Almost three-quarters of small-business owners are confident in their social media strategies. Still need help with yours? Try following these tips.

It seems strange to think there was ever a time when social media wasn’t an integral part of growing a small business. While many entrepreneurs still struggle with how to best use social media to engage their audiences and promote their businesses, there are signs that they’re gaining confidence in their social media skills. In 2012, 54 percent of small-business owners, who participated in a survey administered by Constant Contact, reported they needed help with social media. This year, that number dropped to 45 percent. This confidence seems to be translating into success, with 72 percent saying that their marketing efforts across the channels that matter, including social, email, mobile and Web, are working.

Socially savvy entrepreneurs know that it’s all about engaging the right audiences with valuable content. The online community has little tolerance for self-promoters who view social media as a means to free advertising. Given this, small-business owners face a challenge when it comes to striking a balance in using social media to engage and promote.

Promotion and engagement are really two sides of the same coin. Engagement is rooted in consistently sharing insight and providing value every time you connect with a customer. This establishes credibility while building trust and inspiring customers to tell their friends about you. Promotion extends your engagement efforts by presenting a valuable offer that’s based on your customers’ interests and needs. Social media amplifies your efforts so you can be found and engage a wider audience to grow your business.

To put it all together, here are several best practices for successfully engaging customers and promoting your small business through social media.

1. Follow the one-in-seven rule. This rule is where only one of every seven posts overtly promotes your business. The remaining six should be focused on sharing valuable content, including posts from the community. This doesn’t mean you can’t promote your business in those other posts; just be sure you pair it with great content.

2. Ask conversation-starter questions. Most people enjoy sharing their opinions, so ask Facebook fans to weigh in on topics that are relevant to your business and interesting to them. For example, a fitness center may ask fans to vote on their favorite summer sports in order to be entered into a drawing to win private lessons for them and a friend who joins the club. The questions should engage fans and inspire them to refer business while giving the business owner great insight.

3. Share your expertise. Post little-known, fun facts in the form of questions with a special offer presented to the first person to answer correctly.

4. Provide value. While including fun posts that reflect your personality is a must, it’s important to create content that benefits your followers. That can mean posting tips on best practices, providing access to white papers, or offering special deals on products or services.
5. Enhance the rewards for virtual check-ins. For a specific period of time, double the points each time a customer checks in on Foursquare and triple the points each time he or she brings a friend. Their friends on social networks will see when they've checked in while you expand your reach exponentially.

6. Create a Pinterest board. Make sure the board has eye-catching visuals and run a contest through it that will inspire and reward customers for their participation. Be sure to encourage them to re-pin and create their own boards that reflect the initial contest for additional social amplification of your campaign.

7. Avoid syndicated messages. While you can use tools that allow you to write one message and have it appear on a variety of social media outlets, you risk losing the sincerity behind the message. You can use similar language as you promote your offer on different sites; just be sure to change up the words while reflecting the tone of each network. If you find that your customers are scattered across a variety of networks, focus your efforts where they’re most active. Not sure? Ask. Otherwise, you may waste a lot of time skimming the surface of multiple networks with little results.

When small-business owners apply these best practices to social media engagement and promotion, we’ll likely see that already impressive 72 percent success statistic continue to rise.