GROWING YOUR SMALL BUSINESS: SOCIAL MEDIA; CUSTOMER SERVICE; BUSINESS ANALYSIS, EXPORTING AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

SOCIAL MEDIA: Is Visibility All There Is To It?

Gone are the days when businesses just relied on neon signs, tarpaulins and pamphlets. Since the inception of social networking sites, entrepreneurs harnessed it to maintain business relationships and attract new customers. Marketing has taken on a whole new meaning once social media became prevalent, especially for small businesses. While it is true that the more people know your business exists, the higher chance you get of being considered to fit consumer’s needs, there is still the matter of being able to establish that you can deliver what you promised you would.

You may be sending hordes of email, tweeting left and right, posting new blogs daily all in the hopes of being noticed by more of your target market but have you measured how much of an improvement your business made since you started marketing online? Trust is and always will be an important factor in a business relationship. Even if you have ten times more followers and friends in Twitter, Face Book or LinkedIn, there is still no guarantee that all of them will support you.

Old school marketing has the advantage of effectively building rapport with customers because of face-to-face encounters. The fact is, more people still have some reservations in trusting someone they “met” over the internet, more so when it comes to business dealings.

So how can social media be effective as a marketing campaign for small business then? The bottom-line is: content relevancy should be proportionate to familiarity. As an entrepreneur you may already have thousands of followers on Twitter and even more so on Face book, but if what you post is not enough to attract their attention, you may have lost a potential sale. On the other hand, even if you have only a couple hundred followers but you are able to capture the attention of even about 90% of them, you may already be well on your way to being a small business magnate.

Setting up accounts on different social media sites and inviting tons of people is just the basic step in online marketing. The key in turning your followers into customers is by engaging them in meaningful conversations. You have to remember that not everything is about you and your business. Even online, you should be able to project the image that your upmost concern is not only to sell but to build a relationship as well. An influential entrepreneur is one who elicits responses and provides feedback, a person who ensures that their follower’s interest is maintained.

One of the most effective strategies in any endeavor is to build rapport and once you’ve established that, you won’t go wrong. If you have the right strategy for online marketing in place, there is no telling how far you can go and how fast your business can succeed. Small businesses have the potential to make it big using social networking campaigns. It may be time consuming but it is well worth the effort. (By Amanda in: Marketing, Social Media)

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CUSTOMER SERVICE: Tips for dealing with your most difficult clients

Some people you just can’t please. At least, that’s the truism my grandpa used to say to me. Clearly, grandpa didn’t run a small business. While some people are harder to make happy than others, as a CEO of a small business you can’t just write off difficult clients, unless of course you don’t mind taking a hit in your business.

But, after you’ve spent all day running your catering business, for example, cooking, responding to calls, and delivering orders, getting a complaint from someone because their food arrived at 5:03 instead of 5 isn’t going to make them your favorite person. If you take the time to understand a few important aspects of human interaction, however, you can turn that difficult client into a satisfied, lifetime customer.

**Acknowledge their right to be upset:** Simply acknowledging that your client has a right to be upset will make them less defensive and more open to a level-headed discussion. For example, perhaps a customer calls your auto-repair center claiming that you drastically overcharged them on their bill. You realize that they are just reading the bill wrong and don’t understand what the charges are for.

Begin the discussion with, “You’re right, Mr. Richards, that bill IS pretty garbled and difficult to read. Let me see if I can break down the charges for you…” Mr. Richards will be taken off his guard and feel his anger diffusing into a willingness to actually discuss the issue.

**Never Argue:** Customers’ accusations can become scathing at times. Never give in to the temptation, however when one tries to lead you into an argument. Encourage the client to express specifically what is bothering them about the service you provided, and ignore any baseless or harmful slurs about you or your business. Giving in to pointless negative banter will only decrease their satisfaction with your business.

**Ask What You Can Do to Help:** Often enough, it will be clear what your client hopes to get from you in order to dispel their dissatisfaction. Other times, their prattle will seem like pointless, rambling complaints. When this happens, you should take the opportunity to refocus the situation by asking, “What can I do to help improve this for you?” Simply being upfront and kind about the situation is enough to make most people come back down to earth and actually consider what more you could do for them, rather than continually ranting.

**Don’t Give Up:** Sometimes, no matter how much you try appeasing a customer you are not going to be able to get their loyalty back right away. Staying in touch over time and expressing your desire to earn back their business is a good idea for clients who are too disgruntled to hear what you have to say right now. Follow up in a week or two with a phone call or email once again telling them how important their business is to you.

**Go the Extra Mile:** Some of my most positive customer service interactions have been with companies I was initially angry at for their poor service. Quickly and agreeable going a step beyond the means necessary to rectify a situation can leave your customers regaining their faith in the world and telling all their friends about your great company. If you’ve billed them wrong, right the situation, but also consider giving them a credit for some percentage of the mistake. You’ll earn back the money through word of mouth advertising anyway. (Small Business CEO, http://www.smbceo.com)

100 Small Business Podcasts for Your Listening Pleasure

Each year Small Business Trends Radio brings their readers the ultimate in small business podcast lists. They give readers the opportunity to discover 100 of the best business podcasts found online. We realize that many people don’t have the time to do the footwork and sift through all of the resources out there, so we’ve done that for you and categorized them as well. The majority of the podcasts listed have a focus on small business while others have a bit more of a broader focus. Nonetheless, the focus of all of the podcasts listed is on business. Neatly organized and with nice descriptions of each podcast, this year’s list is tops. Take a few moments to explore the list. You’ll find a lot of new information you can use within these audio resources. SMALL BUSINESS CEO/100 Small Business Podcasts for your Listening Pleasure(By Amanda in: CEO Leadership, Entrepreneurs, Marketing, Sales)
A key problem facing any smaller business is how to focus their limited business resources of time and money. SWOT analysis provides an efficient way to evaluate the range of factors that influence your operation, and can give you valuable guidance in making decisions about what to do next. It also provides a highly productive way to get your key personnel involved in the management decision-making process.

