It's amazing to me, being a public relations practitioner for nearly 20 years now, having seen the incredible changes that have taken place in the world of business communication.

When it comes to communicating with customers (and potential customers), companies used to only have one way "push" methods of messaging — pay big bucks to attach your message to a billboard, work a positive newspaper story or get some hard-earned broadcast exposure, for example.

With the advent of the web and social media, we as practitioners now have unlimited access to a world of stakeholders that were nearly impossible to find previously. And it's two-way communication … you can't beat that.

Until now, social media — at least the "big boys" of business-centric social media world (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) — have been essentially free to those businesses that proactively worked these platforms for messaging to their businesses target audiences. Advertising opportunities were always available, but it wasn't necessary to spend ad dollars to reach customers.
Things are changing now and in 2015 we should all be prepared to spend some money on our business-related social media efforts. With Facebook for example, the algorithm has changed yet again and you may notice that far fewer connections view and comment on your posts.

That's because — according to Facebook — only about 16 percent of your "friend" or "like" base is actually seeing your post (I personally believe it to be far less than that!)

Even with these changes, there are still organic methods to increase your views on Facebook. For example, if you engage regularly with a particular member of your audience, they are more likely to see your posts. High-quality content is also still critical — so plan for unique, strategic content creation across all relevant channels for a marketing communications mix that hits your target audience from multiple touch points.

Interact. Post quality content. And then spend a little money to promote the most important posts.

Facebook added more than 100 million monthly active users last year. That means 757 million people now visit Facebook daily (1.3 billion monthly!)

LinkedIn boasts an impressive 332 million users and Twitter 284 million.

So for any business owner that still doesn't believe social media is worth their time and marketing budget, hopefully those numbers will cure you! I can't name a single, traditional media platform (print, broadcast) that can deliver those kinds of numbers.

In addition to funded posts and quality content — according to socialmediaexaminer.com — these three top platforms will also start showing preferential treatment to content that contains visuals. Further, videos that are hosted on the social media site you're using on will now be seen by more eyeballs than those hosted on YouTube.

Speaking of visuals — there are also some great new(ish) tools that those of you without a graphic design background can use to create some pretty good images. We're liking the WordSwag app for creating professional looking social media banners and graphics with your company messaging. Canva (canva.com) is also a great, intuitive image creation tool. And there are many others. The bottom line is think about ways to creatively embed images and video into your social media posts to make them more effective this year.

Regarding some of the other top social media platforms out there (Instagram, Pinterest, and Vine being some of the biggies) their utilization in your business marketing mix is strictly dependent on your target customer/client.

If you are targeting 30-55 year old females and you have a product/service that lends itself well to communicating through imagery, Pinterest makes sense. Instagram (owned by Facebook)
currently boasts 200 million users, but those users are predominately in their teens and twenties, which may not make sense as a target for your particular brand.

And don't forget about Google+ - having an active business presence there greatly enhances your overall search engine optimization (SEO) efforts — so it's worth the time investment for your business to get active in that space.

Oh, and a final comment about content. An ongoing dialogue we have with our clients is tied to "robo-messaging," which some companies do out of what they believe to be necessity (lack of staff/hours to support strategic social media programs). This means doing things like tying Facebook posts to your Twitter account so they automatically populate the Twitter feed (just one of many examples.)

The problem is, different platforms speak to different audiences (and often in different "languages"). It's important to remember that SOCIAL media is about PEOPLE. Your customers and stakeholders want to believe they are interacting with a real person from your company that cares about them!

Social media can be an overwhelming world for business owners and executives and it's no wonder – the space is changing daily! Keep your head above water — select the top three platforms that make sense for your business model and commit to working them daily (or hire a seasoned communications agency to do it on your behalf!). The reward to your bottom line at the end of the year will be compelling.

Tina Lange is the owner of TNT Communications Group, a public relations and social media agency located in Melbourne, serving clients such as Space Florida, Brevard Cultural Alliance, Florida Health Care Coalition and Hart Clinical Consultants. Tina is also a graduate and mentor for the Women's Business Center IGNITE 360 business mentoring program.