

Outsourcing Social Media – Can it Be Inexpensive



If you ask John Holling, he'd say the answer is a resounding yes.

Since 2012 he's been building a business that offers outsourced social media services — packaged up neat and simple — for the attractive price of \$99 per month.

It's aptly called “\$99 Social.”

[\\$99 Social](#) (pronounced “ninety-nine dollar social”) aims to help small business owners remove social media updating from their to-do lists.

According to Holling (pictured above), “Our mission in life is to help small business owners take something off their plate that most of them don't have the time for or don't know how to do — and that's social media posting.”

For that flat monthly fee, the company will post everyday, seven days a week, on the client's behalf.

And what exactly do clients get for that \$99 every month?

Postings are made daily to three social accounts belonging to the client: Twitter, Google+, and Facebook.

The company's service is centered around updating social channels with relevant content.

“We find content that's related to the client's specific industry or local community. Our staff are going out on the Web and finding relevant posts, articles and news stories, and composing messages to share

along with the content. Our goal is for each update to have the voice of the client,” says Holling.

Holling says they pay attention to time zones and localization issues, too. “We need to make sure updates don’t show up in the middle of the night for the client, and that sort of thing. We have clients all over the world — in Australia, the U.K., Canada, South Africa — in addition to the United States.”

The Challenge: Adding Enough Value at an Affordable Price

\$99 Social wasn’t the business that Holling and his business partner Tara Holling (also his ex-wife) set out to create. Holling is a veteran business owner who has started and sold other businesses including one that had become a household name in Billings, Montana.

“That’s not saying much,” jokes Holling with a self-deprecating smile.

The Hollings originally started a traditional marketing service called Social Mojo. It’s a white label service catering to marketing agencies. It provides social media consulting and services, charging significantly more than \$100 per month.

\$99 Social was an offshoot of that business.

“We got a lot of requests for a lower price plan than what we offered at Social Mojo. We resisted it for a long time because we didn’t want to do something that didn’t have any value to it. Even if you’re paying a very little bit, if there’s no value, you’re still wasting money. So it took us a while to come up with something that had substantial value and yet was affordable for small business people,” says Holling.

They haven’t had much pushback on the \$99 price.

In fact, Holling says price is one of their competitive advantages. “We charge less than a lot of providers charge for the same service. You can find the exact same thing online for a lot more — \$300, even \$500 a month.”

When they do get pushback, it’s not really a price objection, insists Holling. “In most cases, I don’t think it’s a matter of affording it. I think it’s more a matter of realizing the value of it.”



Automating Systems and Honing Processes, in Order to Scale

And has \$99 Social been the proverbial overnight success?

Not exactly. Up until the second half of 2014, it grew “very slowly” according to Holling, and he’s happy with that.

In fact, if Holling had to do it all over, he says he wouldn’t have it any other way. “Slow growth was absolutely necessary” for building the foundation of a business that could scale, he says.

According to Holling, they needed the early time to perfect their offering, train staff, and get their back-end systems and automation in place. “We launched \$99 Social in 2012. We spent all the time up through the first half of 2014 building processes. When you’re selling at \$99, it’s about volume. In order to handle volume, you have to have a rock-solid process in place.”

The service is as personalized as it can be, and still be done at scale, asserts Holling.

“There’s not much margin in \$99 per month,” but you can’t compromise service to drive profits, he

contends. “Eventually your clients just leave if they get poor service.”

Automation and streamlined processes are the key to a business model that works.

The \$99 Social team, for instance, will take specific requests and instructions from clients. But the process for handling personal requests has to be automated, he points out.

“Right now, the way it works is that the client says, ‘Hey, we’re running a special next week that I want you to talk about on social.’ So they would email our support team, and our support team would email the content specialist,” according to Holling.

Automating the communications process is something they are working on currently. It’s not about sending automated responses to the client, but rather automating the processes around taking in requests and getting them to the right person.

“We’re working on a dashboard on the site where clients can say, ‘Hey, I don’t want you to post any more about this,’ or ‘I want you to post more often about this,’ or similar instructions. Then the instructions will automatically go to the correct content specialist,” says Holling.

Removing labor without losing the personal touch and quality, is crucial to an efficient and profitable business, he adds.

