

## **Make social networking work for your business**

Most people don't respond well to in-your-face selling and that's particularly true on social networks. Firms that overtly promote their products or services are not well received.

Trust is crucial if company owners want to reap the rewards of social networks. If you're thinking about buying a new car and ask people which model they recommend you buy, you give a lot more credence to what the people you know very well and trust tell you. The same is true for social networking.

There is a three-step process to developing trust. Firstly, business owners should spend time on forums and in groups looking for questions about issues in which they are an expert. Responding to the problem with free advice will demonstrate you are worth doing business with. Many business owners feel that by doing that they are giving away their crown jewels but in reality, if people see you have the knowledge they will want to know more. You then get into a deeper conversation, the second stage.

These conversations will generally be one to one and allow business owners to approach the third and final part of the process when business can be done. You enter the sales mode, but it's the sales mode in a conversation rather than an upfront, in your face kind of way which tends to turn people off.

### **1. Making connections**

LinkedIn is a networking tool which can be used to find connections to job candidates, industry experts and business partners and many companies now see it a their "primary source of marketing activity". One interesting benefit of LinkedIn is that it allows users to view people who have been looking at their profile and work out whether they are a competitor or a potential business opportunity.

Twitter is another site where business owners are capitalising on the ability to make new online connections and stay ahead of the curve. A recent study revealed nearly one in five SME's had signed up to the site, three quarters of whom use it for marketing, while just under a half use it to keep in touch with customers and suppliers.

The way small businesses are using Twitter is a great example of how the community is embracing new technologies in order to adapt and survive in the current economic climate.

### **2. Recruiting online**

Social networking can also be used as a cost effective staff recruitment tool. With such a vast amount of individuals it's highly likely most business owners will be able to track down someone who could benefit their company. Placing job advertisements can be an expensive process but finding potential candidates on social networking sites generally costs nothing but time.

Facebook, LinkedIn and others give small business owners the ability to find candidates who may not have even heard of their business but possess the just the right skills and experience required.

Employers should look at the groups or profiles that match a set of criteria, interests, qualifications, geography or industry. Searching for competitor names on sites such as LinkedIn may find suitable candidates quickly. Once a talent pool has been identified, engagement through online dialogue should be entered to find out more and create a relationship.

Despite the benefits, some recruiters are steering clear of social networking because of the ethical implications. Some have claimed that looking up applicants on Facebook and MySpace is akin to going into someone's house and searching through their cupboards.

However, this need not be the case if employers adopt a "strict relevance" approach and ignore information which should remain private. It used to be that most employment court cases were heard in respect of losing a job but it may only be a matter of time before we see an increase of court cases for not getting a job related to information held on such sites. Business owners should be aware and treat information with an open mind, as it may not always tell the whole story.

### **3. Accept feedback**

The plethora of social networking portals means businesses are open to an increased chance of being criticised. Dismissed staff, unhappy customers or devious competitors can post negative comments about your business all over the internet. However, experts agree that it is not necessarily a bad thing. It can actually be turned into a business benefit.

Attitudes towards negative comments may need to change. We need to move away from the old way where businesses are pushing a message to an audience that is supposedly passive to the new way where you get live feedback from your potential or existing clients. If that feedback is negative, it's an opportunity for you to improve.

How you respond is the important issue. It's how you react to the negative publicity which demonstrates your skills, experience and professionalism more than the fact the negativity's there. If you see something which looks a bit negative about you or your business you can engage in a conversation and approach it in a professional manner saying something like "It's interesting you say that, can you give me more background as to why that's your feeling."

### **REMEMBER!!**

**It is clear that social networking provides businesses with a vast range of opportunities but entrepreneurs shouldn't believe the benefits will start flowing in overnight. Security issues also need to be borne in mind but using the privacy controls provided by most sites means you should remain protected.**

**Ultimately however, and like most things in business, persistence is key and there are no shortcuts. It's a long term strategy and like any type of marketing, you have to keep at it.**