agorapulse

How to Buy the Right Social Media Management Tool

Determine If a Social Media Management Tool Is Right for Your Business

If you check off at least six of the following statements, a social media management tool is most likely to be of great use to your business.

Self-Assessment: Does My Business Need a Social Media Management Tool?

○ I manage more than 5 social profiles.
○ I manage profiles on more than 1 social network (ex. Facebook and Instagram).
○ I have only a couple of profiles, but I'm very active and like to schedule my activity
○ I am a team of at least two people working on these social profiles.
○ I post at least once a day to these social profiles.
○ I like to publish posts at different hours of the day.
○ I try to respond to comments on my social profiles within 12 hours.
○ I track the use of at least two hashtags on Twitter and/or Instagram.
○ I run ads on Facebook and/or Instagram.
○ I check the analytics on my social profiles at least once a month.
○ I want one centralized dashboard to track all my profiles' analytics.
○ I can budget at least $10 a month toward a tool.

Factors to Consider When Choosing a Social Media Management Tool

When considering a new social media management tool, you need to look at tools where a wide array of functions and features exist.

The following sections are to assist you in the decision-making process. Studying these factors will leave you remarkably well-prepared to evaluate and select the best social media management tool for your needs and budget.

We're covering the following areas and features of social media management tools. Feel free to focus on the areas of least familiarity, or re-read the factors most important to you and your team.

A. Tracking All the Social Networks

The first consideration of any social media management tool must be which social networks it does or does not support.

At this point, understand that every social media management tool is limited by what each social network chooses to allow third-party tools to do. Some networks are more open and allow more functionality than others do. Some networks are easier (or more difficult) to work with. And these "permissions" are constantly evolving, which helps explain why so many tools have different degrees of functionality.

B. Publishing to Social Networks

One of the most common features of social media management tools is publishing to social networks. This feature is vital for businesses that lack time yet need to be present on multiple networks simultaneously.
If that's a concern, you'll need to look at the publishing capabilities of each tool you're evaluating.

Ask yourself:

○ On which social networks can the tool publish activity?
○ Can the tool cross-post to multiple social networks simultaneously?
○ Does the tool allow you to schedule those posts?
○ Are you able to then view a calendar of scheduled activity?
○ Is changing or deleting the scheduled activity easy to do?
○ Is it possible to repeat posts?
○ Does the tool offer a queuing feature?
○ Can you group posts into categories?
○ Does the tool let you assign drafts to team members for approval?

Repetition and content queues can take a lot of different forms, but the core ideas are always the same:

· A **Repeat option** lets you tell the tool to post the same post again at some point in the future, whether that's a scheduled date or after so much time has elapsed.
· A **Queue option** allows you to set specific times of day that you would like to post and then simply add content to your queue to be published at the next available queue slot.

Both options are extremely convenient for managing consistent social media activity.

A subset of Publishing is **Content Curation**—finding and sourcing content to share to social media from other sources. Some brands prefer to create and share 100% of their own unique content and information. Other brands may want (or need) to have a mix of content and sources.

The more content you need to share from other sources, the more help you may need in doing so. And again, what each social media management tool offers will vary.

However content curation is presented, its functions give you the chance to review, schedule, and post engaging content for your audience—content that you didn't have to create on your own.

At this point, you should assess your current publishing methods and evaluate whether an existing tool supports it (or whether, perhaps, a tool supports an even better publishing method).

Ask yourself:

○ What are you currently sharing to your social network
○ Is it a mixture of owned and curated content?
○ Where do you get or create your social posts?
○ How often are you sharing to the social networks you're focused on?
○ Do you currently or will you potentially want to repeat posts?
○ Do you have evergreen content on your website that you'd want to share repeatedly?
○ Would you benefit from having a set schedule for different kinds of content that gets shared to specific social networks?

This approach is a more advanced way to look at your social media activity—to consider what content, in what form, will perform best on which networks, at what times.

Ultimately, this method will appeal to your audience far more.

As you consider your current workflows and compare them to existing social media management tool capabilities, keep in mind best practices and how you may improve your own workflows. Then choose a tool that supports them.

