

Social media and small businesses



They say word of mouth is the best way to do business, but now personal opinions are shared onscreen via social media. So how can small businesses use social media effectively?

Making an impact

Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Delicious, Digg, Reddit, StumbleUpon – the world of social media is massively diverse so it's important to choose the right platforms to communicate with your different audiences.

David Nelkin, founder of Obsessive Web, a leading consultancy specialising in online strategy, says that for any small business there will be one or more ideal social media platforms but, he warns, not getting it right can be damaging.

“The most crucial thing to realise is that most forms of social marketing are a branding exercise,” David says. “They will push perception and positioning of your brand – be it good or bad. And, as such, there is nothing worse than not doing it well.”

David says one of the most common mistakes small businesses make is jumping on the social media bandwagon when there are no resources to do so. “As a lone business person or a small company, it's unlikely you will have a dedicated resource to focus solely on your social marketing. My tip is, if you don't, then make sure you know what you're doing and what you want to achieve before you do it. The risk is that if it's not a key focus for you, your customers and clients will also see it this way, which could have a damaging effect.”

Where on the web does your business belong?

With such a choice of social media platforms out there, which are the best ones to use for your business purpose?

- Twitter has fast become the social media outlet for news updates. Keep your stakeholders abreast of your business developments, new products, initiatives and research with a series of tweets.
- Blogs allow you to share further information with your audience. You're not restricted to 140 characters (as you are on Twitter), but make sure you stay focused. It's easy to start waffling while blogging.
- Facebook is ideal for market research. Want to find out if your latest product appeals to potential customers? Post it on Facebook and see who likes it.
- LinkedIn is the platform of choice for networking with business contacts, but remember, nothing beats networking face-to-face.

“Choose the best channel for you,” advises David. “Don't just set up an account on all of the major social media platforms. It's important to choose quality over quantity.”

When the social media phenomenon first hit, some sceptics wondered when the bubble would burst, but many believe social media is here to stay. As a small business owner the challenge to make the most of it - after all, there's very little cost involved and the potential to communicate with millions of would-be customers. Just make sure you know what it is you want to tell them!

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