IDSN 599: Social Media Incubator: Data-Driven Growth for Founders

Units: 2

Fall 2025 – TBA

Location: TBA

Instructor: Prof Thomas Dadourian
Office: Remote
Office Hours: By Appointment
Contact Info:

- Thomas Dadourian – tjdadour@usc.edu
- Instructor will reply to emails within 48 hours.

IT Help:
https://uscedu.sharepoint.com/sites/IYAStudent/SitePages/IT-Resources.aspx Hours of
Service: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Contact Info: iyahelp@usc.edu

USC Technology Support Links
Zoom information for students
Software available to USC Campus

Course Description

Every startup founder must validate ideas, acquire customers, and drive revenue—and one of the most cost-effective ways to do that is through social media marketing. In 2025, social media is not optional; it is a strategic business asset that founders can leverage to build a brand, generate traffic, and drive measurable business performance.

This incubator is a hands-on, challenge-based, results-driven program where founders will post weekly, analyze real data, and refine their strategies in real time. The course places a strong emphasis on marketing analytics, content performance metrics, social media funnels, and both organic and paid strategies to maximize reach, engagement, and conversion. Founders will also explore how social media can inform

product development, refine ideal customer profiles (ICP), and sharpen messaging, ensuring their marketing efforts are deeply integrated with their overall business strategy.

Beyond brand awareness and customer acquisition, a well-executed social media strategy can also serve as a precursor to crowdfunding, fundraising, and investor outreach, helping founders build traction, demonstrate demand, and potentially improve their valuation.

By the end of this incubator, founders will have a fully developed, data-backed social media system that serves as a customer acquisition engine, a research tool, and a valuable business asset—one that can support their startup's growth, whether through direct sales, fundraising, or long-term brand positioning.

Learning Objectives and Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will:

- Leverage data analytics to drive decision-making, using real-time insights to optimize content, engagement, and conversion strategies.
- Use social media as a low-cost or no-cost tool to generate traffic, validate business ideas, and refine product-market fit.
- Conduct audience research and define an Ideal Customer Profile (ICP) to shape messaging, product positioning, and sales strategies.
- Develop a social media funnel that strategically moves audiences from awareness to engagement and conversion.
- Master research-driven storytelling to craft compelling narratives that resonate with target audiences.
- Build a scalable social media asset that supports a personal brand, business, or community for long-term growth.
- Understand the business of the creator economy and how to navigate brand partnerships, monetization, and audience-building strategies.
- Apply content marketing strategies across multiple disciplines, including product messaging, positioning, and customer acquisition.
- Conclude the class with a presentation for their portfolio.

This incubator ensures founders learn to execute social media strategies with a data-driven approach, transforming social media into a key business asset for audience growth, product validation, and sales.

Note: This is a hands-on, intensive course that requires participation during class and teamwork outside of class. Active participation in Slack channels, in-class discussions, and teamwork is required.

Course Notes
Grading type: Letter. Software used in the class will be browser based.

Students use personal laptops or computers and connect to course sessions via Zoom.

Lecture slides and any supplemental course content will be posted to Brightspace for use by all students. Any and all announcements for the course will be posted to Brightspace.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

Students must provide their own laptop. The laptop specifications take into consideration that students will be creating, streaming, and downloading audio and video; communicating using video conferencing applications; and creating and storing large multimedia files.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

There are two required textbooks for this class as follows.

- Block, Bruce (2008) The Visual Story: Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV, and Digital Media ASIN B01K0NHFKW
- Fitzpatrick, Rob (2013) The Mom Test: How to Talk to Customers & Learn If Your Business is a Good Idea When Everyone is Lying to You ASIN B00E7N2D76
- Godin, Seth (2003) Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable ASIN B0000C9ZNV

The following books provide important background but are not required reading. They will be used as reference material:

