

# ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR BUSINESS ENTERPRISES IN INDIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Social Media, with millions of active users in India, is being actively proposed as an important tool for marketing and brand communication. These social platforms are claimed to help businesses get leads, increase sales, help them connect with their customers, understand their needs, get feedback and resolve complaints/queries. There is also a risk involved of negative publicity and the way these platforms work make it very easy for negativity to spread fast. Therefore, along with keeping the quality of product and services high, having a strong social media presence with regular updates and cautious public posts has become an important marketing strategy for most businesses to stay relevant in the minds of customers and maintain a positive brand reputation. An added benefit is that, compared to other mass marketing channels, social media marketing is a considerably low cost option and the results can be effectively measured. This study aims at understanding the different ways businesses in India, large or small, can use social media as a mode of customer communication to fuel growth.*

**Keywords:** Social Media Marketing, Social CRM, Customer Communication, Brand Awareness, MSME

## **Introduction**

As per the latest research published by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) there were approximately 450 million active internet users at the 2019 financial year end. Out of these approximately 350 million users are active on some or the other social networking platform. These numbers are expected to grow in the coming years as it is becoming easier to access internet enabled smartphones with affordable mobile data plans. Also, huge availability of free and paid content related to news, entertainment and education in regional languages is motivating more and more people across rural and urban landscapes to join the internet bandwagon. With such a huge number of active users spending a significant amount of time daily on these platforms it would be a mistake to not realize the huge marketing potential.

Marketing on these social media platforms is a bit different from the usual one-way communication channels like television, radio, print etc. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, and LinkedIn are all designed with group communication in mind. People can post their thoughts on their profiles and others in their network can react by ways of “Likes” and “Comments”. These instant reactions are the key components that separate traditional marketing channels from social media. It is not just a simple count of few attributes but is a whole range of meaningful analytics derived from

multiple data points like demographics, geographies, interests etc. of participating audience. Also included in the data points are parameters like conversion rates that give a lot of clarity on how successful the campaigns have been. This is all topped by the ability to do a targeted marketing which is a distant dream as far as traditional marketing mediums are concerned. It is important to note here that all these features are available for businesses and marketers to use at a significantly lower cost than mediums like television, radio or print. This provided small businesses an opportunity to showcase and sell their products and services to a relevant audience along with tools to measure success or failure with feedbacks. Marketing, for some, before this, was never an easy task and there was always a risk of losing too much money in traditional mediums without a trace of feedback on what went right or wrong.

Like any other marketing medium, social media marketing has its own challenges when it comes to businesses managing their presence on these platforms. In order to maintain a good brand reputation and constant connect with their loyal consumer base, businesses need a dedicated strategy for content publishing on these platforms. They also need to manage the negative feedback from the disgruntled customers which is visible to all and sometimes causes irreparable damage to an organization's image. This study, through review of past researches and online articles, tries to understand the much publicized role of social media as a marketing and communication tool and how businesses in India can utilize these platforms for brand awareness, public relations, customer servicing and revenue growth.

### **Discussion**

For businesses, whether small or large, making their brand/products/services visible to the potential customer is of primary importance. That is the only way a business can become part of a buyer's journey. Before digital revolution products/services were mostly discovered by way of either direct marketing like telephone calls or through mass media advertisements. Organizations with large marketing budget were able to take the mass media route while small and medium businesses carried on with direct marketing. With the advent of internet and websites like Google the concept of searching online for businesses came into being. But this required interested enterprises to have an official website with detailed information about their offerings and also employ skilled individuals who could help them rank better than their competitors on these online search engines. For enterprises who could not afford to have an online presence by ways of a website or a dedicated blog, took the route of listing their businesses on Business to Business (B2B) websites like Alibaba, IndiaMART etc. These platforms proved to be a very good source of genuine leads and interested people could get hold of contact details of these small enterprises and get in touch to take details of their products/services. Both of these were still one way communication and did not take consumers' view into the play. As the usage of social media picked pace this scenario changed. These days, the organizational cause has replaced the social cause as companies seek to connect with their audience via the online platforms (Kumarasamy & Srinivasan, 2017).

