

## Introduction to Social Media for Business

Over the last few years, social media has quickly moved to be a very powerful marketing tool and any businesses already using Facebook, Twitter and Linked In effectively will swear by how essential it's become.

In this short introduction it will be impossible to explore every social media avenue but I will hopefully manage to give something of an insight into why social media should be integral to almost every media campaign and lay the foundations to set you on the right path.

Traditional business customer relationships are changing. No longer do customers only purchase because of a business's selling power but largely because their peer group tells them to.

A few years ago, before social media took off, there was a shift in online purchasing with the inclusion of customer reviews for products and services on many large retailers websites. Large businesses quickly identified that while they could write 200-300 words selling a product or service 2 or 3 5\* reviews meant much more to customers.

Suddenly the corporation wasn't the main sales driving force but its customer base was.

With the advent of Social Media this way of doing business has been extended to a much larger audience and it's now more important than ever to use this market to your advantage and to embrace the technology to help grow your business.

As an example it's usually helpful to look at a traditional marketing approach and how this has changed in today's market. Usually a business would produce a set of leaflets, flyers or adverts and mail or publish these to their perceived target audience.

Return on investment has always been poor and monitoring results is nigh on impossible.

If your business could target just a few individuals with a real interest in your products and services, and you nurture that relationship correctly, your customers are quickly going to recommend you to their friends who, in turn, will recommend their friends and in very little time our none descript mailing list or advertising schedule has become 200-300 key individuals who perfectly fit your demographic and are interested in what you're promoting.

Before embarking on the great social media takeover there are two key things you need to establish.

Firstly who is your target market? As with any promotion and advertising it's important to know who you're trying to target so you can channel your efforts in the correct areas. Secondly what means of communication do you have available to you and which would be best suited to access your target market.

Most businesses now have their own website. This has become as important as presenting a business card and is usually the main port of call for any potential clients. 90% of the time customers, no matter what channel they found your business through, will check your corporate website before purchasing or engaging with the business.

Websites are a great way to get across your corporate and branding message in a way you have complete control over. This control is essential because while many social media forums allow you to promote your business it's always on their terms, under their rules, and most of the time these can be restrictive or subject to change at a moment's notice. A website is yours to do with what you want and should be the main focus in informing your target market about your business.

Social media should then be seen as satellites around your website, used to draw people from all different areas.

Blogs, Facebook and Twitter are probably 3 of the most well know forms of social media and each one caters for a different target market but all are best for consumer based activity. Linked In is the social networking site for business to business but the principals are largely the same as Facebook. There are no rules on how each should be used but there are some generally accepted practices.

Blogs are usually best attached to corporate websites to supplement core content and expand and demonstrate business knowledge. Your core website won't change very often. The business history, location, opening hours and services for example will be fairly static and while important to customers, once they know this information they won't need to return so how do you keep your brand in their mind.

Blogs allow you to communicate more updatable information in the form of news or featured articles that visitors can browse and review, subscribe to and respond to all without ever leaving your website.

If, for example, you had a photography studio the website would be pretty straight forward as already mentioned but add on a blog about the latest photography technics, tips for amateur photographers or details on how to get the best of night images and already you're creating a sense of community. This is where you have to be mindful of your target audience and always driving sales and if you had a retail business for example this becomes a much easier as you can list new stock items, purchasing decisions and promotions all in the blog domain.

Blogs can be very powerful but must be used to create a sense of community for your customers and not be purely a selling tool. Like a website, you still have to get people to your blog in the first place and while search engines like the update frequency and relevant content of a blog it's still a potentially costly exercise.

Facebook in particular is ideal for contacting large amounts of customers because it already has an interconnected community of millions; 750million in fact as at September 2011 with 3 billion visits per month. And Facebook is still growing! Facebook users are already recommending items to each other and telling friends what they are, will be, should and shouldn't be doing and getting your business into that loop for the right reasons can be marketing gold.

For almost any business to consumer organisation, getting a presence on Facebook is essential. Again it depends on your target audience, and if they're on Facebook themselves, but with most of the world connected chances are they will be.

