

How to Grow Social Media from Nothing (or, basically nothing)

Way back when Facebook dominated social media, I built a page with over 200,000 followers and used it to have my first million-dollar year at age 26.

A few years later, I published a book called [Viralnomics](#) sharing my strategies. It became the #1 marketing book on Amazon. The surprising part? It had little to do with content.

When I rebuilt my Instagram in 2021, I skeptically revisited that little book. "There's no way social media advice from years ago is still relevant," I thought.

I was wrong.

Following those same principles, I built from nothing to 257,346 engaged followers on IG. No ads, no engagement pods, no paid shout-outs—just strategy, despite being terrible at design and video.

Here's the crazy part...

It's 2025. I'm 39. [Viralnomics](#) was published ten years ago. Recently, I read through it again. Aside from cringing at the editing quality, I was stunned.

That little book is *more relevant today* than when I wrote it. A book about ever-changing social media, written before Instagram blew up, before Twitter became X, before TikTok existed.

Algorithms change, Humans Don't.

No matter what happens with tech, our psychology remains remarkably consistent.

The value of focusing on the people who use platforms—rather than chasing temperamental algorithms—only increases in our distraction-filled world.

I know you wanted exact instructions: when to post, what to say.

Don't worry, that's coming. By the end, you'll have frameworks for creating content that spreads purposefully, attracting the right attention from the right people.

First, let's understand what's happening beneath the surface.

The Social Media Advice Paradox

Everyone teaching social media growth is competing for attention . . . on social media.

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They're forced to share what performs best, not what works best. Related, but not the same.

Thumbnail design. Trending music. Quick video cuts. . . All sprinkles on a sundae. They help, sure. But, without the sundae, don't have a place. All simplified tactics that look impressive, but lack context. All stuff that can be taught in a 20s video. The deeper psychological principles that actually drive engagement, the sundae, however, isn't easily taught.



The best educators deliberately choose what to share publicly versus what to teach in their programs. But most casual observers mistake these quick-hit, algorithm-friendly snacks for the full meal.

Ever wondered how some people break through while others don't? Why certain content catches fire when it's not objectively better than yours?

Let's dive below the surface.

Master the Four Stages of Social Media Growth

As I wrote in [The Obvious Choice](#), "There's value in content when you're new and value ongoing. The key is figuring out what value you need based on your situation."

1. **Stage 1: Just publish consistently**, don't check stats
2. **Stage 2: Serve existing customers/audience**, focus inward
3. **Stage 3: Industry celebrity**, begin building a following
4. **Stage 4: Thought leadership**, grow beyond the world you come from

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I suggest most business owners stay at stage 2. Be genuine. Start a newsletter, write a blog, record a podcast. It doesn't matter which you choose, so long as you're serving your existing customers.

You'll get most of the benefits (convert leads, retention, referrals) without the negatives of comparison and potential burnout.

But what if you want to build a bigger audience beyond your existing customers? People who don't yet know you?

That's where the Sea Lion Strategy comes in.

The Sea Lion Strategy: Growth Without Burnout

My family was on a fishing boat in Alaska. Birds suddenly began congregating in one spot.

Our boat's sonar started broadcasting whale calls. Bubbles formed on the water's surface.

Then 15 whales shot up and the once calm setting erupted with activity—whales getting most of the krill fish.



What most people missed was the sea lions. Just like those clever opportunists, they stayed on the perimeter, catching fish the whales flung aside. No work, all reward.

The lesson? Influencers (the whales) have already done the hard work of congregating like-minded people.

When they post, it creates a bubble feed of activity. Instead of trying to get the influencer's attention, follow the sea lions' example: target the people engaging with the influencer.

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Don't Create a Community—Join One Already in Progress

Most view content marketing as "doing something" to get attention. I suggest something different: facilitate a process already underway.

People are already engaging on social media. Most are being ignored. Many are in a position similar to yours—hustling for attention.

Here's the single most important fact you need to understand:

People who comment, comment lots.

People who share, share lots.

People who don't, don't.

The key to building a valuable community isn't attracting thousands of passive followers. It's finding people who already love being active community participants.