### **Business Enterprises in India**

A change in the definition of MSMEs has turned India into a country of small businesses as nearly 99% of entities falls under this category based on the twin parameters of investment and turnover. An entity can be classified as Micro if investment is upto Rs 1 crore and turnover does not exceed Rs 5

crore. The corresponding figures are Rs 10 crore and Rs 50 crore for small enterprises and Rs 50 crore and Rs 250 crore for medium enterprises. As per Government sources, numbers with GST authorities shows that 99% of the entities have the turnover that fits into MSME definition. More than half of the businesses registered with GST network have less than Rs 20 lakh turnover, the earlier registration threshold. As and added relief export turnover has been excluded to enable more units to get the benefit. Income tax department showed that when it comes to investment, the written down value of assets that is after depreciation there are a few thousand entities in India that have investment Rs 50 crore, ceiling for medium enterprises. It has now decided to tap the income tax and GST database to get a better picture of enterprises claiming the benefits.

### **What is Social Media?**

Social Media are interactive Web 2.0 internet based applications. The core principle of social media is the ability to share content with others. In order to upload content, users usually register and create a profile. Depending on the platform and purpose, users are free to choose whether their whole profile or selected content will be publicly accessible or only visible to selected audiences (Anne Osterrieder 2013). Content can be status update, short messages, links, images, audios, videos which is the lifeblood of social media. Users create service specific profiles for the website or app that are designed and maintained by social media organization. Social media facilitate the development of social network through connecting user's profile with those of other individuals or group. Today, millions of web users are connected through SNS worldwide, many of them having fully integrated SNS into their everyday life (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Subrahmanyam et al. 2008)

Users usually access social media services through web based apps on Desktops and Laptops or download services that offer functionality to their mobile devices.

### **Classification of Social Media**

1. Social networking sites-It provides web based platform for building social network amongst people. It allows users to create personal profile or homepages which can be customized later. Users can include pictures, videos, and music files on their web pages. Some of the most popular social media websites, with over 100 million registered users in India include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Messenger, Tumblr, Weibo, and LinkedIn.

2. Blogs-: A blog (derived from the word weblog) is an online journal where an individual, group, or corporation presents a record of activities, thoughts, or beliefs. There are many websites that allow users to create blogs without paying any fee like Wordpress.com, Blogspot.com, and blogger.com. Anyone can create a blog on these websites and these blogs can be accessed by anyone by typing the web address or URL (Uniform Resource Locator). Another popular sub category of blogs is microblogging. A microblogging site is like any blog, however it limits the number of words that can be published in one message. Twitter.com is an example of microblogging. (Trisha Dowerah, Barua, 2012)

3. Content generating and sharing sites-: These sites serve as sources of information for various topics. Photo-sharing sites like Flickr.com, picasaweb.google.com, Video sharing sites like youtube.com, slide sharing sites like slideshare.com, document sharing sites like docstoc.com etc. all fall under this category. These sites serve as free content for all users of internet. Users can search for content,

download and use the content available on these sites without any fee. The content is also generated by the users. This type of user generated content is also known as crowdsourcing. Video and PowerPoint presentation can be shared and uploaded on YouTube and Slide-Share. This is a major advantage to most of the people who are unable to get access to the educational resources

4. User appraisal sites-: User appraisal sites serve as a platform for appraisals of various products and services. Though it is possible for consumers to express their view in any of the medium, user appraisal sites mainly deal with such reviews. Sites like [www.mouthshut.com](http://www.mouthshut.com), [www.pagalguy.com](http://www.pagalguy.com) are prime examples of such websites. These websites serve as a starting point of consumer's decision making model for gathering information about products or services they are contemplating of buying. As such these sites serve as important word of mouth for consumers and a source of expressing post purchase feedback.

### **Communication**

It is well known fact that Communication is the backbone for starting and building a successful business for which employees should be able to communicate their ideas in a precise manner. Effective communication plays a key role in the organization growth.

There are two types of communication-

**Internal**-It is all about promoting effective communication among people within an organization. It involves producing and delivering messages and campaigns on behalf of the management as well as facilitating a dialogue with the people who are a part of the organization.

**External**-It is a transmission of information among people of an organization and another person or entity outside an organization.

A wide variety of communication tools are used for external and internal communication. These tools include mail, email, video and web conferencing tools, social networking, as well as online collaboration and productivity platforms.

**E-mail** - It is the next technological advanced level of communication, this has completely changed the way of communication in the professional world. It is the best way to send mass messages at one go, messages are efficient and quick and can even include attachments which may include message, graphical charts, and presentation. Emails being an internet platform, can be sent anywhere in the world within a fraction of seconds, it makes it one of the fastest communication tools.

