

Half Price Books: An Analysis

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Social media has become an increasingly popular tool for businesses to advertise and engage with consumers, but not everyone is quick on the draw. For some types of companies, using social media is not an essential part of their toolbelt, but it is absolutely necessary for retail stores, restaurants and nonprofits to maintain an active social media presence in today's social climate. Though Half Price Books is a successful company, it is not fully utilizing the power of social media channels. Half Price Books' lack of online presence can be seen in all its social media channels, though specifically in the Big Three: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Half Price Books, or HPB, was founded in 1972 by Pat Anderson and Ken Gjemre. They built the first store in an old laundromat in Dallas, Texas. When the company became successful, the founders franchised and grew their small business rapidly. After forty-five years of business, there are now 122 locations in 17 states nationwide and new stores sprouting up every month. Ownership has remained in the family, with Pat's daughter Sharon Anderson Wright as the current CEO. The bookstore, which advertises itself as "Your favorite local bookstore," buys secondhand books, magazines, records and anything of the sort and sells them at a greatly reduced price. HPB is comparable to other resale stores and other bookstores, such as Barnes & Noble.

Half Price Books maintains all of the usual social media accounts used by businesses to reach the consumer populace: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube and a company blog. The company does not have LinkedIn, Tumblr, Snapchat, or a Google+ account. While these accounts aren't necessary, it is wise for companies to advertise in every way possible to stay relevant and continue to grow. Social media platforms provide a way of advertising subtly to consumers with no cost.

Of these accounts, Half Price Books is most active on Facebook. The company has around 650 thousand followers and 670 thousand likes on its page. Comparable to its competitor Barnes & Noble – clocking in at 1.8 million likes – this is relatively low for a company of HPB's size. Additional content is posted about every two to three days, with the exception of special events (i.e. celebrating an anniversary, Booklover's Day), where the company posts multiple times a day. Content on the Facebook page varies from announcing new store openings, events at stores around the country, and links to the company blog. HPB does an excellent job of replying to user comments, with a laugh or an answer on every single one. HPB's Facebook page also contains a regularly updated calendar of all goings-on for the company – which is more than can be said for the website calendar. Even though the company has its own website, Facebook seems to be its online headquarters.

An idea to boost Facebook likes and followers would be to add posts with contests that involve engaging with the company or adding little polls on their page. I would not suggest posting every single day as content would soon become repetitive and annoying to consumers.

There is not much need for improvement for HPB on Facebook, as it is their strongest online presence.

Instagram however, seems to be a weakness for Half Price Books. The platform tends to be more difficult for businesses to get the hang of, as posts must contain a picture or video. Not every post must contain a caption, but as every social media guru knows, the captions are the most important part of every post. The company has 33.1 thousand followers, but only 698 posts spanning over five years. Barnes & Noble once again beats out HPB, with 253 thousand followers and a whopping 1,655 posts over the same amount of time. The bookstore seems to have trouble coming up with photographic content for its feed, posting every three to four days, on average. Content, as one might expect, is mostly photos of books, books on shelves, books in carts, books being read, books sorted by color etc. This format can get old pretty quickly when you look at all the posts side by side. Captions accompanying the photos range from announcements of sales, anecdotes, or suggestions to donate/buy at HPB. A quick scroll down the feed shows that this is an improvement from past years, when the company would simply post photos of coupon codes. There is little engagement from followers, each post only garnering about 400 to 800 likes and three to four comments.

Half Price Books is definitely not fully utilizing its Instagram account. The company could easily augment its feed by encouraging followers to post pictures of their #bookhauls and reposting them or learning how to make their posts aesthetically pleasing and varied. HPB is not even using the IG Stories feature, which could be quite helpful – especially if the company doesn't want to have a full post every single day. There is so much potential on this platform, and Half Price Books is missing the mark.

The company redeems itself on Twitter however, sufficiently using the platform to share content and interact with its audience. Though HPB has more Twitter activity than Instagram, with 13.4 thousand tweets and retweets, it has less followers – only 21.8 thousand. Compared again to Barnes & Noble (215.7 thousand followers and 29.4 thousand tweets), the resale bookstore comes in second once again. HPB tweets almost every single day, usually two or three times per day. Content includes new store openings, sale announcements and cute literature anecdotes not related specifically to HPB. Other than the frequency of literature-related jokes, the company's Twitter feed does not differ drastically from the combination of its Facebook and Instagram accounts. A notable difference, however, is the high amount of audience engagement on Twitter. Half Price Books retweets any positive tweet or photo about their company, replying with a simple "Thank You!" or agreement of the company's general awesome-ness. The bookstore also replies quickly to complaints, letting customers know that the company is sorry and doing its best to constantly improve.

The only suggestion I have for Twitter use is to add polls every once in a while, and hold more contests (i.e. retweet for a chance to win a \$5 gift certificate). Consumers love to enter in contests and they boost the reach of the company's tweets. Every social media outlet should be a cocktail of info, sales, and fun spirited posts that aren't specific to the company.

Other than the Big Three, Half Price Books' posts to social media platforms are few and far between. Though the company does have a YouTube account, posts are rare. The most recent activity was four months ago and the account only has 1,012 subscribers. Initially, the account was used to showcase the uniqueness of Half Price Books and the interesting collections that come through the bookstores, but it seems that the bookstore gave up on YouTube. The company's Pinterest account contains only 8,118 followers and 477 pins, with most boards only having four to seven pins. Though neither of these accounts are essential the success of a business on social media, if a company *is* going to keep these accounts, they need to be updated regularly. I would suggest more attention to these accounts and the creating of a LinkedIn account, as it's an up-and-coming form of social networking for businesses. HPB could also do with a Snapchat account, though I hesitate to suggest this as the popularity of Snapchat is quickly falling. Regardless, the company should maximize its efforts across all of these channels.

When I chose to analyze Half Price Books for this project, I had no idea what their social media presence looked like. I picked the company because, as a booklover, it holds a special place in my heart. I fully expected the bookstore to have a strong online persona because the stores are so quirky and unique. I was surprised at the lack of followers and content the company had online, especially on Facebook. But every business is different and the system Half Price Books has seems to be working for them, despite minor kinks here and there. Due to the nature of the business, it makes sense that it would not need to advertise as heavily as companies like Barnes & Noble. Like the website says, "the prices speak for themselves." People are going to shop at HPB regardless of ads online, simply because it's the cheapest choice. And the company routinely posts quality content. Overall the posts are varied, though a little stunted on Instagram. And day-by-day content is varied across accounts, which is pleasing to consumers who follow the bookstore on every social media platform.

In sum, Half Price Books' online numbers are a little below average, but not a testament to the company's in-store success. The company adequately uses the most important social channels: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. HPB could do a little more to buff up its social media success, but the current state is acceptable. As for the future of HPB, I think the company should become further educated on using social networking platforms to maximize profits and remain relevant.