If you want engagement, find people who are already engaging elsewhere.

The Sea Lion Method: Step by Step

1. Find large accounts doing similar work to yours (the whales)
2. Check the comments when they post (the bubble feed) and look for thoughtful ones
3. Tap on those commenters' profiles (be the sea lion)
4. If they're creating content in your space, follow them
5. Find their content you genuinely like, share it
6. Message them to say hello

Skip anyone with private accounts or profiles mainly for family photos. Focus on fellow content creators in your niche who are also early in their journey.

The 15-Paperclip System That Built My Community

When building my Instagram in 2021, I started with an abandoned account that had 3,000 followers but zero engagement. I wanted to build a community of personal trainers.

I set aside two 30-minute blocks daily:

- First block: Find thoughtful commenters on influencer pages, follow them, share their content, message them
- Second block: Reply to responses and have conversations

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Each day, I placed 15 paperclips on my desk. Every time I completed this process with someone, I moved a paperclip to a cup. Once all paperclips moved, I was done for the day.

15 people × 180 days = 2,700 potential community members

Of those, 500-700 formed my initial engaged community. By pre-selecting people who already engaged with similar content, I made my small account disproportionately active.

Think about it like this:

Humans follow consistent patterns. Someone who comments on one page actively comments on many pages.

And people who don't comment, which are most, don't comment anywhere (regardless of whether they like the content or not.)

In the early stages of growing an account, you want a disproportionate percentage of people who comment thoughtfully. So, go out and find people already doing that in other places and bring them back to your space.

What's Working Right Now: Real Success Stories

Jack Wagoner hosts The Grateful Podcast. At 18, he's figured this out better than most.

Like many podcasters, Jack shares clips on social media. One of his Instagram reels hit 12,000 views. He expected it to drive podcast listeners. It didn't.

Here's what Jack [told me that he did next](#): He messaged every single person who shared his reel, thanking them and asking how they found it.

This hidden work forms the massive iceberg beneath the surface.

My Current Approach: The Hidden Work

My posts get shared frequently. You can see that. It's above the surface.

Here's what you don't see:

I view story reshares daily and message 15-20 people who aren't following me yet:

{first name}! Thanks for sharing. I'm curious, it looks like you aren't yet following me. How did you find my post?

Many respond they're following now. Some conversations develop further.

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Think about this: These people already shared my content. Someone who shares one piece will share more. These people are the type who value and share my work. I want them in my ecosystem.

Become the Ring Leader: Connect More, Create Less

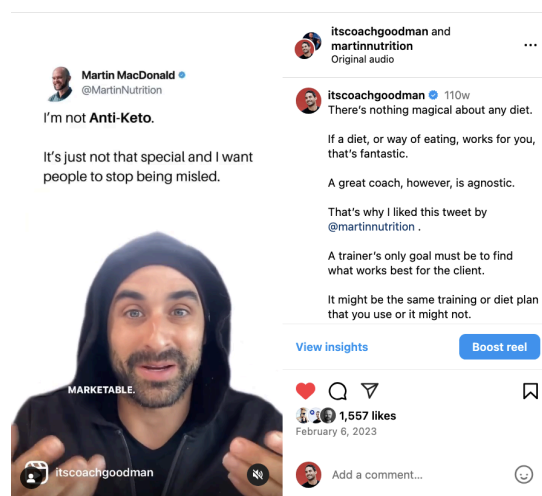
The paradox of social media growth: people who create less and connect more often have the most success.

But with pressure to create, there's no time left to connect. The advantage, therefore, is in connecting, not creating.

Five Connection Strategies That Outperform Content

1. Curate and Add Value to Others' Work

Find a post somebody else did that performed well, talk about how good it is, and add your take. Send it to them. Thank them. Ask if they want to publish it as a collab.

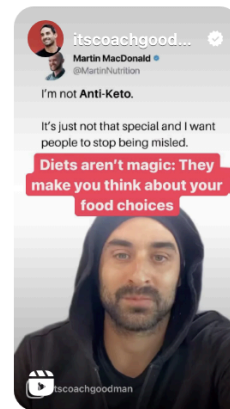


IG Post

Here's the message I sent him. Notice that I did the work first. All he had to do was tap accept. The easier you make it for the other person, the better the likelihood they'll accept.

