

Some home truths about Social Media

There are many ways we can converse and build relationships with our market; and social media platforms are just one of them. Social media enables us to have conversations with people in an online environment as opposed to the more conventional ways we communicate (like via face-to-face or by telephone). Some of the social media sites you may be aware of include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, and specialist blogs.

Is social media changing the way we can communicate with our market? Yes it most definitely is. It is opening up new avenues and ways for us to engage and get feedback from people who are interested in our businesses or brand. Social media does not necessarily generate immediate sales, but it is key in developing relationships. This is important because people buy from people, and having good relationships with your market increases your chance of being top of mind and provides the opportunity to sell to them.

Because social media generally has lower running costs and because it achieves almost instant communication with audiences, it is often used as a central communicating medium for businesses.

But, let's take a moment to dispel a few myths:

1. Social media is free
2. Social media is for everybody
3. A company might as well have social media, after all it can't do any harm

These are risky misconceptions when utilising social media as part of a company's marketing activity and are surprisingly common, even in marketing circles.

'Social media' has become a buzz word in marketing circles as clients become more interested in what the likes of Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Four Square can do for their business. It is often considered an 'easy way' to get the message out.

However, by committing to social media a business opens itself up to consumers more than ever before and while the company may create the brand message, social media hands the control of that message over to the consumer. And in turn, people enjoy a public forum along with relative anonymity to express their honest opinions of your brand.

As resources are required to make best use of it, effective social media is neither free nor necessarily easy at times. Resource must be given to managing your company's online presence, from updating any content which you control, to reviewing and understanding what your customers and competitors say about you. As with most marketing activity, having a good understanding of your identity and that of your customer is the key to creating an effective online marketing campaign.

Lastly, social media is certainly not for everybody; it works best in specific industries, with certain audiences and with companies that take the right approach.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Social media platforms are constantly evolving, but tend to be categorised into a number of purposes. For example; Facebook is more personal, customer-interactive and offers a variety of different promotional and communicating tools such as images, videos, custom applications, opinion polls, competitions and advertising. And in this sense, is perfectly suited for "product based" applications. Pinterest, on the other hand is a great platform for creative businesses. For the uninitiated, it is essentially an online image pin board, a place for you to scrapbook pictures that inspire you, make you laugh or to collect links to informational web pages.

In comparison, LinkedIn can be described as a more professional network that bases itself on 'secure' connections and company pages that people can 'follow', with the ability to list products and services, or business group discussions as a way of interaction.

The idea is to choose a platform that connects with and is right for your type of business; for example a product company versus a service company may be suited to quite different platforms.

So is it worth your while? If you think it is, here are some quick tips to tweeting, pinning and posting:

FACEBOOK DOS AND DON'TS:

- DON'T start a Facebook page through a feeling of obligation or a sense that "we have to be there".
- DO vary your content between brand/product promotion and lighter "entertainment" posts.





- DON'T treat Facebook like a website. Talk with your community, encourage them to participate and let them help you shape the environment.
- DO ask questions to encourage people to comment on your posts.
- DON'T spam Facebook. Two to three posts a week is sufficient.
- DO have a dedicated resource. A single staff member with time to dedicate to Facebook should be charged with populating the page, creating content schedules, ensuring the posts are aligned with all other marketing, and managing the community feedback.

TWITTER DOS AND DON'TS:

- DO strike a balance between conversation posts and product posts.
 - DO tweet promotions and brand relevant information – this is the right forum.
- DON'T write messages over multiple tweets, find a way to make it fit.
 - DO use links through to your website or to third party endorsements.
 - DON'T use long or overly formal language – abbreviation is accepted here.
 - DO follow your target audience, it's a good way to get them to follow you back.
 - DO hashtag and learn how they work.

PINTEREST DOS AND DON'TS:

- DO pin your products.
- DO link back to your website.
- DO place prices on your products.
- DO follow boards for companies in your field – they may follow and pin your images in reply, opening you up to a whole new market.
- DON'T pin everything to one board, create multiple boards for multiple uses.

- DON'T pin a million things at once. A few a day will spread your content evenly over your followers' news feeds.

If you are considering social media, firstly weigh up how relevant it is for your customers and if they will engage with you in this environment. If you are fortunate enough to be in an industry where social media can work for you, I encourage you to be excited and get involved. ■

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