**Social Networking Sites**- According to Internet business news publication IP Watchdog, social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter have emerged as valuable business communication tools. With a free account on a social networking site, businesses can instantly increase exposure to existing and potential customers, and the proprietary communication channels within these sites allow customers to immediately contact someone at the business. To boost the value of social networking, occasional updates about upcoming sales or special promotions can go out through social media to keep customers interested and attract an increasing audience. It is the fastest mode of communication. The most advantageous thing about this type of communication is that users can communicate from

anywhere in the world to anywhere in the world, and can even communicate on the way during travelling. This saves a lot of time.

**Video conferencing-** Video conferencing provides a way to have face-to-face meetings without the expense of travel. Video conferencing technologies transmit and receive images and voice in real-time so that you can have a “face-to-face meeting.”

**Web conferencing-**It adds another dimension - it allows you to share documents and applications during your online meeting. It provides user the flexibility to have one-on-one meetings, or conferences with multiple attendees. Some common tools are Google+ Hangouts, Skype, Zoom, Ring Central, Webex, Goto meeting. These tools are offered at different levels and price points. But some are free to access.

As we see several factors like increased use of smartphones, laptops, Internet access to even rural areas, secured payment modes and transformed favorable demographics changing the way for companies to communicate with customers. New communication tool of our current era is certainly Social Media as it the most commonly used social network application in the world. Social media is rapidly transforming the way organizations communicate with customers. As a cost-effective way to engage online, social media gives companies broader reach beyond traditional communication methods like email. With a simple post or tweet, businesses can promote products and services; provide instant feedback or support, creating an online community of brand enthusiasts. Social technological support, real time dialogue and feedback allow company to be more proactive.

“At least half of Twitter and Facebook users said that they had become more likely to talk about, recommend or purchase a company’s product after they began to follow a company on social media.”eMarketer

Businesses that want to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media have begun using social networking sites like Facebook in external communications to shape the perceptions of their stakeholders (Gülçin İpek Emeksiz, Ali Şimşek 2018). Social media is a relatively inexpensive way to reach to a specific customer segment. Companies are using it to drive sales, build traffic, find employees, build community and create a positive and well-known brand. It enhances connectivity as it is two way communication.

### **Social Media as Customer Communication tool for SMEs**

Any business communication has an associated purpose or a goal. Most of the times businesses communicate with consumers either for brand awareness or to advertise product and services. In some instances the goal could be to share new information about organization, do market research, conduct customer service activities or receive feedback for existing products and new launches. The various ways in which social media is being used as a communication platform to achieve these goals are discussed below:

**1) Brand Awareness / Reputation Management:** Social media allows consumers to share their experiences with others in their network almost instantly. A Facebook page or Twitter account can

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notify all its followers of specific subject quickly and simultaneously (ElAydi, 2018). The word is spread further as others share the “message” within their network. This has motivated organizations to come up with rich text/visual content that may not directly promote a product instead, with its emotional theme, tries to connect and engage consumers into “liking” and sharing the same. Sometimes organizations, that are new on these platforms and do not have a large following, take help of social media celebrities with a large number of followers (also known as influencers) in promotion of their brands and services and also to connect with them. Unlike traditional marketing channels these influencers might not always be entertainment or sports celebrities. Many such influencers are lifestyle bloggers and vloggers who, on their blogs and social media, share their views and reviews regarding products, market trends etc. and consumers follow them for purchase decision making. Once a sizeable number of users start following the organization it can showcase the offers/products/services at a later stage in a more recallable way. The information can be shared with “connected” users in periodic series of text or video posts. People interested in such promotional posts may choose to click and leave their information to be called back by their sales team or they may visit their official websites from the post itself for further information or direct purchase through the e-commerce websites. This can be done repeatedly without spending a lot of money. Thus, social media provides a more cost effective way for small businesses to keep an active presence and build brand awareness (Benwell, 2014). Along with these benefits there are threats associated with reputation management on these platforms. These include the existence of social media users who follow the sole purpose of spreading negative word-of-mouth about a company or employee behavior which is not in line with customer expectations or organizational ethics (Schulze-Horn et al., 2015). A well planned and dedicated social media response strategy with continuous execution and monitoring is the only way to counter such threats.

**2) Organizational Updates:** Brand/Company profiles on social media platforms are not just followed by general public but also by media houses. If any organization enjoys a large following on these platforms it becomes easy to share company updates to a larger audience set fairly quickly due to connected reach of the media houses. Few organizations have been using these platforms for sharing performance reports, corporate social responsibility initiatives, crisis communication, sponsorships and events etc. The utilization of social media in organizational communication also improves the reliability of the information that is being exchanged (M Janet, 2017). Such information seems more believable to people when shared directly from official social media handles instead of reading about the same in newspapers or third party journals. The downside of such rapidly spreading updates is the visibility of negative feedback that may come from the audience. Fake but official looking social media handles also pose a great challenge to popular brands. The possibility that unconfirmed information will carry the same weight as official, confirmed information leaves organizations quite vulnerable to rumor and misunderstanding (Freberg, 2012).

