Stop Renting your Friends from Social Media

by Sergei Nikolaev   *May 5, 2021*

Something went wrong

Social media is great. Professional insights, alternative opinions and touching stories are always in demand. Businesses and individuals can make an impact by sharing valuable, relevant content.

An average user profile is connected to 500 people on social media. Each of those connections has at least 500 of their own and so do them. The only thing that used to prevent you from reaching an audience of 125 million people was the lack of effort.

Ideas, news and viruses spread when there is a host to spread to. The trick to being contagious enough is the critical mass. Make enough meaningful connections, create a valuable piece of content and your message will spread.

But what if you're no longer able to reach your target audience? What if there is an invisible barrier between you and your *friends*?

Rumor has it – there is an Algorithm at large.

The Value Proposition

Once upon a time social media didn't exist. When social networking platforms (SNPs) started to emerge they faced a challenge – insignificant amount of users. Some of the platforms were gaining traction but were struggling to acquire first believers of the new business model among the business community.

To make money SNPs had to onboard large businesses. But companies are reluctant to pour money into the unknown, so social networks had to do two things: amass users and provide proof of concept. The magic of networking effect kicks in with huge amounts of active users; daring businesses follow the crowd and every other business that haven't joined yet follow the dream projected by the success story of early adopters.

When there is a small, hazy audience – established businesses are not eager to jump right in. Large corporations were doing just fine without Social Media and weren't interested. Small businesses, however, have always been struggling to get customers and were very much intrigued by the new, unheard-of technology – a potential game-changer.

The resources at small companies are always scarce and anything that could save them a bunch of money while providing a boost is highly appreciated. To attract the initial batch of small businesses SNPs had to offer something valuable, something no other channel could – user data; they had to make promises too.

The value proposition SNP had once made was simple – have your own company web page on our platform **for free** and **never ever spend** on marketing to your friends. *"Your potential customers are already here – everyone at the same place. We'll share the data. Spend some money to get in front of them; become friends with them. Once you are friends you will deliver your marketing messages forever for free."* The SNP had just made an offer no one sane would ever refuse.

Hundreds of thousands of small businesses had created their free, look-alike social media pages and amassed friends and followers. Once the critical mass of business pages had been attained, every other business had to copy this behavior thinking – *"We'd be missing out if we don't have a social media presence."*

We've got to get more friends on FaceBook, we've got to get more followers on Twitter; we gotta get more likes, more shares, more claps…
Why? Because this is **the only way** your business gets a chance of being noticed and potentially making a difference.

These are the rules of the game set by the Social Media. Who said you have to abide by these rules?

The Algorithm

Today some major social networks have become so vast that they are unable to provide support to their users. The ever-growing amount of posts, requests, offers, complaints and demands has flooded their systems.

When you have millions of daily published posts and you have an obligation to filter abusive and inappropriate ones, block malevolent users and delete dangerous topics the only way to be effective at it was to create a bunch of algorithms that flag and remove the most unwelcome content.

Over the years the amount of published content has grown exponentially. So did the algorithms.

The benevolent purpose behind the Algorithm is comprehensible – SNPs wanted to protect users from bad, malicious, potentially dangerous content. But here is the problem – today the Algorithm have developed into an entity that stands guard between your company and your friends blocking the messages you want to deliver.

Algorithms decide what content to show. Algorithms decide which ads to run. Basically algorithms run the whole show these days.

The complexity, reasoning and motivations behind these algorithms are so convoluted that when a problem presents itself the customer "success" managers are reluctant to making any changes despite the fact that the results of the works of the algorithm are plainly idiotic.

A True Story

A friend of mine has a company (let's call them Charlie) that creates video content and distributes it for free on a giant social networking platform. Let's create a totally imaginary copy of that SNP and call it – LiceBook.

The social media giant makes money by showing ads to users and shares a (tiny) part of the income with content creators such as Charlie. Charlie's business model is pretty straightforward – create an engaging piece of video content that would amass views, likes and comments in order to get paid by LiceBook. The business model works well when tons of users watch Charlie's videos and when LiceBook holds their end of the bargain.

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To benefit from the networking effect Charlie had to obtain thousands of friends. Over the years he had successfully developed his business by purchasing ads and "boosting" content. He had millions of views, thousands of friends, likes and comments. Engagement was over the roof. His business was thriving – for a short period of time.

One day the income had dropped hundredfold.

What happened?

Charlie had his video content translated into multiple languages and distributed through separate accounts. The Algorithm had blocked some of these accounts on the pretence of "stealing the content." Looks like Charlie had been "stealing" his own videos.

Due to COVID events (how convenient) the payout system had been changed – probably the works of the Algorithm as well. Because of that Charlie was entitled to 100x (hundred times – not a typo) less money for the same amount of views. The views themselves were counted in millions and didn't decrease.

None of Charlie's friends and followers had stopped following him but the content had seized showing up in their feed. LiceBook (or perhaps the Algorithm) had decided that it would be best for Charlie to "boost" (as in pay for) his video posts in order to reappear in his friends' feed.

The other day the income had dropped to zero.

What happened now?

Charlie had refused to pay the "Postman" for the delivery of the content to his friends. The same friends, who had voluntarily decided to follow, like and engage with Charlie's content. Friends who have all the capabilities to unsubscribe and unfriend Charlie but who had decided not to.

Charlie had thought that by acquiring friends they would be able to communicate with each other freely. That was the original promise, wasn't it? The rules set by the Algorithm had changed – not into Charlie's favor.