C. Monitoring Social Media

Monitoring is a business-critical function that too often is ignored. Time and again, I see businesses failing to pay attention to what their existing audience members and customers say on social media. That lack of attention is costing them business.

But because those companies aren't paying attention, they don't even realize their loss.

From a functional perspective, Monitoring is the ability to review and respond to engagement directly with your brand's social media profiles and posts, from your audience.

Monitoring can include:
· Comments / Replies on posts
· Direct / Private messages
· Mentions of your brand's profile on other people's posts or comments
· Comments on paid social media ads

In every instance, I am referring to people who are actually talking to or about your brand and who are likely to expect a timely response.

If a potential customer leaves a comment on one of your posts with a question about your product, isn't that something you're going to want to respond to right away?

If you don't see that question for days, it's likely too late to make the sale at that point.

Your social media management tool must reliably capture these inputs and funnel them into a dashboard or inbox, so you can review and respond accordingly (and quickly).

Monitoring is also an area, again, where social networks have different permissions and access, so tool capabilities will vary.

Facebook, for instance, no longer allows tools to do very much with personal profiles due to privacy concerns. You can't monitor your personal profile private messages, unfortunately, nor can you see comments on your posts.

Other tools may offer monitoring for certain social networks, but only at higher price points. Pay attention to what features are offered in which plans.

D. Listening on Social Media

Differentiating between "Monitoring" and "Listening" is helpful, even if some tools don't specifically talk about features that way.

We define **"Listening"** as the ability to review posts and comments on specific social networks that do not fall into the normal monitoring category of direct messages, replies, etc, and that fulfill certain search criteria.

For example, Listening may include searches of your brand name where the social network user and post does not actually mention your profile (no @mention or tag), but used your brand name as normal text. They're talking about you, so that's likely a post you'll want to review!

Brands may choose to monitor a specific set of keywords or hashtags. Those may be branded keywords, industry keywords, or other topics of interest (including your competitors). Some brands opt to listen to what's being said on curated Twitter lists. The amount and type of searching and listening you do will depend a great deal on your brand, industry, and target audience.

For those searches and listening that are possible and available, some tools may offer "on the fly" listening which is essentially a quick search, where others might give you the ability to save that search and have it running all of the time.

Some tools separate these searches into different streams or screens or dashboards, where others might collect them into a single interface or inbox. If you're not currently doing or need a high volume of listening capability, this distinction might not be important.

Perhaps you're already taking advantage of Twitter's advanced boolean search functions, and you would love to save those searches and see the results whenever you wanted to.

Do you need to be able to pause or run searches routinely? Filter or sort results?

And do you anticipate a high volume of listening results regularly?

If so, make a note of that as some tools have limitations or pricing differences depending on volume.

E. Reporting on Social Media Success (or Failure)

Your social media management tool of choice should have enough reporting and analytics capability to help you with basic decision-making and strategy for the months ahead.

Reporting should include data on the posts that you shared to a network during a given timeframe, whatever post performance data an individual social network is prepared to give, as well as whatever data can be collected and displayed on your profile's audience.

At the very least, reporting should account for:

○ The number of posts published to each social profile (not just what was done using the tool)
○ Post engagement (likes, comments, shares, clicks)
○ Post visibility (reach, impressions)
○ Audience size and growth

With that minimum level of reporting in place, you can determine which posts did well and which ones didn't, and extrapolate from that how to change or improve your future posting tactics.

Some tools offer additional analytics—some that they get from the networks, others that they're able to calculate based on available data—that can be very useful, including:

○ Best time/day to post
○ Publishing rate
○ Post engagement rate
○ Post click rate
○ Response times
○ Audience demographic information / splits
○ Identification of influential followers based on engagement / monitoring
○ Competitive analysis

Some tools even let you add tags or labels to your posts, which provides additional metrics and insight into your posting habits and success.

More advanced reporting tools aggregate data across multiple channels and include insights such as sentiment analysis.

Pay close attention to which and how many reports are included with any tool. Some tools offer you unlimited downloads of their reports; others put a cap on how many can be downloaded per month.