**3) Market Research & Feedback:** Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube has audience from all age groups viewing and sharing content on various topics of interest. The activities are regularly tracked and available in the form of data for analytics. Businesses can also launch surveys on these platforms to take inputs directly from the users. The surveys are often about taking the feedback of their existing products or to find the product-market fit for their new ideas/concepts/product-launches. If the concerned business does not have a large following then the

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survey could be shared through “influencers” of the relevant domain/industry to target a larger set of audience. Availability of such survey/analytical data helps businesses to do a customer sentiment analysis and come up with new products and offers that have a better chance of adoption. With social media, the marketers can quickly and effectively gauge response of customer and accordingly plan their strategies. Finding out what works and what doesn't is important as a business can grow only by understanding the prior faults (Mahajan, 2015).

**4) Advertising:** Organically generated user following on social media platforms is the primary target of most businesses as it provides a better ROI in the longer run. But many a times for new businesses or new product launches it is important to reach out to a targeted set of audience in the fastest way possible. Paid advertising on the social media platforms had allowed small businesses to compete with established brands at a relatively lower cost. Also, advertisers and marketers are now able to target the audience and measure the effectiveness of their campaigns and strategize better on real time basis. Business in India whether small or large are increasingly using social media to do paid advertising of their products and services. As per latest Statista.com report, social media advertising expenditure in India stood at approx. USD 3,200 million. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter provide options like promoted posts, sponsored stories, lead ads, external website landing ads and in-video advertising. These options are aimed at allowing advertisers to either get sales leads or attract customers to their official websites and e-commerce websites for further transactions. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are the preferred platforms for B2C models (FMCG, Fashion, Consumer Electronics etc.) while LinkedIn is the platform of choice for B2B models (IT Services/Infrastructure providers, Heavy Manufacturing, Industrial Training etc.).

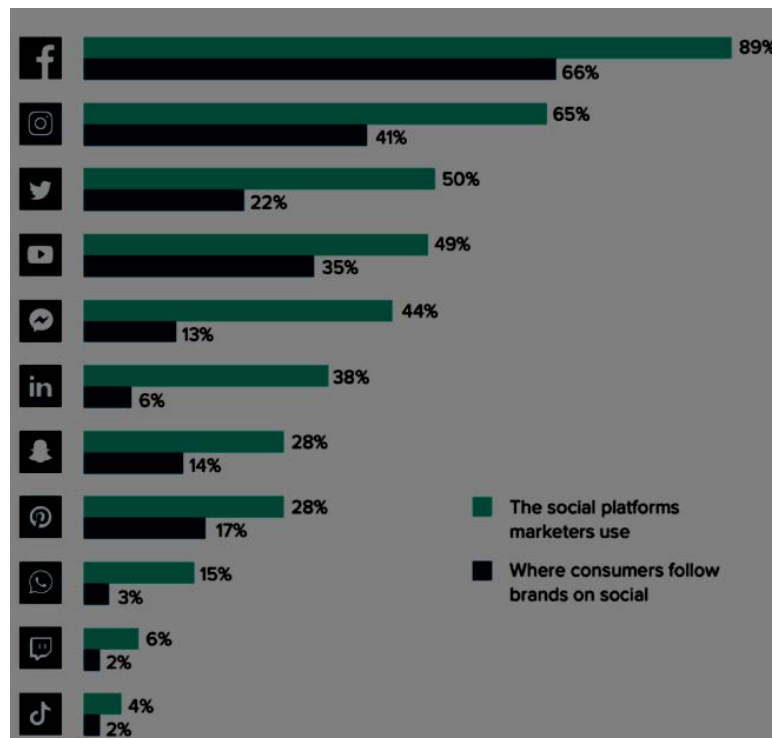
**5) Customer Servicing:** Organizations have also been paying great attention to the value social media provides in the domain of customer service. Customers who are not able to get a satisfactory resolution to their complaints regarding an organizations' products/services through traditional mediums of phone, email or website chat often resort to talking about their experience on online consumer forums and many a times posting the same on the official social media handles of these businesses. Such posts and discussions are always embarrassing and impacts an organization's reputation negatively. When customers have shown their displeasure via social media applications, the company should respond from a defensive position and apologize for the causes of the complaint in order to reduce the possibilities of further customer actions that might damage the firm's reputation (Schulze-Horn et al., 2015). Businesses now train customer service executives to engage such customers on the social media platforms on behalf of the organization and ensure that their problems are resolved in a timely and responsive manner. Social media has given consumers the power to interact directly with a company through this medium and this has caused organizations to become more actionable and generate a deeper connection with their consumers and the public (Langer, 2014).

