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The Brave New World of Digital Marketing: Why it's Right for your Small Business

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It's no news that the way we gather information has changed. Traditional media, once seen as the dominant provider of news and information, is now having to compete with its own audience. With the rise of high-speed internet, free and easy-to-use online publishing tools, and technology that can "push" information on the masses, everyday citizens are gaining a voice and becoming amateur journalists. Millions of consumers are increasingly turning to online communities to voice opinions, make purchasing decisions, and receive customized information based upon their preferences. Technorati, an Internet search engine for blogs, currently tracks 44.5 Million blogs, and this number continues to grow by more than 75,000 a day.

So what does this all mean to you, the entrepreneur or small business owner? It means big opportunities from a marketing standpoint. The changing media landscape creates a revolutionized way to communicate with consumers virally through online channels.

Digital marketing forums are growing in credibility; in fact a recent Peppercom survey of 210 marketing executives found that 80% of respondents feel that a corporate blog can help improve the dialogue between a company and its stakeholders, customers, and employees. 79% percent feel that a corporate blog helps position the company / chief blogger as a thought leader.

Outlined below are the top reasons why small business owners should be embracing digital marketing now or be left behind.

Stand out from the crowd

From inception, all small businesses are faced with the same challenges: creating awareness in the marketplace and differentiating themselves from the competition. By implementing these new digital platforms, small businesses have the opportunity to communicate directly to the consumer, bypassing traditional media barriers. Therefore, these new technologies can quickly help businesses gain trust, build credibility and break through the clutter by becoming a thought leader in his/her respective industry.

Level the playing field

Line executives at major corporations just don't get it, nor are they taking advantage of it. According to a recent survey conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of Makovsky + Co. of 150 corporate executives, just 5% of executives said they were convinced "to a great extent" that corporate blogging is growing in credibility as a communications medium. As a sales or lead-generation tool, the percentage dropped to less than one.

What these statistics boil down to is the chance for small businesses to run circles around their corporate competitors by entering the digital space and diverting the consumer's attention to their brand. In an era of widespread distrust of big business, there's no better time to take advantage of the corporate digital disconnect and make strides to connect with your audience through online channels.

No barriers to entry

Small businesses already have a head-start over their big business competitors due to the lack of bureaucracy and controls. In smaller enterprises, there is less red tape in the approval process, giving small business owners the freedom to make their own marketing decisions. This flexibility allows them to set the tone and direction of the digital marketing efforts, such as posting their thoughts openly and honestly through blogs and podcasts without internal restraints.

Relevant Audiences

A misconception exists that digital marketing can only be leveraged by consumer brands, and there is no place for the business to business segment in the digital world. In reality, the online community is vast, but it is very targeted. More often than not, business to business consumers are making large purchasing decisions and will use online tools to gather information. There's no reason a business-to-business widget maker can't leverage digital in the same way a small retailer who sells directly to consumers does.

Cost effective

Traditional marketing campaigns such as PR and advertising are typically beyond the financial realm for small businesses and start-ups. The best thing about digital initiatives such as blogging, podcasting, social networks and message boards is there is little to no costs involved. Typepad, one of the most popular host sites for blogs and podcasts, costs around \$15 per month. You can also purchase audio equipment to produce high-quality podcasts for around \$300.

Walk the Walk

When it comes to innovative marketing, it is the small businesses and entrepreneurs that should be leading the pack. New ventures don't necessarily follow traditional or old-fashioned business models, so why rely solely on archaic marketing methods? Creative letterhead and fancy cocktail receptions just won't cut it anymore. It is the relationship building and communication that is made possible through digital initiatives that can truly differentiate a brand in today's marketplace. Entrepreneurs are risk-takers by nature, so their marketing tactics should follow suit. If implemented correctly, the benefits of leveraging digital marketing platforms can be the key to taking a business from start-up status to an established brand name.

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Sidebar:

How to drive traffic to your blog

1. Content

Whoever the audience, one thing remains constant: The content and knowledge being shared in a blog must be provocative, non-commercial and honest 100 percent of the time. Without such traits, the blog is destined to fail. You must constantly be on the lookout to make the blog as timely, robust and interactive as it needs to be.

2. Reciprocal Linking

To drive awareness and interest to the main blog page, you should make the blog accessible from your main home page. Additionally, posting links to the blog in relevant directories and message boards will help drive traffic to your site.

3. E-mail Distribution

Setting up an e-mail distribution list is a good way to alert your key constituents when new content is posted on the blog. Also, adding the blog's URL to the signature at the bottom of your emails will invite e-mail recipients to visit the blog.

4. RSS Feeds

Setting up an RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication) on your blog will allow people to subscribe to your blog and receive your new entries via email in XML format, which is called an RSS feed. This provides a constant reminder for readers to check out your posts and also allows for more discussion and participation from the subscribers. You should also subscribe to RSS feeds for blogs covering similar topics as well as important news sites so you can follow what others in the blogosphere and mainstream media are covering.

5. Search Engine Spidering

You should make sure that the blog's URL gets picked up by all the major search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN). The easiest way to do this is to visit each search engine and find where they have an option to "Submit Your Site" (frequently referred to as "ping") or something similar.

6. Blog Search Engines

Just like the major search engines such as Google, there are blog search engines that search by key word for blogs with certain content. A few of these are Google Blog Search, Bloglines, Feedster and Technorati. Again, pinging your site to these search engines will increase the traffic to your blog.

7. Blog Participation

To succeed in the blogosphere, you must participate. You should find several blogs that share similar content and views and become an active participant in the discussions there. People who strongly agree (or strongly disagree) with what you have to say are likely to visit your blog and participate there as well. This will help grow your presence in the blogosphere and link your blog to other blogs that are targeting similar audiences.

8. Post Frequently

The more often you post, the more hits you will receive from the search engine. You also

create more of a reason for people to come back and read what you have to say. Also, the more you participate in the "comments" section on your site, the more your guests will participate in your blog. We recommend posting approximately three to five times per week.

9. Post About Current Events

Not all your posts should be about current events, but staying timely will attract more visitors through search engine exposure and will encourage passionate debate in your "comments" section.

10. Potential Blog Measurement:

The best way to measure the success of a blog or other online communications strategy is by studying the quality and quantity of the readers and posters. From a quality standpoint, the expectation is that people who post information are adding value to the discussion thread and elevating the conversation by posting thoughtful and meaningful content. When referring to quantity, you should look at how many people are reading the blog and the number of links (trackbacks) into the blog. Some or all of this information can be obtained through the blog's tracking and reporting features.