



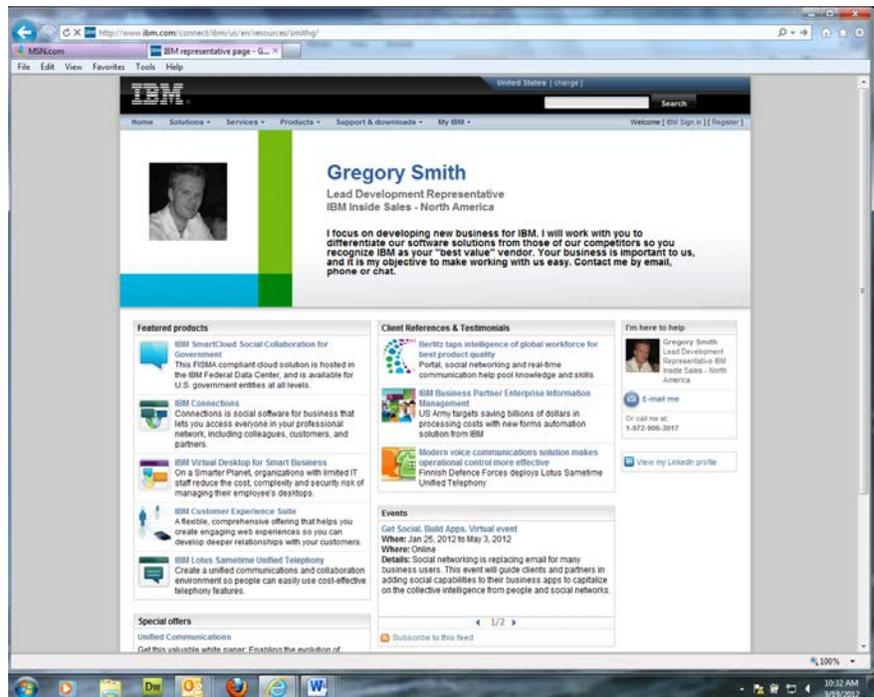
Mastering the Art of Social Selling: IBM Finds Leads in Social Media

By [Nancy Pekala](#)

B2B brands understand the clear benefits of going social but knowing you should be integrating social media with lead generation activities and effectively doing so are two different things. IBM is one B2B organization which understands this well and set about putting into play a strategy that supported and drove lead gen.

The strategy was supported by results of a buyer preference study IBM commissioned that revealed that one-third of its B2B buyers were already using social media of various kinds (Twitter, blogs, and online forums) to engage with vendors and learn about products.

Buyers who were not necessarily the decision-makers but a level or two below that, under 40 and in a position to influence a decision, were even more likely to be using social media to collect product information. And a full 75% of respondents to the survey said they were likely to use social media in the future as part of their purchasing decision.



IBM has taken these insights to heart and developed a robust social selling strategy that it has successfully integrated throughout the B2B organization. Sandy Carter, Vice President, Social Business Evangelism and Sales at IBM, [explained](#) in her *Social Media to Social Business* blog, the technology giant understood that in order to attract a high volume of leads from a new set of customers, it had to go social. As a result, the ibm.com team set out to develop a multi-pronged social strategy that included:

- **Sales Rep pages.** IBM's 1,700 inside sellers drove prospects to personalized ibm.com pages that serve as a "virtual business card." The pages include a wealth of information for clients including the seller's contact information, area of focus, client testimonials and more.
- **Twitter profiles.** The ibm.com provided reps with training on how to nurture and engage potential clients via social channels and built Twitter profiles to facilitate the process.
- **Influencer strategy.** IBM engaged an outside firm to identify the most prominent influencers in the technology space, according to Carter. "Sellers could then follow them and comment on or re-tweet their posts and learn and connect," she explained. "We developed a unique engagement strategy for each influencer, based on their activity and what they were saying."
- **Social message calendar.** Planning and organization are key to the IBM social selling strategy. To this end, IBM provides reps with time-sensitive messages, accessible via a social message calendar located within their Lotus Notes application, which they can tweet.

IBM's social selling strategy netted impressive results. In the first two weeks of the new effort, visits to representative pages increased by 106% and sellers reached 1.9 million contacts. The ibm.com team increased their overall followers by five times during a seven-month period, reported Carter.

However, IBM's success did not come without its challenges. In a recent [interview](#) with [Chief Marketer](#) magazine, [Douglas Hannan](#), the business unit executive for inside sales marketing at IBM North America, acknowledged one challenge of integrating social media with a lead gen process is providing sufficient content and resources for social monitoring.

"We really wanted to make social selling part of the basic way we sell," he explained. "We didn't want our reps spending five minutes a day tweeting and then going back to their 'real' job."

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Working with [Mason Zimbler](#), a social marketing agency owned by Harte-Hanks, IBM targeted its Cloud Computing division as a priority and launched an "intelligent listening" program within social media to learn what conversations were taking place about cloud computing, what trends and issues were being discussed, and what the hot-button topics in the field were for users or considerers.

To address the content issue, IBM and Zimbler identified the collateral assets the company had in-house and supplemented those assets with content offerings from outside IBM such as third-party research studies and white papers. The collective inventory of assets were made available to sales reps via a social marketing calendar that included pre-written copy and bi.ly links where were loaded into RSS feeds. Sales reps, Hannan explained, could simply check the feed, locate content that fit their need and upload them to the social media channel and to their personalized sales rep pages. Inside sellers were encouraged to customize the tweets and updates to make it as relevant to their customer base as possible.

Hannan reported that the results of a six-month Cloud Computing social selling pilot resulted in seven reps growing their aggregate LinkedIn direct followers from 535 to 3,500, and their reach (followers of followers) went from 54,000 to 1.3 million.

"Basically we got lots more pairs of eyes reading our content with a very low-cost investment—just the rep pages and some social messages," says Hannan. "So we said, 'This is definitely working; we're rolling this out everywhere.'"

Hannan added that the value of implementing a social selling strategy is that it allows sales team to engage earlier with clients and prospects, sometimes beating out the competition.

"It isn't social media that creates ROI—it's the sale team," Hannan said. "But social causes engagement and boost the number of engagements, helping reps extend their networks to people they might not know." The viral nature of social media means that it could be responsible for many referrals."

[Nancy Pekala](#) is the AMA's Senior Director of Online Content and Editor of [B2B Marketing](#). Share your insights about social selling for B2B organizations in the [B2B Marketing](#) Group in [AMACConnect](#), the AMA's online community exclusively for marketers. Follow us on Twitter [@marketing_power](#).