

**EXPLOIT SOCIAL NETWORKING**  
**Get closer to your customers**



about, what products they are most interested in, and, potentially, what issues they face.

**3** Connect with customers on social and business networks such as Facebook or LinkedIn. Watch their postings, interact with them, ask them questions and get their opinions.

Social networking is the perfect tool for learning more about your customers. Yet new figures reveal that only eight per cent of small businesses are currently using it in this way. Here, managing director of Echo E-Business Management Deborah Collier offers her advice on how to use networking to gather useful information.

**4** Implement social media and user-generated content features on your website to allow your customers to interact with your own content and ideas. Social bookmarking will also inform you as to how these customers are interacting with your content, and whether it is valuable to them.

**1** Create a Twitter account and 'tweet' about potential issues your customers might face. Watch the number of new visitors that start following after each tweet. You will be able to see which subjects you should discuss more often, and potentially what products or services might be of interest.

**5** On applications such as LinkedIn and Facebook, see who else your clients or potential clients are connected to. This may give you an indication of potential competitors and also other useful relationships that they may have. If you have delivered a good service or a product to one of your clients, you can ask them to refer you to a specific person of interest in their network.

**2** Follow your customers on Twitter. From their comments, you will be able to learn what they are passionate

**GET STAFF TALKING (PART 1)**  
**Meeting dos and don'ts**

If you struggle to get your employees together for meetings, try suggesting 3pm on a Tuesday. A study by online scheduling service When Is Good found that people are most receptive and willing to accept invitations at this time. Arrange one for 9am on a Monday, though, and only one in three employees is likely to attend. "People seem to think they can't leave it much later than 3pm because time might run out," says research co-ordinator Keith Harris. "They start clock watching. The most important factor, though, is probably preparation time - if you have a meeting at 9am in the morning, employees will need to prepare the day before, or turn up underprepared. People need to be given reversing room."



**GET STAFF TALKING (PART 2)**  
**No more wasted afternoons**

Do your teams communicate effectively? Communication coaching company Personal Presentation Ltd says many businesses find meetings unproductive because louder characters take over, while others are far too reticent.

According to founder Julia Goodman, the way people interact at the beginning of a meeting will set the tone for the rest of the discussion. "Speak up," she advises. "People who don't speak up within the first five minutes of a meeting will not

be viewed as valued contributors, which makes it harder to get heard at all later."

With a third of meeting time spent being 'wasted' according to Cisco research, the stakes for SMEs are high.

All attendees should be encouraged to think through the agenda before the meeting starts so that they have something relevant to say, says Goodman. "Lead meetings, keep them on-brief. People must communicate clearly - and say what they mean."



**INTELLIGENT RECRUITMENT**  
**HIGH SKILLS, LOW BILLS**

According to recent research by the National Apprenticeships Service, over 80 per cent of the people surveyed said they were more likely to use a business if it offered apprenticeships. So if you want your business to gain a competitive edge, consider taking a leaf out of Sir Alan Sugar's book.

The study was conducted to tie in with the launch of the Service's 'Good for Business'

campaign, which aims to inform employers about the benefits of taking on an apprentice. Previous studies by the organisation have found that apprenticeships also help improve workforce motivation, productivity and fill skills gaps.

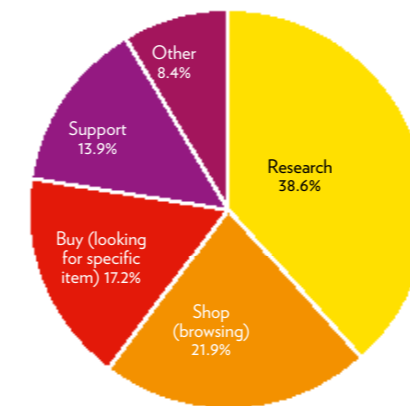
To find out more about the commitments involved and funding available, visit apprenticeships.org.uk



New boy: the freshly appointed Lord Sugar, Government enterprise champion, 2009

**WIN WITH ONLINE CUSTOMERS**  
**KEYS TO E-COMMERCE SUCCESS**

Ever wondered whether your website could work harder for you? Industry-wide research by eMarketer reveals exactly what to offer to attract visitors... and what to avoid if you want to make a sale.



Reasons for visiting an e-commerce site according to internet users worldwide, April-June 2009 (% of respondents)



Barriers to buying on e-commerce sites according to internet users worldwide, April-June 2009 (% of respondents)

**ACCESS BUSINESS RESOURCES**  
**SMARTA NEW LOOK**

Business advice and networking website Smarta.com has recently been relaunched with a host of extra features to add to those it already offers SMEs in the UK.

The site, supported by NatWest, was started last year to offer users business advice and networking opportunities. Now, after consulting with its users, Smarta.com has introduced a number of new features.

This includes a much greater number of guides, interviews and case studies, which can be searched for using the improved site navigation. It is also easier to keep up to date with your business network through a live feed, and to offer and receive advice from fellow business people through the website's improved user forum.

Take a look at smarta.com to see how the new features can help your business.

