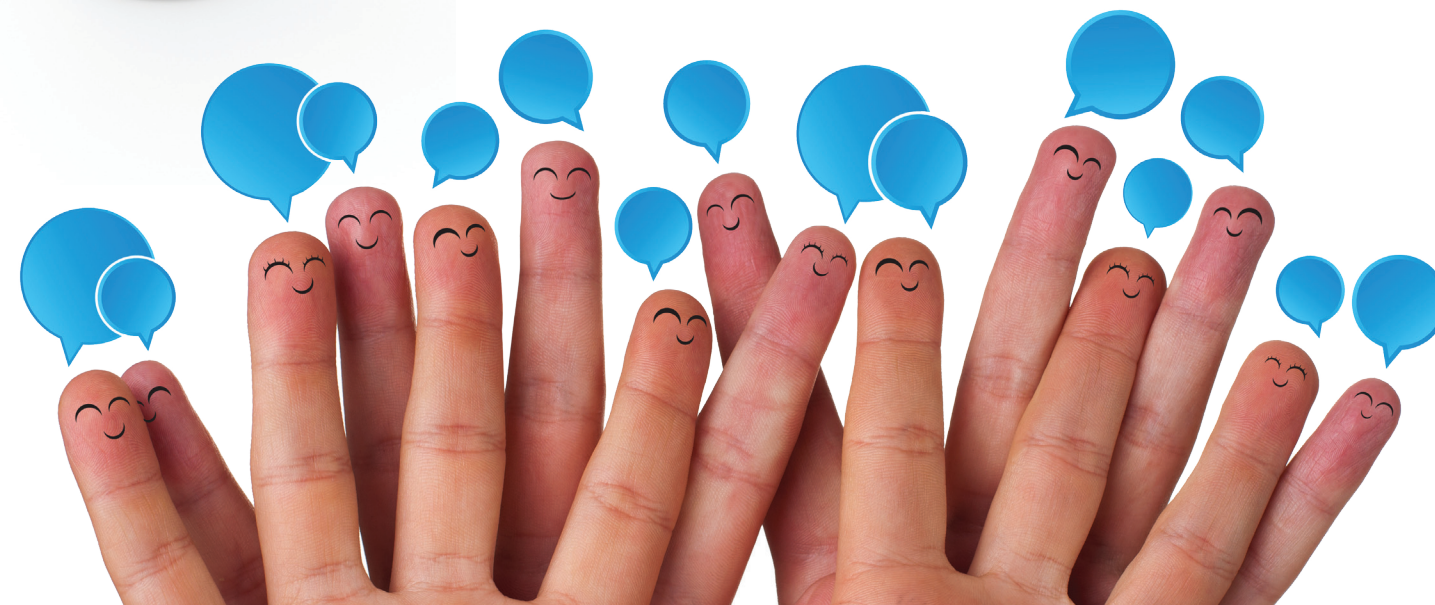
**21.** Respond personally to every person who writes on your wall, it will encourage them to write more, and remember that every comment they make is on their newsfeed that is read by their friends.

**22.** Remind customers that you really do bake everything from scratch by taking a photo of your kitchen staff one at a time, showing them mixing, baking, whisking, pouring and taking tasty treats out of the oven, but make sure the food looks delicious and the photos are sharp and in focus. Pay particular attention to what you might have photographed in the background in case it is not appropriate to share it with the world.

**23.** You can upload your menu onto your Facebook page, along with other information such as 'how to find us' maps, ethical sourcing pledges and any other information that your customers might enjoy.

**24.** Make sure your Facebook timeline looks amazing by having an image that really sums up your catering offer, your principles, and celebrates your suppliers etc. And change it regularly to keep your page fresh.

**25.** Just do it. Feel the fear and post or tweet anyway!



Doug Stewart is author of the Garden Centre Blog ([www.gardencentreblog.co.uk](http://www.gardencentreblog.co.uk)) and is garden centre, social media and catering consultant at Waring Stewart Associates.