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EMERGING TRENDS FOR SMEs

The great news for business is that emerging technologies are making possible a return to earlier times when business owners and their customers knew each other and had personal relationships that extended beyond the tight boundaries of buying and selling goods and services.

Personalization

The public face of a business has moved from the corporate to the personal. These days the word on the street is that people like dealing with people. They want to know specific names and faces. They want their business dealings to be with other humans. The upside is that they might be more loyal because they like and trust you. The downside is that they might not buy a perfectly good product because they had a bad experience with you.

Taking this on board, and acting on it, might seem counterintuitive to those who are trying to avoid tying their business too closely to their personal brand. Will it become harder to remove yourself from the business when you want to sell it? Well, no; you still need to make it a priority for your business to have the systems and processes in place to run without

relying solely on you. Blame automated phone answering services, with robotic voices offering so-called “customer service”, but there’s no getting away from the fact that it’s become essential to personalize your business. This means that when you are picking the name you are going to use on Twitter or other social media, in most cases, you should consider using your real name. Similarly, don’t upload your logo, show your real face. If you are the person with the vision behind your business, be proud of it and use yourself to promote it.

Social media

Do you believe that customers in your industry aren’t really into social media? Statistics indicate that even if they’re not now, it’s only a matter of time. Remember we just mentioned that people want to deal with the people in the business, NOT the business. Social media is a clear offshoot from that trend. Social media is about building communities and relationships. In the business world, that translates to making connections with customers and prospects. It’s marketing 101 upgraded by a new style of technological support.

If your competitors and your customers

GET THE EDGE

Whether you like Facebook or not, it’s here, with the same population as the world’s 3rd largest country. So while you may not love it, your target market does! Facebook Pages act as the business area of Facebook. Create a Page and build an online community. Facebook has a lot of options for customizing your Facebook Page, including general information, notes, photos, a discussion board and of course, a Facebook wall that acts like a blog.

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aren't there yet, grab a golden opportunity to get ahead of the curve and start finding your feet in the social media sphere using Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Grab a spot before your competitors do and be ready to greet customers and prospects when they arrive.

Video marketing – pictures tell a thousand stories

YouTube is the second biggest search engine after Google these days; people are searching for what they want online and the great news for business owners is that YouTube allows you to upload your videos for free!

YouTube visitors don't expect to watch an Oscar winning movie; in fact they're well trained to viewing all sorts of home grown efforts. Any business person can purchase a decent video camera at an affordable price and start shooting testimonials, behind the scenes at work, interesting tidbits and information about their product or industry, and visual demonstrations of just how their products work.

It's an enormously powerful way to connect to your prospects in a very personal way. 80% of page visitors will view a video and 52% will act as a result of watching it - these are statistics you shouldn't be ignoring when planning your marketing mix.

"Utility computing"

The average small business doesn't have an entire IT staff or the budget needed to fiddle about building a code-heavy proprietary network - open the door to "Utility computing".

Utility computing allows you to ditch a number of IT related expenses such as backup systems and servers and reduce support costs. You aren't tied to your office for access to emails or files. It can all be done, even storing your data, by using applications that are stored and delivered via the internet. It's called cloud computing, and as long as you can access the internet, you can view your data, collect emails and run your business - from wherever you are.

If you're a newbie, try sampling Google Apps. The free version - which is more than adequate for a small organization - allows you to host your email on Google's servers, store documents, and even create intranet sites and share calendars. Aside from Google, there are many other service providers, offering everything from hosting your customer relationship management system (such as Infusionsoft.com or Businesscatalyst.com) to your accounting records (Sassu.com).

CO-OWNED BUSINESSES – GIVING EMPLOYEES A STAKE IN THE COMPANY

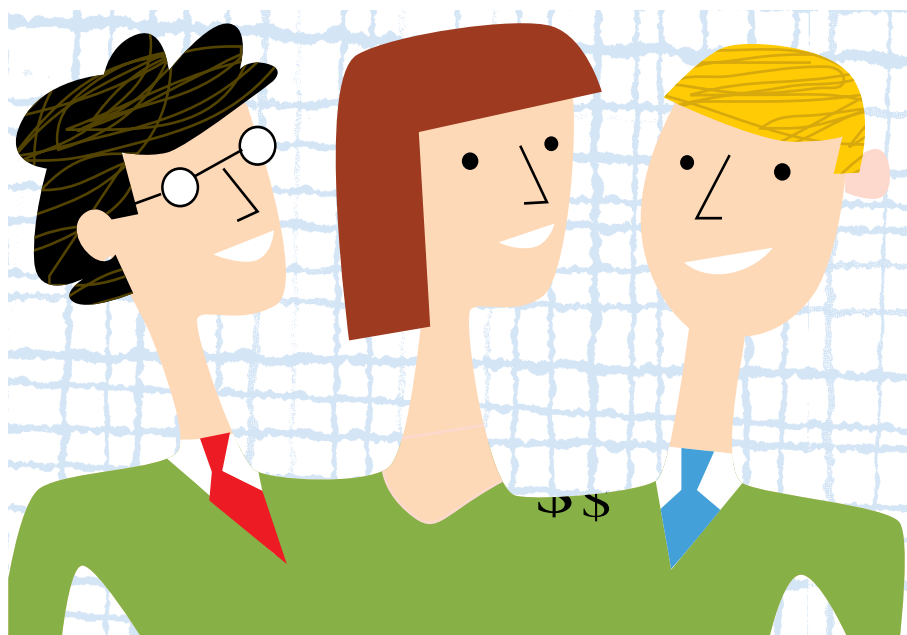
The connection between productivity and morale is a demonstrated fact in the business world. Lack of commitment directly impacts a whole raft of productivity inputs such as number of work hours lost, workshop safety and wastage rates. Lack of commitment dries up a major source of money saving ideas - those that *committed* employees make.

