

Social Media hype or valuable business tool?



Jo Dodds on what web-based and mobile technology can do for you

In the old days, marketing was focused on outbound or interruptive marketing; TV, radio and newspaper advertising, telemarketing, email and direct mail. All designed to 'interrupt' people as they were going about their daily lives and try to sell them something. Companies who still rely on these methods have a much harder job in getting the attention of people because we now have ways of avoiding it. Sky+ allows us to fast forward through adverts; caller display means we can ignore calls from people we don't know; spam filters are more sophisticated.

We needed to find another way – and that way is inbound or permissive marketing. With this, we create an online presence where people can find us and are drawn to our company to find out more. The best way to do that is through the use of social media in conjunction with a strong website, including a blog to publish fresh useful content for your target market, positioning your business as an expert or a thought-leader.

So what is social media?

Wikipedia describes it as the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue. You may associate social media with the names of the most used platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. There are hundreds of other platforms that

allow you to share information and interact with your target market and existing customers: but if you haven't started yet, these three platforms are a good place to begin and I would say essential in the new marketing world.

By creating an online presence, your target market can find you, build a view of who you are and interact with you to find out more. That's permissive marketing. And on that point, I mentioned email earlier as part of the less effective outbound marketing; but done in a different way, where you are given 'permission' to email people, it is also part of the new way of doing things.

Business benefits

Social media is a great way to create awareness about your business. People can get to see what you do and can check out your business in their own time. It also aids online networking and there are many opportunities to build relationships with your prospects. This moves them along the 'know, like and trust' journey, which can really help to convert prospects into customers and effectively shorten the selling cycle. You can really engage with those people, as well as your existing customers on social media: and apart from your time, it costs nothing.

Another useful aspect of social media is the opportunity you have for what's called 'social proof'. Much business comes about

because of referrals from satisfied customers and people who know and respect what you do. Imagine those same people posting on your Facebook profile or on Twitter about how great they think you are. Do you think that might encourage people who are considering using your services to buy from you? If you can get a tribe of fans talking about you on social media, your marketing efforts become much easier.

Finally, if you get it right and use the main social media platforms to promote your business, including blogging regularly, you can dominate Google in your niche. This is comparatively easy to do if you have a local printing business as your competitors probably won't have realised the benefits of social media yet.

Twitter, Facebook & LinkedIn

Not convinced? Consider these facts. Facebook has more than 500 million active users, 50 per cent of whom log into Facebook every day. There are more than 200 million active users accessing Facebook on their mobile phones!

Twitter has over 175 million active users (that statistic is on the Twitter website but is dated September 2010 so there will be many more by now) and Twitter's search engine receives more than 600 million search queries per day. It's a great source of real-time information.

LinkedIn has over 85 million members in over 200 countries and a new member joins approximately every second.

But do you really need to be on all three platforms? All three have information indexed by Google, so they are all useful in promoting your business online. LinkedIn is essential if you are marketing B2B (business to business) but also useful for B2C (business to consumer) in relation to creating referrals and social proof. Facebook is stronger for B2C – for instance if you are selling photo printing – but again as your Business Page is searchable by Google, why wouldn't you use the free opportunity to get your business onto one of the most visited and used websites in the world? And Twitter is very current,

"BY CREATING AN ONLINE PRESENCE, YOUR TARGET MARKET CAN FIND YOU, BUILD A VIEW OF WHO YOU ARE AND INTERACT WITH YOU TO FIND OUT MORE."

like one big noisy party. You can't hope to follow everything that goes on there but there are many tools that can help you to 'listen' to your target market, connect with them and start to engage them in what you're doing and how you can help them.

Case studies

Two companies within the printing industry who are using social media to great effect are Vistaprint and Kodak. Whether you agree with their business model and brand values, their marketing is clearly working for them. If you google 'social media Vistaprint' and 'social media Kodak' you will find masses of information about how they have successfully used social media to build their business, including a downloadable pdf that Kodak have put together to share some of their thoughts and experience.

Social Media isn't hype; it's here to stay. Those businesses which embrace the concept of connecting and engaging with their prospects and customers online are also here to stay. I can't say the same for those businesses still stuck in the twentieth century. All I can say is, given the stats above, where do you think your target market is?

Jo Dodds is an online marketing and social media specialist.

→ For more information on Social Media come along to the BPI's half day workshop on Social Media. Contact Geoff Sutton on 020 7915 8328 or email geoff.sutton@bpi.org.uk

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