

Social Media for your business?

By now everybody has heard about social media and most business people are already involved one way or another. By the way, if you are on LinkedIn you are already involved. You probably have a marketing plan which identifies marketing spend as a separate cost and includes items such as mailings, brochures, email campaigns, exhibitions and the like. There are further options which are the newest part of marketing using social media for marketing.

This nugget is about two aspects

- What is this “new” medium?
- How is it different to other media?

The big four **social media platforms** are Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. For those that don't know any of them;

Twitter - Is an online social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based posts (tweets) of up to 140 characters. It's membership based (you have to open an account) and you can tweet via your mobile phone or the Internet. It's informal, quick and you can add pictures links and tags. Media professionals value its immediacy and scope and it's meant to be immediate and to the point. Twitter can be used in two ways. One way is to listen to what competitors and peers are saying and two is to inform your peers (followers) about what you (your business) are up to.

LinkedIn - Probably the most relevant to general business. You can post your profile and view others. You can also setup and maintain a network of direct connections and connect to others at second hand. You can also use it to create special interest groups of any type, either job or industry related.

It's a way of keeping in touch but also researching and establishing new contacts. There are other such as Xing but LinkedIn is by far the most extensive. You can go to the LinkedIn website www.linkedin.com and complete a profile. Treat this as a CV though- it will be seen and although you may get no reaction that doesn't mean it has not been viewed. If you do get a contact then respond- it does not have to be instantaneous but it does need to be personal and open. You can very quickly expand your network but remember why you are there- it's a marketing tool and it should have a budget and desired outcomes.

Facebook - Once the province of students is a social networking service and Web site launched in February 2004 with more than 800 million active users. Has overtaken Google in the US in terms of page impressions. Users must register before using the site, after which they may create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages, including automatic notifications when they update their profile. However your business profile should be set up as a page not a personal profile.

YouTube - Is a worldwide video sharing website where users can watch, upload and share videos.

Uploading videos requires you to be a member but watching does not. It allows anyone with a camera phone (or a film studio) to have an online video and it reduces the need for BBC style production but it will still send messages you want and messages you don't want so it needs to be treated with care.

Social media tools can be used in conjunction with the main social media platforms and aims at increasing the impact of social media such as:

Blogs - Blogging can be seen as an extension to social media activity but it also works as standalone activity. A blog is basically an interactive website allowing visitors to leave comments. All in all the aim is to direct traffic to your website and can form part of the overall social media activities of a company. Popular hosted blog tools are for example Wordpress and Blogger.

RSS feed - An RSS feed is an online publication of news items (for news feeds, blog entries, video and audio) that works by syndicating content and making it more accessible on the web.

Social News - Are websites with user submitted stories. Like in blogs, users can leave their comments on the different topics and articles tend to rank higher depending on their popularity. Popular social news sites are Slashdot, reddit, digg and fark

The use of social media as a campaigning tool is known as **SMO** (social media optimisation) and the intention is to attract visitors to website content. However social media also extend your brand presence and add a personal element to your marketing.

What are the characteristics?

Importantly, it's not “free”. Having a presence is easy and straightforward. Working a range of media into a concerted campaign that moves your business forwards requires time and expertise. You can decide whether to develop the expertise yourself or to buy it in but it's not free, it's your time or someone else's. There are effectively four stages to social media:

None - it's not obligatory. It's another weapon in the armoury but not the only one unless your business is exclusively online.

Starting - getting your company presence on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Ideally you should invest some forethought into what you want to get out of it and who your market is.

Controlling - Start measuring effectiveness (Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, twitterfeed)

creating white papers, useful data, developing engagement with the brand.

Maximising - Evaluating how all the different media work together and measuring success in terms of campaign to cash. Actually measuring return on Investment (ROI) will be seriously complex but simple tests like having two different landing pages and split testing is a good start.

It is an additional medium. You can rebalance your media to do less mailing (for example) and more social media but most successful marketing uses a number of channels, which will include more or less social media.

It gives you a personal reach which can be very powerful since used carefully you can access other people that would usually be very remote. It also allows them to access you too so it's a two edged sword in every way.

It says things about you too! Remember that when you post a rant, whether justified or not, the rant (and the person) gets remembered for longer than the content. Worse it will turn up for ever in websites. Be the person you aspire to be, not the one you don't like.

You need to be aware that social media are dangerously democratic. Everybody has an opinion and they might want to share it. Worse they might be a disgruntled or indiscreet employee. Have a look at some sample social media policies to decide how you want to manage your social presence.

Treat it as the description says “SOCIAL media”. It's not a sales channel and it should not be an excuse for a hard sell, it's a way of interacting which should lead to more business. Finally- give it a go- it is all part of a changing picture of connectedness and in a time where contacts are more and more electronic it gives you the chance to restore some human contact to your transactions.