### **Social Media Platforms Usage Statistics Based on Communication Goals**

Social media is the most powerful tool for organizational updates. The biggest challenge they face is to create a winning marketing strategy. When it comes to platforms, Facebook is the most popular. As per Sprouts social's latest report 89% of marketers use it as a part of their social strategy. However

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66% of consumers follow brands on this platform so brand messaging may not be reaching large portion of their target audience.



(Source: Smart Insights 2019)

Following in from Facebook, second most popular platform for brands is Instagram. Once again fewer customers follow brands however there are lots of influencers on the platform which means brands have more option when it comes to customer engagement.

The biggest difference is seen on LinkedIn. While 38% of marketers use it just 6% consumers follow brands on the platform. This means unless a strategy is incredibly targeted, it may fall short achieving the type of engagement you want to achieve on LinkedIn. In terms of usage it is used least by both consumers and marketers.

WhatsApp is struggling to show its worth and consumers are not connecting with brands on this platform. Therefore, Facebook is ruling the kingdom right now.

While having presence on several platforms, understanding where to put the bulk of your investment is more important. So looking up at the ways for which social media is used. It is equally important to make right decisions about which social media to be used for what purpose to leverage company’s goal.

Every platform is right. It is important to understand your business, audience and how social media fits into your strategy. First it should be clear in mind that who are the target audience and which platform do they use. Second what message you want to convey about your business. Third what kind of content you want to produce consistently. Finally how social media will support your website.



**Facebook** - We all know this has become the household name. Based on new data sent to advertisers as per Codenex report it has 241 million active users in India, a million more than in US making India the country with the largest user base first time. It is the place we go to keep up with friends, family or people we used to know. It has the widest age spread with high daily usage among 18-54. Smartphone users scroll through it 5-6 times daily which make easy for businesses to expand their customer base. Cost of paid ads is the biggest concern for marketers with ads that costs less but reach to more people for which Facebook is the solution. Facebook page is a tool for businesses where they list product offering and services, share link, images and post to give a better sense of personality. Facebook ads with headline, image, and click through link are the most affordable for small businesses and its marketing features extend into Instagram and messenger (owned by Facebook). This is most effective to increase likes, draw website traffic. Using it for “likes” can be very beneficial as once the user likes your page they become follower and every time company’s post will appear on the user’s news feed resulting in more users interacting with brand. Running Facebook contest is another tactic to increase fans and brand awareness through third party app. Facebook promoted posts rise up the chances of being visible on viewer’s news feed. Sponsored stories are a type of Facebook ad that shows a user’s interaction such as likes to the user’s friend. Facebook open graph is a feature which lets businesses label a user’s action with their app. Advertisers can target an audience based on their web history data. All these features make it a best tool for brand awareness.

**Instagram** - It has over 1 billion users as per the report of Forge and Smith. These people spend 28 minutes per day on this platform. Although it is the most popular in the 18-30 age bracket, 71% of B2B companies have an Instagram account according to the 2020 social media marketing report. It is the best place to highlight your company, showcase your values or elevate your brand with striking images and videos. Instagram pictures provide a greater collage and give a better insight of the company to a customer. Here Instagram profile is the best tool which can be used to make story visible to followers using pictures, videos. Recently it has become a popular platform for photo contests where users are asked to post pictures using particular hashtag for the contest so that it is easy to search through pictures and ask other people to vote for their favorite pictures to pick a winner. Sony’s contest is a great example to get more followers and increase your followers’ engagement with brand. Here you can reward your followers with discount coupons, contest or promotional codes. In addition, this is the best platform to feature your customers. Here you can post a picture of happy customer showcasing his/her experience with your brand. Lastly, using this platform you can get more interest in your events. Instagram can help with the goal to give event attendees a visual and location for your event. So it is a great platform to connect with people or other companies. Initially people thought it was ideal for B2C but in recent years it proved to very much beneficial for B2B also.