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Reposted this and set it as a collab. Totally up to you whether you want to accept. Figured I'd give you the option if you wanted some easy content today. Hope you're awesome man!

2. Arrange Strategic Collaborations

Take the lead and do all the work. The reason so few collaborate isn't because they don't want to—it's because everybody's too busy in their own world.



IG Post

In this case, Carin and I planned the concept and then I wrote the script. We both recorded our parts and she edited them together.

While the reel itself didn't perform great in terms of engagements, it exposed me to a new community. Way more important is that it brought Carin and I closer together. About a year later she joined us on our team as a mentor in the [Online Trainer Mentorship](#).

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3. Introduce People to One Another

When Lisa Simone Richards wanted to build her PR company, she began hosting "Lisa's Podcast Party" on Zoom, inviting 8-10 podcast hosts she'd appeared on to talk about their shows.

[She told me about it on my pod](#), and then I copied her strategy with "Jon's Author Party." Out of 15 invites, 8 attended.

Most of my marketing strategy now hinges on connecting people. When you dig deep into any network, you'll find a few core connectors with outsized influence.

4. Send Birthday Cards

Gather addresses from people you meet professionally. Find their birthdays. Load all addresses and birthdays into Postable, an online address book.

Once a year, take a goofy photo, write a note, and buy birthday cards for everybody. When was the last time you got a birthday card in the mail? From anybody?



[IG Post](#)

5. Include People in Something Bigger

When I updated *Ignite the Fire* in 2016, I included 90+ other people in the book. Each person got a physical copy with a post-it note to their page. [On a recent interview](#), I told Jack that this single action was the biggest catalyst that helped me break through in my crowded industry.

Unrelated, but a fun memory: I was living in Uruguay when all this went down. It's a crazy story. [The entire thing and all costs involved are here](#). Here's the video I sent to my assistant who compiled the packages for me:

<https://vimeo.com/135462097>

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You don't need a big project like a book. When I was a personal trainer wanting to make a name for myself online, I messaged about 50 trainers asking for 3-5 biggest mistakes they made early in their careers.

Around 30 responded. I compiled their responses into a PDF, put their names on the cover as authors, and invited all contributors to share it. That PDF generated 300 email opt-ins on its first day and launched thePTDC.com into the largest blog for personal trainers.

Cost: \$5 and a little elbow grease.

With your connection strategy in place, let's explore why people share content so that you can create posts your new connections will want to amplify.

Unlock The Psychology of Sharing

People don't share because they like your content...

They share because they like how sharing your content makes them appear.

Sharing on social is an act of selective self-representation. We do it because we feel it makes us look important and improves our perceived self-worth.

In [Viralnomics](#), I called it the "newest, oldest drug on the market"—III AF. People will share your content if they feel it makes them look:

- Intelligent
- Interesting
- Intellectual
- Attractive
- Funny

Whether we actually are these things is irrelevant. You get your fix if you believe others perceive you as III AF.

The Surprising Truth About Who (actually) Shares Your Content

The biggest mistake people make is creating for their ideal customer, not for colleagues or fellow enthusiasts.

Your customer isn't listening yet. And even if they were, they don't engage or share.

If your goal is growth on social media, the fastest way is to create for your colleagues:

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- Say what they're already thinking
- Share and comment on work from others that already has resonance

The people who will share, follow, and help you grow aren't your customers—they're your colleagues or other enthusiasts. People like you who like the same things as you.

The Three Types of Content That Drive Growth

1. **Viral**—attracts followers
2. **Value**—solves problems
3. **Depth**—creates connection

Purely viral accounts attract the most followers but lack meaningful ability to sell.

Accounts that only include problem-solving content often lack the size to make an impact.

And if you're only posting personal information, you're not creating content—you're sharing stuff about your life with a few friends.

If you're looking to grow from nothing, your ratio should be heavily skewed toward viral, around 80:10:10. Once you gain an audience, you'll have earned the right to begin adding more of the other types.