And if you're an agency and intend to use reports to demonstrate success and return on investment (ROI) for clients, look for tools that allow you to download or email and customize or edit the reports which are generated. Not having to recreate reports from scratch can be a huge time-saver.

Now that I've explained the key functional areas to consider in a social media management tool, I'll move on to other factors, such as how a tool can be used, how easy it is to use, how much it costs, and so on.

F. Collaborating on Social Media

You need to evaluate a tool's <u>collaborative features</u> if you have:
· A team that schedules or replies to posts
· Clients or partners who need some level of visibility into your social media management

First, you will want a tool that allows you to create separate user profiles for each member of your team. Though sharing a single login may be tempting (and cheaper), using different profiles is better.

Here's why:
· Different users can then be given different access and permission levels.
· Different users can get reports on response time per user.
· Different users facilitate access to the rest of these collaborative features.

Once you have more than one user set up within your social media management tool of choice, you may then be able to take advantage of true collaborative features. Those will vary from tool to tool but may include:

Assignment of posts/comments to team members to be reviewed
Addition of internal notes for team members on content / profiles
Indication on posts/comments/replies which team member posted (also called an audit trail)

And as mentioned earlier:
The ideal social media management tool will offer the ability to give specific team members or groups of users access (or not) to different social profiles and varying levels of access.

Think about your current workflows within your team or between you and your clients—or at least the workflows you aspire to—and consider which tools best fit those processes.

G. Integration With Other Online Tools

Are there other tools that you have or want to use? If so, how do they work with your prospective social media management tool?

For instance, many brands and social media marketers will use Bit.ly and a custom domain to create branded short links for social shares. If that's an important part of your social media toolkit, you want to make sure your tool supports it.

Write down every other tool that you use and whether it works best on its own, or whether it needs to integrate with other tools.

Perhaps you're using a tool to help source content to share to social media, or maybe you're using something like Zapier that links several tools in its "zaps."

Use the following guide to determine which tools you'd like to see integrated in your social media management tool. Open the checklist of integrations in another tab to share with a colleague or to work on offline. If you don't typically use any other tools in your social media marketing, feel free to move to the next section.

I need the following integrations in my social media management tool.

○ Bitly
○ Dropbox
○ Feedly
○ Slack
○ Zapier
○ Zendesk
○ Other

H. Social Media Management Tool User Experience

Functionality is important, but most of us will not use a tool that's challenging to work with.

User experience matters!

Start a trial with a social media management tool that you're considering and see how it "feels" to use it for a while.

Ask yourself:

○ Does this tool make daily social media management tasks easy to do? (If you have to use it every day, this consideration is important.)
○ Does the process for publishing, listening/monitoring, and reporting match the way you like to work?
○ Will you find explaining how this tool works to others easy?

I. Social Media Management Tool Customer Support

Another consideration not directly related to tool functionality is customer support. Inevitably, you're going to run into a bug or an issue or a question with your chosen social media management tool, and you're going to need help.

Now, the trick is, how do you evaluate customer support?

I don't suggest that you invent issues just to see how a customer support rep responds. Instead, take advantage of existing public support channels like the tool's Twitter profile or Facebook Page. If the tool has been around for a while, the company is likely getting customer support requests via social, and you can see for yourself how they're responding.

You'll never get the full picture publicly (most customer support is resolved privately), even if it's initiated as a public post.

At least, you will get a sense for things like:
· Responsiveness
· Tone
· Knowledge of the product

And so on.

Of course, if you do have questions during your trial and experimentation, even better! You'll get first-hand experience of how each tool's support team will respond to you if you decide to become a subscriber.

J. Social Media Management Tool Pricing

How much a social media management tool costs is an important consideration. It can also be a complicated one for the more robust tools. Basic social media management tools are usually offered for a base monthly or annual price, with just a few tiers to choose from in terms of features and cost.

The more advanced tools have to take other factors into consideration, such as:
· How many users you need to add
· How many social profiles you want to manage
· Volume/amount of usage as well

First, always make sure that you're comparing as close to apples-to-apples as possible. That starts with being clear on whether you're looking at true month-to-month pricing, or if you're looking at the annual cost broken out by month. It's the difference between $49 a month or $39 a month (paid annually). Most tools will give you a discount when you pay for a full year.