In fact, I interviewed Holling for this story at [ICON15](#), the user conference for Infusionsoft marketing automation software. I had met him the year prior at the same conference. During the intervening year, \$99 Social had implemented Infusionsoft. Holling was there once again to learn more about automating back-end systems.

Automation is crucial when margins are thin, he emphasizes. The trick is to eliminate low-value-add manual labor such as forwarding emails, but not drive out the human element clients want.

It Still Comes Down to People: Quality and Service as a Competitive Advantage

Holling says his company’s service is all human curated, and stresses the importance of the human element.

What goes into it is more complex than it seems.

The company has 24 content specialists.

If you’re thinking they are offshore talent hired on the cheap, you’d be wrong. Most are part-timers located in the Phoenix area. The company also has three full-time and one part-time support person in the office in Anthem, Arizona.

“Our people are going out and finding those articles, news stories, videos and images. They also are writing a brief message to go along with it.”

“We’re representing that client, so if we spell something wrong, it’s they who spelled something wrong in the eyes of their community, and that’s not good. So we’re very, very picky about our content specialists,” adds Holling.

For that reason, a new content specialist goes through a rigorous recruitment and training process. And it’s something for which Holling expresses a lot of pride.

“There’s a 3-step interview process. The first thing that they do is go to the site and apply. Part of the application process is we give them three scenarios with three different sample businesses and they

create a post for each one of those. We don't expect it to be perfect, but it gives us an idea of their thought process. Also, we look for spelling, grammar, voice."

After that is a phone interview. Then comes an in-person interview for those who make the cut.

The company offers two full-days of training, then assigns the new person to one account. For the first two weeks the home office staff oversees every bit of content curation that the new content specialist does. Assuming that works out, the company then assigns additional accounts and reverts to regular spot checking.

Content specialists also get ongoing training, either in-office or through webinars and video training.

"A lot of it's refresher. But some of it is because the industry changes. For example, finding images is a bigger part of what we do these days. We have to find the right image, and so there's some training around that. Image sizes have changed, so we don't post anything less than 550 pixels wide, because that's a good size for all the networks."

Holling credits the company's thorough training as one of \$99 Social's competitive advantages. Training ensures quality, and quality is just as important as price.

"We train our content specialists that before you post anything, ask yourself two questions," he says. "First, is this relevant to the target audience? Second, is this interesting enough that readers are going to want to interact with this piece of information somehow — want to share it, like it, comment on it? So, we dig to find that."

Being Clear on What You Offer, Don't Offer

The key to a service business model that works at a \$99 price point is having a specific repeatable offering and setting expectations to prevent misunderstandings or scope creep, says Holling. Startup entrepreneurs, he contends, have to decide one thing up front: exactly what you're going to provide to customers and what you will not.

And, he says, you have to be crystal clear with clients and set expectations.

\$99 Social doesn't portray its service as a total marketing solution, or even a complete outsourced social media campaign.

"We try to make it very clear to clients that what we provide is a piece of your overall marketing, and it's a piece of your social media — not the whole thing," says Holling.

Service providers for low-margin packaged services need to get good at conveying their value proposition, he advises.

Holling says that if clients only made one content update per day on three social media accounts, they'd get consistency. They'd build credibility. And they would realize some SEO benefits.

"But if that's all you do, you won't build your social network as much. For that, you need engagement, to interact with people."

He adds that some clients interact with followers in their social networks, and some don't. But Holling argues that even the ones who don't do anything over and above what \$99 Social provides, are still better off than those doing less or nothing at all.

"How many times do you go to a Web page and click on their Facebook icon, and they haven't posted in a year, or the button's not working? With our service, at least the lights are on. And it's not just that the lights are on, but the content that is posted is quality, and has a personal touch. It shows that they know their industry, that they care about their community. It leaves the right impression," says Holling.

Therein lies the value of having someone do that posting for your business consistently, he adds.

And what happens when inflation kicks in? Will the \$99 price point become outdated and force the company to change the [\\$99 Social](#) brand name?

Holling doesn't foresee that happening anytime soon. He says, "Our focus is on automating to drive efficiencies, so we can stay at that price point."

"Besides, we already offer personalized add-on services above and beyond the \$99 plan. We will offer more of those to serve clients who see the value in what we do and want more help from outsourcing social media."