

An Introduction to Digital Strategy By Deborah Collier

The current economic climate has forced businesses to change their advertising strategy and there is now more focus on the Internet than ever before. This has not only meant reduced costs, but also immediate calls-to-action, for online buyers seeking competitive sales prices, convenient ordering and delivery, wider range of products and the ability to compare prices and benefits against other merchants.

Businesses who are not investing in e-commerce are missing out on a golden opportunity to increase sales, reduce costs, and beat their competitors, but they need to ensure that it is done well. Understanding buying behaviour and investing in their customers' online shopping experience will be key to their e-commerce strategy and success as will determining which strategies to embrace and which to steer well clear of.

Are you an Ebizanista?

You've heard of fashionistas but what about ebizanistas? Before embarking on any e-business strategy I always warn my clients to beware of following the latest fad in online business, technologies or techniques. Just because they work for one business, it does not mean they will work for yours. Ever heard the expression, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it"?

Let's examine m-commerce for example (sale of goods and services, via mobile devices such as mobile phones and PDAs). It works for simple things such as ticket sales and digital downloads, but what about the sale of larger tangible products and is there a market for business-to-business sales through mobile devices?

When you build your business case for undertaking your new web project, I always advise people to do the following:

- 1) List in order of importance the reasons why you are undertaking a project
- 2) List any problems experienced with your existing web site (e.g. poor performance, graphics, load time, profit etc).
- 3) Confirm whether you are responding to a specific business need, opportunity or technological change.
- 4) Consider the business benefits versus the costs of implementing a change, such as: Reputation- Increasing speed of online application- Increased Profit- Lowered Costs- Increased Efficiency- Better Customer Service and experience.

Next, you need to think about feasibility. Is this possible and will it actually work? Analyse your competitors and examine existing case studies. Look for measured results. Once you are satisfied, you are then ready to move onto the next stage in planning your digital strategy.

Having said that, it would actually take a weeks worth of training and materials for me to show you exactly how to develop and manage a digital strategy. The thing is, digital strategy is something you create and come up with depending on each unique customer and scenario - each time it's different and there are a multitude of combinations. For me strategy is very much hands-on, its not 'hey just do a bit of SEO, then do a bit of online pr - it's actually how do you do each of these things and how they all connect together to produce the right end-result. So in this article, I am going to introduce two of the main concepts, which form the basis of most digital strategies and they are the utilisation of user-generated content and personalisation.

Utilising User-Generated Content

When creating a digital strategy, it is important to remember that brand reality is entirely based on your customer's perception and if planned, built and managed well, a good online strategy can make a small business look like a mini-John Lewis. I always say that an online

presence is like having your shop window in every living room in the country, so it is crucial to make sure it delivers what the business needs and equally what the customer has grown to expect from you in the offline world.

User-generated content is becoming commonplace in business because in modern society, people like their voice to be heard. We are no longer in world where being broadcast to brands is deemed sufficient and people feel that their opinions, ideas and thoughts are valuable and they are equally stimulated by the contribution of others.

But, the real challenge for businesses in the modern world is how they can embrace the concept of user-generated content in a way that satisfies these basic human needs whilst also building brand loyalty. User-generated content has never been more important for brand building as it keeps customers coming back and allowing them to post their own content and ratings, this installs a faith and trust that has not been possible before.

Personalising the Customer Experience

Personalisation has come to the forefront again recently, as organisations seeking the competitive edge, maximise the value of their online presence, strengthen customer loyalty and increase staff efficiency. Giving customers and users content that is relevant to them at all times, is the ultimate in personalisation. So the key questions on most business leaders minds are

- Is personalisation for us?
- What level of personalisation do we need?
- How do we best implement it?

You see, personalisation and user-generated content are no longer a luxury but a necessity in forming your digital strategy. Even the smallest of organisations can add a more tailor-made experience to their web site visitors. It comes down to old-fashioned selling – who are your customers and what is relevant to them?

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This article was published by Utalkmarketing.com in August 2009