Everyone recognizes the value of employee engagement in the work they perform, but how to achieve it? The most effective way is shaping up to be employee ownership. Employee owned businesses (EOBs) give employees (who are now also the owners or part owners) a stake in getting things right. For the current owner, deciding on the most appropriate EOB model to restructure into needs careful thought and the support and advice of specialists and practitioners with experience in various aspects of employee share plans and facilitating employee share ownership. However, independent research in the US, UK, and mainland Europe, consistently finds that EOBs tend to be successful, competitive, good to work for, and sustainable. And as interest grows in the EOB model, governments are moving to create more amenable legislative and tax regimes to encourage their development.

When employees become owners the advantage for the company comes from them now taking a stakeholder, rather than a shareholder, view of management. Employees tend to become more entrepreneurial in their thinking, more committed to delivering quality, and more flexible in responding to the needs of the business.

This attitude contributed to the better than average success rate of EOBs in weathering the downturn. At Gripple, a UK company, when orders from its biggest customer (a company in the US that had run into financial problems) dried up, employees and directors both agreed to take salary cuts. Hugh Facey, Chairman of Gripple explains - "Because we are all shareowners everyone could see what was happening and why such action was necessary. It worked like glue, pulling everyone together".

Just establishing an EOB alone isn't enough to get employees to think like owners. Companies set on creating an ownership culture need to make definite and continuing effort to teach employees about their stake and keep them focused on increasing stock value. This is the more easy



the smaller the business. As EOBs grow in size, frontline employees are distanced from management and finance issues so it is necessary to develop innovative ways to keep them focused on their personal stake in maintaining quality work. At Van Meter Industrial Inc., a US electrical parts distributor with 340 employees spread out over several worksites, that meant, among other initiatives, a marketing campaign presented in terms the workers could relate to. One was based on a slogan: “Work 10, get five free.” In other words, an employee there who was earning \$30,000pa - or \$300,000 over 10 years - could stand to accumulate a company stock account worth \$150,000 during that same period, based on stock price appreciation and company contributions.

For the owner of a closely held business, transforming to an EOB offers more benefits than increased profitability alone. One CEO says “The program’s [the change to an EOB] going great, I get to go home at 5 o’clock now. It used to be that if the fellows encountered any problems at all, they would stop working, call me, and wait for me to find a solution...Now that they are co-owners, it’s all different. They actively participate in establishing our goals and plans, and they take initiative to resolve any issue that threatens to take us off our plan. And most of the time they handle the whole thing without calling me in.”

Employee ownership is also an increasingly popular solution to the business succession dilemma, particularly for smaller, privately owned businesses. A growing number of SME owners are opting to exit by selling their company to their own management and employees. This exit route can be the most advantageous way of extricating capital and taking advantage of government tax schemes that support employee buy-outs, while ensuring that the business continues to trade.

USING CUSTOMER SURVEYS TO GENERATE LEADS

Customer surveys can be an extremely valuable way of collecting all kinds of useful data. What businesses often don’t consider is that customer surveys can also serve other objectives, such as to inform customers, to advertise a new product, or for lead generation.

If your marketing goal is “to inform readers about a new product or offering”, or “bring an advertising message to prospects and clientele”, then the satisfaction survey becomes a subtle piece of advertising.

Let’s say you’d like to introduce a new product to the personal fitness industry; you’ve decided to include massage therapy as a standard part of your program. You might decide to send out a customer satisfaction survey with a cover letter asking your reader to complete a quick 6-question market research survey. This is a pretty short and non-demanding sort of request that most customers won’t mind doing.

You’ll improve participation rates if you offer a small incentive for taking part. Include an offer to let them know the survey results and you’ll have a great way to capture contact data and permission to be in touch with them in the future. List building alone makes the survey worthwhile for your business.

“Did you know the Fitness Fanciers Gym offers a massage as an alternative for one of your weekly gym sessions?”

