

A Tale of Social Media Marketing Success



Harlan's Experience

(Any resemblance to real people or situations is purely coincidental.)

Once upon a time a man named Harlan decided to get out of the rat race and go into business for himself. Though he was always very diligent on his job, didn't miss an opportunity to get bonuses every time his company doled them out, and received yearly increases in salary, he didn't feel as challenged as he wanted to feel.

Harlan worked as a Project Manager for the largest construction firm in the mid-western state where he was born and raised. Both his brothers also worked at the firm, as well as several of his friends from high school. He'd been there for over 15 years, and actually didn't have anything bad to say about the job itself or the company, but he had been thinking about his old dream of opening a smoke shop.

Even many, many years after his initial vision, there still wasn't a decent smoke shop in town, and not only would he like one, but he had ideas of how his shop would be better than all the others; how his would even rival the trendy shops in the nearby cities.

His wife Nina was always supportive of his dreams, in a diffident sort of way. She worked as an office manager in a local dental office and had grown accustomed to their two regular paychecks for keeping the roof over their heads, and their 2 young children fed, clothed and with enough toys and games to busy them.

Harlan had done some research and learned what it would take to open his very own smoke shop, and was surprised that it would be more doable than he'd thought. He kept notes over several weeks and asked questions to one of his buddies, a local tax man. He put all the pieces together carefully before he sat down to discuss it with Nina. He wanted her to see that not only was he serious about finally doing it, but that he had found a way to make it work.

When you are in business for yourself, everything is your responsibility, and you are committed 24/7. Harlan knew this. He also knew that the uncertainty of the shop's viability, especially in the beginning, would be a concern for his wife, and he understood why. But he had the information on what it would take, and he had his ducks in a row with a plan. He knew he could handle it and was sure he'd make it work.

Surprisingly, his wife needed less convincing than he'd thought, which reminded him why he'd chosen to spend his life with her. She said she could tell that, even though he wasn't unhappy with his work or his life, she sensed that he wanted more, that he wasn't satisfied, and she was willing to take the jump with him to try to make his dreams come true.

Two weeks later, he gave notice to his job, and a month later, he was the proud owner of his new smoke shop, which he aptly named "Up in Smoke".

The first six months went by in a blur, with setting up the shop, ordering the supplies and products he would need, dealing with his raucous brothers and friends almost every Thursday happy hour and Friday night. He didn't serve alcohol, but no one seemed to care. They enjoyed coming to his place before heading to the local pub for a beer, or they'd stop after they'd had a couple for some rambunctious socializing on the way home.

He didn't think too much about marketing or even advertising at first because it seemed everyone was talking about "the cool new place in town". It was turning out exactly as he'd envisioned it would.

But, almost a year in, Harlan was beginning to see things slow down. His out-of-pocket was more under control, but his monthly payments on the initial loans was substantial. Business was regular, but it wasn't booming. He got a curious new customer once in a while, but mostly it was the repeat business of everyone he'd attracted those first few months. He was siphoning enough pay to keep his wife and kids in the lifestyle they were used to, and his head did seem to be above water, but it just wasn't enough. He still wanted more.

He started to wonder if he'd made the wrong choice. Yes, it was his "dream job" but it was also just a job. As things settled into a predictable routine, he seemed to feel the same sort of stability he felt as a project manager. He went into business for himself because he wanted more. He didn't want the same, steady week in and week out monotony.

He'd heard about promoting his business using social media, but he wasn't even on Facebook and had no interest in Twitter, Google+, Instagram or any of the others. Forget it. He didn't have a clue.

Nina told him about a company that did social media ads for her office, but the problem was that the company only worked with dental offices. Not only that, they seemed to only help with running a Facebook or Instagram ad, not managing the accounts, building up followers, or regular posting. Harlan found that he didn't need to find a way to get used to this idea of marketing on social media, as he thought he would, because he'd heard enough stories about how social media could really get a business to the next level of expansion and really cause it to take-off. His original idea was that he'd have a celebrity smoke shop, one that was known not only locally, but in neighboring states, and even featured nationally in travel magazines as a must-see. The kind of recognition and notoriety he daydreamed about would be fun; something he could definitely get used to.

But, how was he going to get there sooner than later when he didn't even like social media?

He stumbled around the internet, set up a profile and page on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Yelp, but then didn't know how to get people to them. Did he need a fancy website?