**Twitter** - It has proved to be a great tool for small businesses to reach to local customers. As per social-pilot team report 31% people are more likely to remember information they saw on Twitter than browsing online. If leveraged strategically, Twitter can help you engage with your customers, increase your reach, grow your brand, and generate qualified leads. No matter whether B2B or B2C it will always help you to find target customers and stay in touch with them. As per Forge and Smith report 70% of users visit Twitter for news. It is a collection of news from world leaders, media, and organizations. People use Twitter for quick customer service. Business messaging platform like SLACK uses it for quick customer response. Hootsuite also has busy customer support account on

Twitter. Apart from this you never know that your Twitter profile is the first impression. So make it impressive as it can also be used to drive traffic to your website or blog. Links to the same can also be included in profile. It can help brand to earn some recognition. Community can also be built up here by following customers, friends, competitors, relevant influencers or people who can be source of information. Then they will start following brands in return. Now to be stay connected is much important by reverting, liking and re-tweeting customer's tweet. One can also use trending hashtag in their tweets to gain popularity. Twitter chat can also be strategy for conversation; it is like meeting your customer face to face.

**YouTube** – It's the world second most popular search engine (after Google which owns YouTube) processing over 3 billion searches per month as per Forge and Smith report. One of every two internet users around the entire world uses YouTube. Users spend an average of almost 12 minutes watching YouTube videos every day. It reaches more people between the age of 18-49. YouTube recently announced that it now has over 325 million 18+ unique viewers month on month in India, citing Comscore data from May 2020. People in India love to watch videos, 62% have even streamed TV content via the internet. They also love to watch them on the go- 91% have watched them on mobile as per Codenex report. It provides the unique opportunity for any company in any industry for business, online video marketing presents a unique opportunity. Used efficiently, video marketing can help to build trust and establish an organization as having authority. Moreover, it makes it easier to connect and engage customers. Not only is your audience on YouTube, but as the internet's second largest search engine, YouTube can help improve your SEO and overall brand presence. It allows to present unique content that is easy for viewers to consume and share. Beyond targeting viewers, YouTube allows you to target ads on specific channels and videos. With some research, you can place your ads on popular videos that will be seen by a relevant audience, extending your brand reach even further. This allows you to target high-intent users at various stages of the buying process. YouTube is free to use. And accounts have unlimited storage capacity, which means you can upload as many hours of footage you want, whenever you want.

**Messenger** - Marketing landscape has been evolving with technological advancement. A new audience introduced to the digital world in the country. So marketers have to be where customers are. Marketing world from one to many is now coming to one to one in which messenger plays a key role. Here you can be in direct contact with them to know their preference, feedback or to solve their problem. Facebook IQ conducted a study on the use of mobile messaging with 12,500 people across the world and found Sixty-three percent said that their messaging with businesses has increased over the past two years 56 percent would rather message than call a business for customer service. 61 percent likes personalized messages from businesses. More than 50 percent are more likely to shop with a business they can message. This is the easiest way to deliver content. Instead of pushing them you can help them to pull themselves to content. Companies have chat-bots where customers can find articles they want to read. Also businesses uses messenger to send reminders about the events they are signed up to. It is also found that here response rate is higher than emails. Here you reach your customer one to one and also can provide speedy customer service.

### **Conclusion**

Business communication is one of the most important factors for the success of any organization irrespective of its size and helps in creating a brand image. Traditional communication channels like

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print, radio, television and out-of-home banners had been a preferred choice for businesses in India that were ready to spend large amount of money on marketing and public relations activities. Small organizations that were not able to afford such costs could not compete with large and established brands even if their products / offers / services were of comparable or better quality and this not only impaired their growth but also kept a good product or service from reaching to the consumer.

Rise of social media with increased internet penetration changed the status quo and has democratized marketing and business communication. Consumers outreach and engagement can be in a more productive two-way communication. For a fraction of the traditional cost, small brands can now market their products on the same platform as the big ones. Along with advertising, businesses are now able to connect on emotional level and have a better interaction with their customers in the form of organizational updates sharing, user feedback, CSR events & activities and market research. This also means that an organization would be exposed to public criticism. Adopting social media into the organizational communication methods should not be done without a thought-out strategy. Identification of appropriate social platforms for maximum impact, posting high quality relevant content, hiring talent with social media management skills, a proper response strategy in case of public criticism and choice of influencers are some of the key components of any social media integration plan. If the company management can ensure these organizational capabilities are in place to make the social media integration process effective then business communication goals like public relations, advertising, customer servicing can be better achieved.

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