Yes No Please call

“Do you think you or your partner would like a nice soothing all over body massage?”

Yes No Unsure

“Are you aware of others who would appreciate a body massage as part of their gym membership?”

Yes No Unsure

At this stage your real intention is to inform clients of your new service. Their answers don’t really matter to you (unless they ask you to call of course).

Continue your survey questionnaire and turn it into an actionable key question survey:

“Knowing that regular massage has been shown to improve health and fitness outcomes, have you planned to include it in your health regime in the future?”

Yes No Don’t know

“Are you worried about your ability to maintain your health and fitness as you get older?”

Yes No Please call

The answer to this question allows you to take action if clients answer in a certain way. You have achieved your objective of generating a lead - the opportunity for you to call the customer. Your survey has been successful.

Another excellent key question to include would be:

“How long has it been since you have had your general fitness reviewed?”

One year Three years
 Never, or if I did, I can’t remember

Regardless of their response, you have a wonderful opportunity to call the survey respondents – they would all obviously benefit from a review of their fitness if it’s been a year or more since it was checked! You might wrap up with a few other short questions which allow you to send out a useful set of survey results and stay in touch with your new contact list.

“70% of all respondents had not reviewed their general fitness in the last 3 years”. Our fitness expert Joe Bloggs points out that failing to monitor fitness can result in... [more good information and stuff about your fitness review and massage services].”

So, if you’re designing a customer satisfaction survey, even an online survey, first decide on the objective; then design the survey to fulfill the objective.

The answers to the questions might not really matter to you, but the survey allows you to build your prospect and customer lists. If the objective is to get permission to contact your prospects, or get them to call you, insert just one or two relevant “key questions” to prompt the desired action. Make the rest of the survey questions simple, and follow up with the results - and the promised gift.

WEB PICK OF THE MONTH

Consider using Facebook Pages for your business:
<http://www.facebook.com/FacebookPages>

THE EXTRA EDGE ON SEO FOR THE SMALL BUSINESS WEBSITE

How is your small business site or product going to be found when the indexed web contains almost 15 billion pages, according to www.worldwidewebsize.com? Here are a few insider tidbits on SEO (search engine optimization) for your small business website.

A domain by any other name

The most important single element in ranking well in search engines is your domain name (DN). Secure a domain name that is different, original and not commonly used by other businesses. It is also helpful if your domain name includes keywords that explain what you do. If necessary, rename your product or business to make sure you can purchase the domain name.

Another trick is to buy secondary domain names, says Catherine Rogers, author of *Taking Off Online – a step-by-step guide to growing your business online*. Select keywords that your customers might use when trying to find your product and redirect them back to your website. If your business name is “Mike’s Shooz” then you might purchase the domain with the more common spelling mikeshoos.com and point it to your mikeshoos.com website.

Keep in mind that people are more likely to type in a short URL, without any hyphens, than they are to type a very long domain name chock-full of hyphens.

Keywords are the keynotes of success

Keyword relevance is vital. Research your keyword terms before you do anything else in your online marketing program advises Catherine - and that includes building your site, writing your content or purchasing a domain name. You can use free Google tools such as these: Google Search Based Keyword Tool <http://www.google.com/sktool/#> and the Google Keyword Tool Box <http://www.googlekeywordtool.com/>. Run them through Google’s keyword tools and see how saturated

they are (heavily used). You can also check the popularity of keyword derivatives this way (at the same time, since Google returns related keywords with your query results).

Whatever you want to be known for, make sure you talk about it a lot on your website. Writing regularly about your primary keyword topic will cause search engines to give a higher keyword relevancy to your site, and get them to see you as an expert resource.

Back to base

Backlinks work wonders for your ranking. When other sites mention you and link to your site, it impacts on how important the search engines perceive your site to be.

Most websites just link to you with your web address. Ideally, some sites should link to you with your top keywords. This would mean that some backlinks that refer to pages on your site come from “anchor keyword text”. An example would be having a link back to your site from an article with the keywords “retirement coach” if that was your business service.

Backlinks from other sites are more effective when they come from organizations that are relevant in your industry. So contact a professional society, or trade association, of which you are a member. If a website profile comes with the membership, ask if you can choose which words link back. Your website address alone will be valuable to you. But if you are allowed to insert your anchor text selection, you’ve hit the jackpot.

Make sure that you use your keywords in any of your own web distributed press releases.

Sorry, Flash is dead

They might look exciting but unfortunately, in most circumstances, it’s simply not worth it. Search engines don’t even index sites which use lavish Flash graphics, so your site won’t rate. Stick to HTML (HyperText Markup Language) and skip the Flash special effects.

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Tim Walsh
Walsh One Consulting, Ltd.
4227 Grove Ave, Gurnee, IL 60031
Phone: 847-782-0500 Fax: 847-782-9137

www.walshone.com

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