If you're considering one tool that has multiple features, versus two or more tools that, combined, have a similar feature-set, definitely combine the total cost of the two or more tools for a fair price comparison. Often, the single, robust tools are most cost effective compared to combining two or more tools.

Tool A might seem expensive at $79 a month, compared to Tool B at just $19 a month. But if you're also paying for Tool Cat $29/month and Tool D at $49/month, you can actually save $18 a month by eliminating tools B, C, and D in favor of Tool A.

Another equation could be price versus value. $1,000 is not expensive for a tool that generates you a 1 million dollars in business!

It's surprisingly easy to try tools, accept a relatively low monthly payment, and not realize that you've allowed quite a few of these tools and payments to add up to a significant expense. Make sure every tool you pay for serves a purpose and helps your business.

One final consideration with regard to pricing of a social media management tool is how easily you can obtain and understand its pricing. How much a tool is going to cost you should not be hidden behind layer after layer of pages and forms and sales calls.

See if a tool has an option for an annual pricing plan. It's a larger investment up front, but saves money when averaged over the course of the year.

Though the complexity of some tools may justify requiring an exploratory call to determine an organization's actual needs and custom solution, most tools should be straightforward and transparent with their pricing.

K. Social Media Management Tool ROI

Determining the ROI of any tool or campaign or initiative is important. It's also really hard. Most of us do not have the luxury of being able to directly compare dollars spent to revenue or dollars saved. And that's definitely the case with social media management tools.

Ideally, a business looking to implement a new social media tool would already know how much its current social media activity is costing in both tool costs (if there are any) plus labor. Labor might be in simple hours if it's just you managing your social media as time permits. Or it might be in the cost of hiring the employees or freelancers dedicated to social media management.

Cost of tool per month

x

[4 x (hourly rate x hours saved each week using tool)]

When calculating how much time you're spending, and how much time the new tool might potentially save you, also consider the time:

· Spent publishing content to multiple social networks
· Saved by not having to use / manage multiple tools
· Saved when creating reports / reviewing analytics
· Saved managing workflows / team members
· Saved reviewing / managing engagement

For some social media managers, that equation may be all that you need to justify the expense of a new social media management tool, whether to yourself or to your boss. But that's not the whole picture.

The point of a social media management tool isn't just to save your time, it's to make you better. To make your posts better. Your social media presence better. Your brand image better.

And any improvements that you affect as a result of using the tool—reaching more people, generating more engagement, driving more traffic—will have a positive impact on your business and bottom line.

But that's where it's really difficult to have an accurate measurement.

If nothing else in your business changes you can monitor your regular Key Performance Indicators (KPI) such as website traffic, leads, sales, etc., and then note trends and improvements over time. But realistically, you'll have other campaigns and activities going on that will blur such metrics and make determining which activities led to what improvements hard.

You may also need to consider opportunities lost/gained. If, previously, you were missing comments or losing sight of potential prospects or customer issues, using a social media management tool that makes sure you never lose such opportunities again can dramatically impact your business.

L. Social Media Management Tool Reviews and Recommendations

Your final consideration when shopping for a social media management tool is to find and / or solicit reviews and recommendations.

Social Media Management Tool Reviews

Fortunately, plenty of sources for tool reviews exist. TrustRadius and G2Crowd are excellent places to begin. You can also use a Google search for the name of your considered tool + reviews. These sites contain unfiltered reviews by real-world users of the tools you are evaluating.

Just be careful not to let reviews and recommendations interject too much into your evaluation process.

Remember: You're looking for a social media management tool that fits your needs and processes, which are completely unique to you.

The needs and experiences of others may be similar but will never be exact.

Now that you've reviewed all those important factors and considerations, take a moment to figure out what your business really needs in a social media management tool. Some functions are absolutely must-haves; other ones may simply be "nice-to-haves."

Use this checklist to determine which factors are most important in choosing a tool to manage your social media profiles.