SWOT analysis is the process of carefully inspecting the business and its environment through the various dimensions of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. **Strengths** are the company’s core competencies, and include proprietary technology, skills, resources, market position, patents and others. **Weaknesses** are conditions within the company that can lead to poor performance, and can include obsolete equipment, no clear strategy, heavy debt burden, poor product or market image, weak management, and others. **Opportunities** are outside conditions or circumstances that the company could turn to its advantage, and could include a specialty niche skill or technology that suddenly realizes a growth in broad market interest. **Threats** are current or future conditions in the outside environment that may harm the company, and might include population shifts, changes in purchasing preferences, new technologies, changes in governmental or environmental regulations, or an increase in competition.

As with most such management analysis tools, **SWOT** itself will not give specific answers. Instead, it is a way to organize information and assign probabilities to potential events – both good and bad – as the basis for developing business strategy and operational plans.

Using **SWOT** analysis is a straightforward process. The key is to limit the number of issues under each category. This forces you to evaluate the relative importance of each, and select only the most critical. To get there, use a reduction process.

1. Use any issues you can think of that affect your business. These may be extremely pragmatic and objective (we don’t have enough capital to support growth), or highly subjective (key personnel don’t like each other and so don’t work well together). They may be internal or external. They may be real or perceived. Don’t evaluate at this state; just make your lists.
2. Once listed, sort these issues or factors into the **SWOT** categories.
3. Sort each category first by relative importance, and then by reality. This is where the hard work begins. It is critical at this stage to make sure that the factors you are listing are real and not wistful thinking on your part (We are the best – Are you really the best? How? Why?), or a way of passing the buck (Things are out of control, and there is nothing I can do about it). Being honest with you here is essential.
4. Now, use the reduction process to limit each list to more than five factors or issues. This forces you to look for duplicates of variations of the same issue, and to determine which are really the most critical to your business situation.

Once you have performed the **SWOT** analysis yourself, ask your key employees to go through the same process. Make sure that they do this independently of your work and each other; otherwise they suffer from the phenomena of “group think,” in which the group limits its thinking to the topics, which hit the table first. After your staff has had an opportunity to perform their own **SWOT** analysis, gather their ideas and construct a master list of all issues. This may well bring some new matters to your attention that you haven’t been aware of or have chosen to ignore. This list now becomes the basis for your strategic planning. Remember that this is not about ego; it is about reality, because the business can only operate in the realm of reality. The list now becomes a basis for your further planning. Inspect each of the **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats**, and determine what each of them implies for your own operation. There is no substitute for your own efforts, and so no passing this task along to someone else in the company. Here, the secret of success is in the details, and your own hard work. Good luck!
EXPORTING …. GO TO…..SBA.GOV

Doing business internationally may seem overwhelming at first. However, there are a number of government programs that offer training, counseling, and financial assistance to small businesses wanting to export their products and services.

BASIC INFORMATION: The following resources will prepare you to start exporting your products and services overseas.

- Guide to Exporting: This guide, available for purchase from the Department of Commerce, explains exporting basics such as identifying markets, financing export transactions and handling orders.
- Export Basics: A primer to help you assess your business’s export readiness, understand what you need to know and consider before pursuing an international sales strategy, and when you are ready, develop and implement your export strategy.
- Exporters guide to Trade Agreements: A list of all trade agreements affecting U.S. businesses in the international marketplace.

FINDING BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES:

- Advocacy Assistance for U. S. Exporters: What you need to know…The U. S. Department of Commerce’s Advocacy Center has helped hundreds of U. S. Companies – small, medium and large enterprises – in various industry sectors win government contracts across the globe.
- U. S. Trade and Development Agency: Info for U. S. Exporters…Find out about current contracting opportunities with USTDA grant recipients in host countries.
- Trade Mission Online: A searchable database of U. S. small businesses that wish to export their products. As a small business you can REGISTER OR UPDATE YOUR PROFILE. It is also a search engine for foreign firms and U. S. businesses seeking a U. S. business partner or supplier.

Online Training, Videos & Podcasts are resources available to assist your business entering and competing in the global marketplace. Topics include: Take your Business Global; Where Your Next Customer Come From; Strategies for Growth: Export Opportunities; Competing in the Global Market: SBA’s International Trade Program; and Export University 101 Webinar. Other related articles available include: Export Working Capital Program Fact Sheet; Export Loan Programs; SBA Export Express; 6 Steps to begin Exporting; Export Controls and Licenses. For more information or to request assistance, contact Steven Groner, Illinois International Trade Center at Kaskaskia College.

ISBDC TRAINING EVENTS: APRIL & MAY

Watch your local paper for Starting a Business workshops offered one/two times a month at Kaskaskia College Education Center locations in the Kaskaskia College District.

April 20, 27, May 4, 11, noon – 4:00 pm, QuickBooks Pro Software Training Vandalia Ed. Center
April 26, 2011, 1:00 – 4:00 pm, Marketing Plan Development, Workforce Center, Centralia
May 16, 18, 23 & 25, 5:30 – 9:30 pm, QuickBooks Pro, Crisp Technology Center, Centralia

For more information or to register for a class, please call 618-545-3260, Steven Groner, Director Illinois Small Business Development Center, 325 S. Poplar, Centralia; 618-545-3260; sgroner@kaskaskia.edu

Websites for researching small business trends, issues and other information:

We hope you find our newsletter a good resource regarding small business issues; however, to be removed from our mailing list, call 618-548-3429!