Storytelling 101: The Formula That Works

For every point, find a story. For every story, find a villain.

A villain isn't a single person. They're an institution, a bad habit, or a dumb social norm.

The easiest format for writing social media posts (or scripting videos) is hook → story → punch.

- First line needs to grab them
- Then tell a quick story
- End with emotion, intrigue, or a call to action



[IG Post](#)

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This five-step formula has generated millions of impressions for me:

1. Tell a story
2. Call out the problem from the story
3. Restate the problem generally
4. Steps to solving
5. Conclude



[IG Post](#)

[Click here](#) for a short list of proven hooks to get you started.

Final Practical Tips for Sustained Growth

Recycle Winning Content

If a piece of content works, repeat it every 2-3 months. Then create more like it. There are probably only 5-7 things that matter in your field that will resonate on social media. The game becomes how many different ways you can say the same thing.

Ask "Doorknob Questions"

Most questions are like stop signs: they invite an answer that naturally ends the conversation. "Doorknobs" invite the other person to tell a story.

Example:

- Stop-sign: "Where are you from?"
- Doorknob: "What's your favorite thing to do in your home town?"

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Choose Your Path: Engagement or Sales

Do you want engagement, or do you want sales? Either is fine. They're simply different.

Think of your social media platform as a savings account. Make deposits when there's excess time and money. Think of it as an investment in the future, not a way to benefit short-term.

When you ask for sales, you will see a decrease in engagement and probably will lose followers. Which is fine.

Work backward from what you want and measure the right metrics. For my main channel, a major metric we measure is the number of qualified DM inquiries for OTM that we receive.

Interestingly, Our data clearly shows an inverse relationship between engagement and tangible business outcomes.

Here's what this looks like in practice: When I share personal stories or viral-style content, engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) soar.

But when I share content directly related to our services—either [direct calls to action](#) or [educational frameworks](#), engagement drops while qualified inquiries and sales increase.

The content that generates the most business rarely gets the most engagement.

This is critical to understand. Both have a time and place but you can't get upset when your material that generates business doesn't get as much engagement.

The Timeless Social Media Strategy

Platforms will continue changing. New features will launch. Algorithms will shift. But the fundamental truth remains:

Social media is about people, not platforms.

The most successful creators understand human psychology. They build genuine connections and facilitate community rather than force it.

Start with the sea lion strategy. Find your 15 people a day. Connect more than you create. Include others in something bigger than themselves.

Stop obsessing over what to post and when. Instead, focus on who you're connecting with and why they would care.

The principles that worked a decade ago still work today. The principles working today will still work a decade from now.

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Because while platforms evolve, humans don't.

Your Social Media Growth Action Plan

Use this checklist to implement the strategies from this article immediately:

[Click here to download this checklist as a worksheet](#)

Step 1: Research & Foundation

- Identify 5-10 "whale" accounts in your niche (larger accounts whose audience overlaps with yours)
- Set up 2 daily 30-minute blocks in your calendar for community building
- Gather 15 paperclips (or use a digital counter) for your daily outreach tracking

Step 2: Sea Lion Strategy Implementation

- Daily: Find 15 people who actively engage with content in your space
- Follow them if they're content creators in your niche
- Like and thoughtfully comment on 1-2 of their recent posts
- Share something valuable they've created to your stories
- Send a personalized message introducing yourself (not pitching anything)

Step 3: Content Foundation

- Create your first piece of "colleague-focused" content using the hook→story→punch formula
- Draft 3 ideas for curating and adding value to others' work
- Identify 5-10 people to include in a collaborative project (even something simple)

Step 4: Connection Amplification

- Organize one small virtual meetup with 5-8 people you've connected with
- Start collecting physical addresses for future birthday cards or surprises
- Create a simple group project that includes others (shared PDF guide, carousel post with multiple contributors, etc.)
- Begin testing "doorknob questions" in your comment replies to extend conversations

Want to dive deeper into these strategies? Check out my book [Viralnomics](#), where I dive deep into social media specifically and/or my latest book, [The Obvious Choice](#), where I explore how to build a sustainable (and human) business in an online world gone mad. Together, they make a great pair.

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