- Godin, Seth (2018) This is Marketing: You Can't Be Seen Until You Learn to See ASIN B07DKHFTLS
- Snyder, Blake (2005) Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need ASIN B00340ESIS
- Cialdini, Robert (2006) Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion ASIN B002BD2UUC
- Miller, Donald (2017) Building a StoryBrand: Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen ASIN B06XFJ2JGR
- Doerr, John (2018) Measure What Matters: How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs ASIN B078FZ9SYB

Additional reference material and online reading will be provided in class.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

- <u>Weekly Social Media Performance Report (individual)</u> – Each week, students will be required to post content and track its performance using key social media metrics. They will submit a brief report analyzing engagement, reach, and conversion data, highlighting insights gained and adjustments for the next week. These reports will serve as a foundation for in-class discussions and strategy refinement.
- <u>Read, Reflect, Discuss Assignments (individual)</u> – you will read articles and white papers provided by the instructor and summarize into short presentations. These submissions will be used to lead rigorous in-class discussion.
- <u>Content Iteration (group)</u> – you will take prompts from the instructor and create content designed to test specific hypotheses.

- <u>Personal Brand & Network Building (individual)</u> – Students will define their personal brand strategy and execute outreach to industry professionals, influencers, or potential collaborators. They will document insights gained, key takeaways, and action steps for building their network and leveraging partnerships for social media growth.
- <u>Content Breakdown & Reverse Engineering (group)</u> – Each group will select a high-performing post from a competitor or industry leader and deconstruct it shot by shot, analyzing structure, storytelling, captions, engagement triggers, and visual elements. Groups will then recreate their own version of the content using the same strategic framework and measure its performance.

Participation:
Students are expected to actively participate in this course in person and via Slack. Participation includes:
- Careful reading and viewing of assigned materials by the date due
- Regular, substantive contributions to discussions in person and via Slack
- On-time attendance and full attention in synchronous sessions
- Significant collaboration with classmates

Course grades may be affected for students who do not contribute to the course through active participation. Students should notify the instructor in advance if they are unable to attend class. Those unable to attend will be required to review the online recording for the session missed and submit thoughtful feedback to the instructor.

Grading Breakdown

	Points	% of Grade
Weekly Social Media Performance Report (individual)	150	15%
Read, Reflect, Discuss Assignments	200	20%
Content Iteration (group)	250	25%
Content Breakdown & Reverse Engineering (group)	250	25%
Personal Brand & Network Building (individual)	150	15%
TOTAL	1000	100%

Grading Scale

Final course grades will be determined using the following scale:

Letter Grade	Numerical Score
A	95-100
A-	90-94
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

Grading Timeline

Grades and feedback will be posted for students within 72 hours of submission.

Late Work

Assignments will be accepted after the deadline with the following grade penalties.

- Submission in the 24 hours after the deadline   10% deduction

- Submission between 24 and 48 hours after the deadline   20% deduction

- Submission between 48 hours and 3 days after the deadline   50% deduction

- Submission more than 3 days after the deadline   100% deduction

Please keep copies of all your files and emails until the end of the semester.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the USC Student Handbook. All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

For more information about academic integrity see the student handbook or the Office of Academic Integrity's website, and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Policy for the use of AI Generators

Permitted on specific assignments
In this course, I encourage you to use artificial intelligence (AI)-powered programs to help you with assignments that indicate the permitted use of AI. You should also be aware that AI text generation tools may present incorrect information, biased responses, and incomplete analyses; thus they are not prepared to produce text that meets the standards of this course. To adhere to our university values, you must cite any AI-generated material (e.g., text, images, etc.) included or referenced in your work and provide the prompts used to generate the content. Using an AI tool to generate content without proper attribution will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. Please review the instructions in each assignment for more details on how and when to use AI Generators for your submissions.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. (Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook, page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study.

This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relation to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the internet, or via any other media. Distributing course material without the instructor's permission will be presumed to be an intentional act to facilitate or enable academic dishonestly and is strictly prohibited. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](), page 13).

