

B2B Online Communities Really Do Work

If you still think social media have little to do with the serious business of b2b, think again. Web marketing expert Adrian Lennon begins a series of reports.

Many people outside the IT industry see social media as frivolous. They associate Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter with frenzied enthusiasts who have nothing better to do than swap photos and puerile platitudes. But no-one can ignore the fact that social media are used increasingly as a communication vehicle, and by a wider spectrum of people. And although channels to market are changing, the principles of marketing aren't. Marketing is still all about creating value for customers by building strong customer relationships in order to secure their commitment and satisfy their needs. That means creating a credible presence in the places where they will find it.

Relationships first, sales later

To get the marketing right you still need to think about relationships first. It's not just about selling something any more. That might be the end result, but to get there you need to work on the relationship. And that's where social media really help. Many b2b companies are using the social web to find customers, to build their own reputation and, ultimately, to differentiate themselves from competitors. There's a great deal that social media can offer to the non-consumer business.

Over a series of articles, I'd like to offer my tips on how the following can really work for your business:

1. Building a reputation through blogs
2. Using a networking site to communicate with identified groups
3. How social media can help you research your own sector

1. Building a reputation through blogs

Creating – and nurturing – a blog focused on your expertise can help you stand out from the crowd.

If a potential customer comes to your company's website and sees an active blog with insightful posts on how your company's offering helps customers, reads detailed posts demonstrating your company's knowledge, and comes across a few case studies, they're going to be far more inclined to come to you for their needs.

It's also important to make blogs personable. Not only are they an opportunity to show off your knowledge, they can also show your company's human side – proving your people are approachable and have empathy. Sure, it's a commitment. But a regularly-updated blog can raise your company's profile and brand it as a thought leader and expert in your business area.

And don't forget to connect with the people who comment on your blog. If they make the effort, you should reward it. It also proves your strategy is working.

First steps

If you're new to blogging, you may have questions like:

What should I write about?

First of all, remember you don't need to be controversial or break industry news stories. Write about your passion for your business – or about industry trends in general – from a personal point of view that is aligned with your business ethos. Add analysis to the story, based on first-hand experience.

A blog's diary format is ideally suited to frequent, informal posts that combine thoughts, commentary and links.

And, of course, write regularly.

How hard will it be to set up a blog?

It's very easy, which is one reason why blogs have become so popular. The simplest approach is to go with one of the following free blog service providers, allowing you to set up a blog quickly and link to your website:

<http://www.blogger.com/>

<http://wordpress.org/>

<http://www.typepad.com/>

What do I call it?

As part of the blog set-up process, you have to think of a name for your blog. It's important to reflect your blog content and perspective.

How do I get my blog noticed?

As well as promoting your blog on the company website here are a number of other tips to start the traffic:
Sign up for My Yahoo and add your blogs feed to your own My Yahoo account. This will get your blog included in Yahoo very quickly.

Exactly the same applies for My MSN.

Sign up for Google Pages, and add some content and link to your blog. This will get your blog included in Google very quickly.

Place a link to your blog in your online 'signature', so that any posts to forums, outgoing emails etc will promote your blog. Place your blog on all the major search engines. AddMe.com will submit your blog free to the top 14 search engines. SubmitExpress.com will submit your blog free to the top 20 search engines.

Submit your best articles to related industry portals

Look for relevant industry blogs with a lot of traffic and place appropriate comments in their comment box.

Should it be public or private?

All blogs are on the web and accessible to anyone who types in the url, unless their authors choose to make them password-protected (a feature offered by some blogging services.)

You have some degree of control over your visibility within the blogging service's community. For example, if you make your blog public, it may be listed by your blogging service under Recently Updated Blogs each time you make changes.

If you want to keep your blog private it can be password protected to limit access. But if you want to drive more traffic to your blog and increase the number of readers who might click and buy through your blog, make it public. You can easily change this setting, so you can experiment a bit first in private – and then make it public when you're ready.

How do I keep it going?

After an initial burst of energy, it might be hard to maintain your momentum. Spend time on your blog every week and get into a regular routine. Remember – posts can vary in length from a few sentences to a number of paragraphs.

Adrian Lennon is Client Strategy & Business Development Director at Being Communications. Being offers services in online branding, web development, e-mail marketing, e-commerce, online advertising, online reporting and learning management systems. For more information contact Being by phone on 028 9073 5980, online at www.beingonline.co.uk or by [email](#).

The content of this section is provided for information purposes only and does not constitute professional or other advice.