

E-Business in 2010 **By Deborah Collier**

The growth of social media and the economic crisis have literally catapulted opportunities and entrepreneurship for online business. More and more individuals, as well as businesses have turned to the net to promote themselves and their offerings. The web is becoming more and more integrated and is having an impact not only on business, but also on our popular culture. What does this mean for the individual? What does this mean for the small business, and what opportunities are there for business startups? E-business strategist Deborah Collier of Echo E-Business sums up lessons from 2009 and delivers valuable e-business advice for the year ahead.

Cutting-edge technologies, the evolution of social media and its impact on our culture, have blurred the lines not only between large and small organisations, but also between businesses and individuals. Our digital age has enabled more and more access to potential customers for any individual with an Internet connection and a social media account. The word 'entrepreneur' is being redefined and we are living in an entrepreneur culture.

The biggest evolution in technology and adoption of those technologies has been in social media and mobile phones. An individual programmer can make a fantastic living at no financial cost, by developing an application, selling it in a mobile phone application marketplace and promoting it via social media.

The greatest challenges for businesses in 2009, aside from the economic crisis, were social media know-how, marketing budgets and affordable reliable delivery services. Knowledge of where and how to invest social media efforts was a key challenge, with businesses losing hours of valuable time focusing on inappropriate social media applications and delivering the wrong messages. When they did get their messages out, they were faced with lack of product delivery mechanisms or ones so expensive that they caused a strain on resources.

However, it has not all been doom and gloom. Businesses have taken the opportunity to learn, innovate and focus on their existing customer-base in preparation for the economic recovery and 2010. With the future in mind, I've put together some valuable e-business advice for small businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurs for our year ahead.

E-Lesson 1: Say Goodbye to the Middleman

We have already seen a rise in the number of small businesses selling products and services using E-Commerce, but the growth of social media applications such as Twitter has enabled more affordable marketing to individuals and small businesses. Our analysis has shown that Twitter can give as much as ten times more clicks than email marketing, depending on the nature of the offering and quality of the campaign. I advise businesses and sole traders to use online social media tools to make themselves more visible to their audience and gather credibility.

I predict in 2010 that there will be extensive growth in the consumer-to-consumer markets, where commerce is now even more focused on the individual seller than the business. Any individual is potentially an entrepreneur who can sell directly to their customers. Similarly buyers can procure services and products at source from those with a great online reputation, and so invest heavily in this area.

E-Lesson 2: Start or Source a Delivery Company

The growth of e-commerce and our reliance on more affordable nationalised postal and delivery services, has left our businesses open to risk during postal strikes. According to a report by the London Chambers of Commerce in October 2009, the postal strike cost London more than £500 million. I urge online retailers to look at alternative delivery companies rather than lose customers, and I encourage entrepreneurs to consider starting up affordable delivery businesses. I predict delivery and shipment to be one of the biggest growth industries of 2010, bringing hundreds if not thousands of unemployed back to work. So there really is a golden opportunity.

E-Lesson 3: Invest in Creative Sponsorship and Collaborative Projects

Social media and popular culture, particularly amongst the 16-35 age groups, has demonstrated that people are becoming more and more adverse to direct advertising. Despite clever creative and marketing tactics, banner advertising is increasingly filtered out by individuals, and pre-roll video advertising is perceived more and more as intrusive. Only the most innovative, integrated and seamless advertising will succeed. Businesses should focus on more creative sponsored advertising, or collaborative projects, not only for brand building but more importantly to bring themselves closer to their potential customers. We are living in a collaborative world where relationships are key. Our ability to deliver humanistic and social messages, through collaborative sponsorship opportunities will be at the focus of our marketing strategy in this coming year and the years that follow.

E-Lesson 4: Sell via Mobile Phones

I predict 2010 to be a year of exceptional growth for mobile, which will continue in years to come. Throughout the next decade, we will become less and less attached to our computers, and more connected to our surrounding world via cutting-edge technologies and hand-held mobile devices. News subscriptions and music downloads are currently the top two services purchased via mobile phones. Businesses should consider offering micro-applications via mobile phones in order to up sell to higher revenue services and products.

E-Lesson 5: Embrace the 'Free Culture'

We are living more and more in a culture where we expect products and services for free. Where does that leave businesses? The 'Free Culture' may however have a detrimental affect on the quality of information and services we consume. Businesses should continue to embrace the 'Free Culture', as a means of building relationships and cross selling to a wider range of products and services. Experts in their industry risk losing customers to less savvy businesses – those who give away less quality offerings simply to sell their other products or services. Look at more savvy ways to maintain your customer-base and beat the free services and products. The key will be in skillful marketing, communication, customer service and reputation building.

2009 was a difficult year for the small business, but hopefully I have demonstrated some wonderful opportunities for 2010 and the forthcoming economic recovery. It is time to plan and reinvent our future using the latest cutting edge technologies at our fingertips. We are in a fast moving age – a highly innovative and accessible digital age, but one that is focused on people and relationships. Work effectively with these, and you will succeed in this year and the next.

Author: Deborah Collier at Echo E-Business for 'Start Your Business Magazine' - Published January 2010