Course Evaluations

Course evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university-wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class. The process and intent of the end-of-semester evaluation should be provided. In addition, a mid-semester evaluation is recommended practice for early course correction.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

I. Phase 1: Research, Positioning & Metrics (Weeks 1-5)

KEY DELIVERABLES: Case Study, Analytics Dashboard, Competitive Analysis, Content Calendar, Creating a Social Funnel Project

	Topics	Assignment	Reading
Week 1	Why Social Media? The Business Case for Founders ● The role of organic and paid social in startup success ● Case studies of founders who scaled via social media	● Assignment: Case Study Review	The Mom Test – Chapters 1-4
Week 2	Audience Research, Competitive Analysis & Positioning ● How to identify your audience and their pain points ● Building a research-backed content strategy ● Competitive analysis & industry benchmarks	● Assignment: Create an audience persona ● Assignment: Content Breakdown and Analysis	The Mom Test – Chapters 5-9
Week 3	Social Media Metrics & Building a Dashboard ● Key metrics that matter: Reach, engagement, watch time, CTR, conversions ● Building a simple analytics dashboard	● Assignment: Set up social media tracking & baseline analytics	Purple Cow – Chapters 1-4
Week 4	Funnels, Paid Ads, & Conversion Optimization ● The 3-stage funnel: Awareness (TOFU), Engagement (MOFU), Conversion (BOFU) ● Intro to Facebook Ads, TikTok Ads, LinkedIn Ads	● Assignment: Practice creating content for each stage of the funnel	Purple Cow – Chapters 5-8

		Assignment	Reading
Week 5	Creating a Data-Backed Content Plan ● Setting content pillars: What themes resonate with your audience? ● Content calendars, posting frequency, and A/B testing	● Assignment: Create CMS ● Assignment: Create Content Calendar	Purple Cow – Chapters 9-12

II. Phase 2: Content Production & Performance Optimization (Weeks 6-10)

KEY DELIVERABLE: Scripts, Visual Storytelling docs, and produced content

	Topics	Assignment	Reading
Week 6	The Algorithm & How to Hack It ● How engagement signals affect reach		
Week 7	The Creative Process & Advanced Scripting ● The psychology of attention: Hooks, pattern interrupts, open loops	● Assignment: Write & produce a high-retention script-based video Part 1 (Script)	
Week 8	Visual Storytelling & Editing Techniques ● How to create scroll-stopping visuals	● Assignment: Write & produce a high-retention script-based video Part 2 (Visuals)	Visual Storytelling – Chapters 1-3
Week 9	Shot composition, pacing, and text overlays ● In Class Work Session: Content Iteration		Visual Storytelling – Chapters 3-6
Week 10	Posting Strategy, Engagement Tactics & Growth Hacks		Visual Storytelling – Chapters 6-10

III. Scaling, Monetization & Advanced Growth (Weeks 11-15)

KEY DELIVERABLE: Social Success Presentation Deck

	Topics	Assignment	Reading
Week 11	Breaking Down Viral Content – Reverse Engineering Success ● In Class Work Session: Investor Conversations 2	● Assignment: Personal Brand and Networking	
Week 12	The Creator Economy ● Brand Deals, Influencer Marketing & Monetization		
Week 13	AI Tools for Social Media & Automation ● Using AI for content ideation, scripting, and editing	● Assignment: Ai Implementation	
Week 14	AI Tools for Social Media & Automation ● Using AI for content ideation, scripting, and editing		
Week 15	Final Presentation Rehearsals and Deep dive into ROI tracking for social media		
Finals Week	Final Presentations		Refer to the final exam schedule in the USC Schedule of Classes at classes.usc.edu.

Statement on University Academic and Support Systems

Students and Disability Accommodations:
USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:
To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the Financial Aid Office webpage for undergraduate- and graduate-level SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:
Counseling and Mental Health - *(213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - *988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call*
The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - *(213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call*
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - *(213) 740-5086*
Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - *(213) 740-2500*
Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - *(213) 740-0776*
OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - *(213) 740-0411*
Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - *(213) 740-2101*

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call
Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call
Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)
A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu
Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.