Unlike Facebook for personal use Facebook for business is driven by Business Pages. These are setup by individuals, usually the business owners or IT department, and these pages are liked by Facebook

users so your news feed appears on their own Facebook home page. It's generally best to keep Facebook posts short and snappy and, like a blog, involve customers more than constantly giving out information.

While there is massive value as a business in posting about your latest product promotions, acquisition or blog posts, helping to drive traffic to your site, Facebook users like to be engaged so ask questions, get them involved and give them special promotions. Instead of a simple 'Today we're giving 10% off' why not write 'Come in today, mention our Facebook promotion, and get we'll give you 10% off anything.' Suddenly you've made your Facebook community feel special and they're much more likely to engage your business and recommend you to others.

Facebook is great for regular, short snippets of information, and gets you involved in a huge potential online community. Twitter on the other hand is much more immediate, even shorter and targets a whole different sector of people.

Twitter has the same homepage news feed idea as Facebook but with messages limited to 140 characters, while Facebook is unlimited, these are generally shorter and there are much more of them.

For business purposes this should be seen to be the same as Facebook but the earlier promotion would generally become 'Come to see us for the next hour and get 10% off' because with the speed Twitter posts are updated any messages will be quickly lost.

Pointing people to the latest blog post, business update or related online resource is all possible on Twitter but generally this is more one way than Facebook and doesn't require the same interaction amongst others. Users themselves filter your content so while it can feel a little lonely Twitter is generally more of a broadcast, information in service.

Twitter users have to find you. There is no recommendation system like Facebook and you aren't informed when one of your friends starts following something you may also like. One of the best ways to grow on Twitter is to give people something to re-tweet because this generally contains a link back to your news feed and if people like what's there they're likely to follow you.

One of the single biggest tips on getting the most out of any social media website is to get involved on a personal level and don't keep churning out the same corporate message. On twitter particularly re-tweet relevant links and always accredit the original poster and on Facebook link to other interesting pages, not always your own.

Despite the seemingly one-way setup of Twitter it's important to be prepared for two way, and potentially more, conversations as people tweet and reply to tweets. I've personally had an excellent interaction with a few businesses over the previous year, notably with London Midland, a train company running from Crewe to London.

Usually my Twitter feed is updated with service announcements on train services up and down the London Midland network and many of which I ignore. On the one occasion it affected my train I wrote a response asking what the alternative journey plan was. I got a response, updated my subsequent response with a better plan and was thanked by the London Midland service team on Twitter. Basically, due to a problem, we had to get off at Northampton and there were no trains to

the next station. They recommended waiting for a replacement bus to take us to the next stop, which could have been hours, so I found local bus service for £2 that did the same thing and pointed out this would be refunded as part of the London Midland compensation package which they agreed with.

Personally this was quite a frustrating but there was someone there to talk to without incurring extra costs or waiting in call centre queues and the whole Twitter conversation was also played out publically meaning anyone else following or looking for the same travel plans had the information to hand and London Midland had to do no extra work to achieve this.

Twitter for business can be a very powerful thing but only if used correctly and like Facebook traditionally works best for business to consumer interactions.

As well as the websites outlined above there are countless other social networking options available but they pretty much all work in the same way with a sense of community, news feeds and personalised update pages others choose to follow. Linked In is basically Facebook for business, so great for Business to Business interactions, while sites like MySpace specialise in their own areas, music in this case. Blog sites such as Blogger are great for social blogs, not attached to corporate websites and YouTube is a great way to share and host videos.

It's impossible to overstate the need to focus on your social media objectives and bear in mind that the impact of social media is very difficult to measure directly. Due to the sheer number of outlets available and never knowing what the next big thing will be I always recommend social media as supplementary to your own professional website. That way you're only putting all your eggs in a basket you hold and if suddenly Facebook is replaced anyone only using Facebook for their online presence has to start all over again.

To start making the most of social media you need to identify your target market, find out what they're already using and engage them on that media. Done properly you can have a priceless direct link to your ideal customers but beware because done badly the whole world can see it.