

Social Media & Online Content for Business



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Used to be that retail was all about physical things; products, shops and customers. Marketing was all about letting your customers know about your shops and products and persuading them to go there and buy. But the virtual world of online retail and marketing has moved mainstream and while the endgame is the same, the way we think about retail, customers and business has to change.

Social media is a much abused phrase which often makes us think of personal communications in networked platforms like Facebook, Twitter or MySpace. Yet what it also means is the way in which communications, from journalism to advocacy, marketing to sales, has translated to the world of the web; what we know as the semantic web or web 2.0.

Social Media, quite simply, is technology enabling people and organisations to connect using content. That content can be text, audio or video; anything that lets us tell a story to someone else. In our personal lives that can be sharing family photos across the world in a two second click, connecting your extended family and friends. In a business world it can be a powerful basis for building client or customer relationships, extending brand trust, customer engagement and creating an on-going conversation.

There are over 1.3 million people in Ireland on Facebook (over 400 million globally) and twitter now claims over 100 million accounts in the world. The challenge for business, and retailers, is how to successfully move into that sphere without wasting time, energy or revenue and to begin to incorporate it into the daily operation across communications, public affairs, marketing and sales.

The first thing we advise business leaders to do is to inform themselves of the transformed media model, to build their own intelligence, research and experience and begin to plan how they can adapt, succeed and win.

The key is not to assume that every business must be busy online, running half a dozen social media accounts and creating endless chatter, but to study the trends and work out a strategic plan which matches those trends to your own business identity, brand and market.

One of the starting points in traditional communications or sales is to know who your audience is, where they are available, what they currently do and consume, and what forms of media they interact with and enjoy. When you have that map you can plan a campaign and get your message to them in a medium that



works. In online and social media it is even more important to target your market; know where they are and be where they are. That is one of the core strengths of the online sphere. You can target your defined audience/market more precisely and build a sustainable community around them.

So don't rush into an online, social media campaign without that research, intelligence and plan. Don't be tempted to out-source everything or simply hand it all over to a young intern. To succeed in this space we believe company CEOs and business leaders need to embrace and engage with the knowledge, trends and tools. It doesn't mean the business leaders are literally carrying out the campaign, or implementing it, but the thinking around communications online needs to flow from the top, and integrate across the whole company, if it is to work and build a long-term vision.

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That is the second thing we emphasise. There are few quick returns in social media and the hard-sell approach is destined to fail. If Irish social media business brand communities, like the Barry's Tea, Sandtex, or HB ice-cream fan pages and groups in Facebook work, it is because they create an on-going conversation with people, prompted by sharing stories, photos and incentivised by rewards, prizes and games. Social media is about relationships and building those online is as challenging as it is offline. It takes time, trust and shared knowledge and experience.



Conversation is a key word in social media and really it means keeping a relationship alive. Everything we do in social media, whether Twitter's 140 character messages or Facebook's status updates, flows from both the technology and experiences of blogging. Blogging only works if it is done regularly and allows a conversation to flow. It fails if it is a monologue. Good social media policies are about incorporating social media thinking into the daily work of a company, feeding that conversation, building relationships, rewarding your business community and encouraging interaction. That means, from a business or organisational basis, being able to deal with both positive and negative feedback. If someone makes a complaint via your twitter account you need to have created a structure, and policy, which allows that to be answered, acknowledged and dealt with professionally. Handling online complaints or negative feedback well is extremely powerful public relations so embrace it and make a merit of that two-way flow.

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The third thing we underscore is the mantra 'less is more'. In the online world brevity is a merit as your content; your messages, your communications, and your sales need to feed a conversation. You want someone to 'like it, share it' and move your message, your link, your video or text around the web via their own networks. You want to engage, get a response and make it easy for people to share online. So don't transport your traditional media thinking and output from press releases to audio-video online. You need to change them to fit the medium. While one billion videos are shared through YouTube every day the average duration is less than six minutes and the shorter your video (for example one minute) the more likely you are to get viewers and for those viewers to share it.

The twitter world of 140 characters allows you to share links, videos and photos and to drive people to your website or a portal for retail. But remember how we feel about spam. Anything resembling spam or a hard direct sell will simply be 'unfollowed', deleted or unread. It is easy to put stuff out there; it is a little harder to get people to want it unless you see it as part of this on-going two-way flow.

So how do you do that? If in doubt use the platforms and think of what works for you. If something is useful, relevant or adds to your information, entertainment or provides value, you are likely to be interested. Being useful, being relevant is a central part of making any online conversational relationship work. Having fun, providing entertainment and play is often at the heart of human engagement and if you look at Irish online case studies, like Rabobank's www.truthbank.ie and its humorous take on being honest, you can see how that works. Many businesses worry about time and cost yet are still willing to pay quite significant amounts in traditional advertisement without the same level of targeting or metrics. Time is money and in a simple analysis if businesses put a percentage of their marketing/sales spend into social media and measured the returns, they could then see the physical value which is often hard for them to evaluate or justify in the beginning of a campaign. And that is perhaps the final piece of advice. Stop thinking of it as a 'campaign' but see the shift online as part of your business future-proofing. The undeniable truth is online will be the dominant platform for human engagement, both personal and professional, and the sooner we begin adapting our thinking, tools and strategies the more likely we are, in a Darwinian sense, to survive and thrive.

Athena Media runs Social Media & Online Content for Business workshops for business leaders and decision-makers in The Digital Hub, Dublin 8 once a month. Upcoming dates are May 21st and June 18th. For more details contact Paula or Niall on 01 4885851 and visit www.athenamedia.ie