He spent a couple months working on it over the weekends, or during slow afternoons at the shop, getting on his accounts, trying to build his followers, and posting about his "great new, one-of-a-kind smoke shop" (even though it wasn't so new anymore).

For the time he spent, he didn't see much return – just the occasional, "I saw your Facebook post yesterday" and "Funny, dude, and spot on!" He wasn't sure social media was going to be the answer to his problems. In two months, he had 57 Facebook followers, 25 Twitter followers, and 73 Instagram followers. He'd never get there at this rate. Maybe social media didn't work its magic in small Midwestern towns.

He'd heard of hiring someone to help with it but didn't know how that would work. It did make sense to him to let someone else do it, because he just didn't have the time to devote to it, didn't know if he was doing it right, nor did he especially like it.

Speaking to a few friends, he'd learned that marketing was a very confusing industry. Every company seemed to be drastically different from the next, all offering their own unique vision of what would help your business. Very many of them seemed to be cookie cutter, only working with one type of business – like my wife's dental office. That didn't make sense to Harlan. If he were a dentist, why would he want to do the same marketing that every other dentist was doing?

He found a company that could work with him to determine what *his business* needed and then work on just that. They didn't have a specific market, and had some good ideas about what to do for his business, even though they'd never seen it. That sounded reasonable. They were on the east coast, which seemed odd to him at first, until he realized that what he needed help with didn't require someone to be at his store. He wasn't looking for a cashier, after all.

On the first skype call, the account executive he spoke to asked a lot of questions about his business; what his goals were, when he wanted to achieve them, what his ideal situation was, was he keeping track of his activities and stat graphing them, for starters. Stat graphing them? He made a mental note to look that up later. At first, he didn't see what these questions had to do with improving his standing on social media, but he slowly began to understand that, with the goals and ideal scene in mind, the correct marketing activities to achieve his goals were crystal clear.

The woman, Margo, explained that "outflow" (sending emails, posting to social media, making new connections, making phone calls) was key to "inflow" (more business). She said that her job was to create that outflow by having a plan and then writing a program with specific goals and tracking it – all the while continuing to determine any other actions that would support it, maximizing on what worked the best. She told Harlan that her goal, her own success, was dependent on his.

Harlan knew he didn't have the time, expertise or desire to do what she would be doing, even though he knew he could "to save money". But, he also knew that he wouldn't do it, not the way it needed to be done for the biggest pay-off. It was scary for him to make the investment, but one thing he did realize is that people don't cost you money, they make you money, and he would rather pay an outside company to do this work than to hire another employee he'd have to pay full-time and insure.

Only one month into the contract with Margo's company, Harlan was amazed at the progress: 503 Facebook followers, 945 Twitter followers, and 288 Instagram followers. He had also, at Margo's suggestion, updated his very feeble website, adding a video and a blog, and was getting his customers to post their experiences on Yelp, which was helping even more with word-of-mouth around town.

Margo said things would increase "by a power", meaning that as they got more and more blog postings, more and more followers and more and more positive reviews, it would just keep growing and growing, eventually taking on a life of its own, and instead of 50 new friends on Facebook each week, he would see it jump to 100 and then 200 and more. And she was right.

Some of the time, Harlan didn't fully understand what Margo was doing, or how she was doing it, but he did see increases in the stock orders he needed to place, and he was getting more visitors to the store. Every couple weeks, they would talk and she would share with him what she was doing and why – all of it specifically geared to get to his ultimate business goal of becoming a celebrity smoke shop known far and wide.

Four months after Margo started managing his social media marketing, a national travel magazine called the shop. They were doing a piece on US travel, specifically focusing on the Midwest, and wanted to

feature his shop. They'd learned about him on Twitter, and said that, because of the buzz he was getting online, they wanted to share it with more people.

Jackpot!

Harlan's business really kept improving after that. He stayed with Margo's company for two years, until they both agreed that because his business was growing so much, he needed to hire a dedicated, full-time staff member to run all his marketing. Margo helped him find the right person, and then she turned everything over, and explained it fully, so nothing she was doing would be missed.

Nina commented over and over, "I've never heard of a marketing company doing what Margo's company does! She's always going over and above what you'd expect."

They were both thrilled with the success Up in Smoke was experiencing. They seemed to have more time to spend together, the kids were happy, they were able to take fun vacations to faraway places, and Nina was able to quit her job to focus on the kids and the house – and she sure did like to shop!

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