



Generating Leads from Social Media

Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and blogs. You are active on at least one of these but are probably unsure if social media is just a passing fad or if it presents a real opportunity



BRENDAN HUGHES
Director of Community,
Weedle

Recent news that Bebo is in decline should be considered against the backdrop of Facebook's unrelenting growth. The world's largest social website now boasts half a billion unique visitors per month, an estimated 1.5 million of whom are in Ireland. The particular websites and applications that people use to engage in networking online may come and go, but the Internet is now facilitating a new type of relationship-building that is here to stay.

There are important implications for businesses with this shift to a more social web. A survey last year by the Irish Internet Association of Irish businesses with blogs revealed that 39% are actually generating sales leads from their social media activities. Meanwhile, research in the United States this year indicates that online social networking is proving at least as effective as direct mail at generating qualified B2B leads (Source: OneSource, 2010).

In the first instance, social media can be an effective way to present a more human face to your organisation and thus increase your trustworthiness. As public relations firm Edelman highlights in its 2010 Trust Barometer, we are far more likely to trust what employees within an organisation tell us than the messages delivered to us in company

advertisements.

Leveraging social media to increase trust and confidence in your company is valid end in itself. However, social networking can also deliver on the bottom line; by increasing your findability online, by helping to build relationships with customers and establish your expertise, by providing a platform for managing your reputation online and by supporting your word of mouth referral activities.

Increase your findability

Social media initiatives can assist in increasing your visibility online and hence the likelihood that you will be found by more new customers. Recent research by marketing agency HubSpot, among over one thousand small and medium sized companies, indicated that there is a direct correlation between the number of keywords a company ranks for in Google and the number of leads generated each month. Creating a blog can be a very effective way of increasing the number of keywords your company ranks for in Google.

Blogging applications, which are generally free to use, facilitate the publication of regularly updated and topical

content, and they encourage discussions and cross links with and from other blogs. These are the very factors that Google places most weight on when deciding which web pages to rank higher in search results. In fact, the HubSpot research found that both B2B and B2C companies could double the number of leads by creating a blog that was regularly updated.

A great place to start with blogging is to read and subscribe to other business blogs in your sector. The IrishBlogs.ie website is a useful directory of the many Irish blogs that exist. Alternatively, check out Awards.ie/BlogAwards for a list of the most popular blogs in Ireland. For international blogs visit Technorati.com, a comprehensive directory of blogs worldwide.

Build relationships and establish your expertise

Social media can help to build relationships with existing and prospective customers and establish your expertise in your field. Twitter has proven to be a particularly effective tool for achieving this and in enabling businesses to remain in consumers' consciousness. Because of the succinct nature of Twitter messages, or "tweets", many people are finding Twitter to be a very easy means of engaging with lots of people on a regular basis.

Tweets can contain links to other web pages and these types of tweets are generally the most likely to be "re-tweeted" or shared by others with their friends on Twitter. This is where Twitter can be especially useful in establishing your expertise. Publish tweets highlighting blog posts you have written yourself or articles that you have read elsewhere online which demonstrate that you are knowledgeable in your field.

The HubSpot research showed that companies with just a few hundred followers on Twitter were achieving twice as many leads per month as companies not engaging in Twitter at all. Twitter's own search engine (<http://search.twitter.com>) is a very useful tool to help locate people in your target market talking about the topics you are interested in. Follow these people, converse with them and illustrate your expertise to them so that the next time they are considering purchasing the type of product you sell, they will be far more likely to contact you.

Manage your reputation

Many organisations are wary of engaging with social media applications, concerned that it will open the floodgates of negative feedback in a very public way. The corollary to this is that the conversations customers are having about your products and your brand are taking place anyway and that you are better off being involved in those conversations. Not only will you demonstrate your responsiveness to your customers' frustrations, but you will also be in a position to correct any damaging inaccuracies being perpetuated

In 2009, Domino's Pizza faced unprecedented negative publicity when two rogue employees posted a video on YouTube showing them placing bodily fluids on food before serving it to customers.

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Within twenty-four hours the video had been viewed nearly a million times. Domino's president, Patrick Doyle posted his own YouTube video in response to the prank and apologised to customers for the incident. They also created a Twitter account (@dpinfo) to answer customer queries. As a result, Domino's was widely praised for their responsiveness to the scandal.

By remaining silent in the face of criticism online you leave a vacuum that will be

filled with exaggerations and untruths. By actively engaging you can demonstrate that you are listening to your customers and you can effectively bring unpleasant situations to a close more quickly. You can easily monitor when your brand is mentioned online by using free services such as SocialMention.com or Google Alerts.

Maximise word of mouth referrals

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Currently there is no single large scale way of harnessing the power of word of mouth referrals. This is one of the big ideas behind Weedle; a new type of social network which enables individuals within your organisation to promote their expertise or specialism through their social and business contacts. The next time that someone is searching for the service you offer they can immediately see how they are connected to you and the recommendations from people they know. After all, we prefer to do business with people we know and we are more likely to trust what people we actually know say.

In general, the power of word of mouth is greatly extended on social networks since people tend to have wider spheres of influence here. For example, the average number of "friends" that users of Facebook have is 150. Therefore, the "echo effect" of your legion of fans can be very powerful. By providing your followers with interesting, valuable or entertaining content that they can easily share, you maximise the potential that many others, outside of your direct sphere of influence, will discover it.

Finally, select the social media application that is most likely to be frequented by your customers. The tactics and approaches outlined for particular social networks mentioned here can readily be applied to your activities elsewhere. Your customers are spending more and more of their time online and increasingly this time is spent on social and business networking websites. Social media presents an opportunity to not only to establish your trustworthiness, but it can also generate more leads for your sales force.

Brendan Hughes is Director of Community at Weedle. He previously held positions as e-Commerce Manager at FBD Insurance and e-Business Manager at Vhi Healthcare. He was the founding chair of the Irish Internet Association's Social Media Working Group. Contact Brendan at <http://weedle.com/brendan.hughes>