Today Charlie's videos are as demanded as before but the company's paycheck is zero (as in none). He is not getting paid. His friends are held behind a paywall. The LiceBook had decided that Charlie's content is "exempt from monetization" yet the ads on his videos are still running.

Looks like, it is Charlie who is "exempt" from monetization – not his videos. LiceBook continues to make money on the video content created by Charlie. Is this how the almighty Algorithm understands the principles of a fair play, business relationships and copyrights?

Innumerable changes to the rules, bans, blocks, payout reductions, delays and sheer stalling – the lice had sucked out all of the resources Charlie used to have. And now Charlie can't even produce a single piece of content to launch on a different platform. Charlie is stuck and broke.

The saddest part is that there isn't much (or anything) Charlie can do. He can't tell his friends to move to another platform, because they don't have the means of contacting their audience. LiceBook has it, though, but it's not sharing, ever.

Poor Charlie has been suffocated by lice. And by the looks of it, our Charlie isn't the only Charlie out there.

Stop Renting your Friends

The moral of the story is quite clear. If you over-rely on a benevolence of the Postman to deliver your marketing mail, someday this middleman might hide from you behind an algorithm and erect a paywall between your company and your target audience.

It might seem as if there is no escaping the middleman. It might seem the social media giants have won access to your friends and followers. It might seem that you'd have to play by their rules. Luckily it isn't the case. There is a way out. There is a solution that will help you break free. It's called (drum roll) – the Direct Connection.

If you are buying ads, boosting posts or paying to click-farmers with a goal to appear in the feed of your friends, stop. Just stop. Any resources you have available – devote them to getting a direct connection.

What is a Direct Connection?

It's an email, a phone number or a physical address of the person. Mail is slow and expensive but very personal – a great marketing channel when you want to get noticed. Phone call is amazing for having a conversation, being heard and getting feedback, but it's time-consuming and intrusive at times. Text messages are super powerful but rather short which imposes certain limitations. Email is arguably the most effective tool to deliver your personal marketing messages to people who want to hear from you.

The beauty of the email: it's direct, it's fast, it's reliable, it is available practically anywhere in the world, it can be really personal and it's free.

No one owns email. Even if you're paying to an email service provider, you still own the contact details of your friends. If you decide to move, your contacts will move with you.

SNPs will never allow you to move your followers to a different social media platform or export them into a spreadsheet. If you move – you lose everything.

What's the best way to establish a direct connection?

The best way to start establishing direct connections with your target audience is through your company website. You already have it – why not use it? Invest your resources and effort into it. Grow your audience on your company website.

The technology used to build social networks isn't proprietary to social media giants, neither are the features to like, comment, rate, follow and otherwise engage with users. You can have these features too.

On social media you compete with everyone for your friend's attention. On your website there is no one to compete with.

Gather personal information like email and phone numbers and be frank about why you're doing it and how your audience will benefit from providing heir personal details.

What's the difference – paying to social media or to web developers?

There is a huge difference or there is none. It all boils down to your beliefs. Do you believe it is best to rent an office space or to own one?

When you are renting – the owner sets the rules and gets to decide whether or not to renew the lease, make you vacate the premises or increase the fees. When you are the owner – you are in control and have the responsibility of making the rules.

Do you **believe** that it is OK to have your friends behind a paywall and to negotiate with the middleman every time you want to deliver a personal message?

I believe that a meaningful, direct connection with your friends is more rewarding for everyone involved and is worth investing in.

Spiraling out of Sanity

Imagine a critical mass of businesses agreeing to "boost" their posts on a regular basis. Sooner rather than later, for the sake of the end user the Algorithm might decide that in order to declutter the feed it wouldn't be such a bad idea after all to auction the boosting process. And now paying a fixed fee for the delivery of your posts to your friends would seem like a great deal.

What if some of your friends would pay the LiceBook to block sponsored content? I'm sure the Algorithm would find a way to smuggle the ads in; your business would just have to pay a *little* extra.

The casino always wins. You will never win the game while the casino is allowed to keep changing the rules. Guess what – you don't have to play their games. Maybe you can't afford to start your own casino, but you can play your own game. And you can invite your friends to play with you and let them win.

If you haven't established a direct connection with your audience, you should start tomorrow. If you already have it – nurture and develop it. Become independent of casinos, postmen and algorithms. You can set your own rules and let your friends join the game without any strings attached.

Summarizing the Argument

My argument is this. It's not that you don't need followers or friends on social media – you do. People need to be reminded of products and services; social media is where people tend to hang out these days. But you cannot afford to rely on the benevolence of social networking platforms. Not for long.

Your hard-earned friends and followers are not your asset – they belong to social networks. SNPs will continue keeping this asset behind the paywall. The more friends you have the more dependant you'd become.

Stop "boosting" your social media posts. Your business must have a direct connection to your target audience – an email, a phone number or a physical address. If you are into *boosting*, boost the attainment of direct communication channels.

Social media giants are too big to fail and they do not care if your business does. Any SNP can change the rules of the game at their own whim. No one is going to ask you.

Don't get dependant. Be lice free.

You have all the tools you ever need to grow your business. It's right there – under your very domain name. The best tool to grow, nurture and communicate with your tribe is your website. Go for it!

As they say – the first step is just a step.

About the author

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At awezzom our goal is to **create business Websites that are Worth Making**.

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