



THE SECRETS OF MARKETING VIA SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

INTRODUCTION

No matter what you sell on the Internet today – whether it is eBooks, products you have to mail out for services that you provide yourself – you need to find customers.

That much is certain, but the more creative you are at finding those customers (especially when those methods don't involve spending any money) the more successful you are likely to be.

And that's why it is in your best interests to become familiar with social networking sites. Not to tell people all about what you do in your spare time, or to share the intimate details of your life with, but to use as a method to gain more business.

Yes, there are thousands of customers to be found on these sites. Despite the fact that they are intended for social purposes, they can be used for business purposes too. You just need to know how to do it.

And there is no doubt that the people who are doing it already are reaping the rewards. There are such a high proportion of internet users who are members of at least one social networking site that you are ignoring a huge number of potential customers if you don't at least try it. Facebook alone has over a hundred million users as of the middle of 2008, so you can see just how big an opportunity this is.

But I can guarantee that once you HAVE tried marketing to your audience in this way, you won't want to stop.

TO START WITH – DO YOUR HOMEWORK

This is vital if you are going to get some good results. Some social networking sites are quite lenient when it comes to members using them for business purposes. Others are completely against it.

You need to know exactly where you stand with each one before you get started, because if you take a laid back approach with a site that doesn't like it, you won't get anywhere.

This part is easy though. All you need to do is read the terms and conditions of each site that you are interested in, to see how promotional you are allowed to be. The more you know up front, the better you will be able to integrate yourself into each website.

You should also take a look round and see what other people have done. But be careful with this approach because you may well come across people who have broken the rules and haven't been discovered yet. And you certainly don't want to join them, do you?

DON'T OVERDO IT

Before we get into how to make the most of social networking for business purposes, we should cover one important point.

There are a lot of social networking sites online today, and it can be tempting to join them all. But this can actually harm your chances of marketing successfully through them.

It works far better to join just two or three social networking sites rather than as many as you can. Just think about the amount of free time you have available each week. If you focus your efforts on a few sites rather than a lot, you'll get far better results.

Why? Simply because the people who start to follow you on the sites you do use will expect you to be reasonably active on there. And if you are trying to keep up with half a dozen or more sites, you will naturally be spreading yourself a lot thinner.

And that means the effect will be diluted as well. So make sure you choose the best networks with the most people – and stick with them. And here we're talking about the networks that have millions of followers. You won't be aiming to connect with all of them, but you'll soon find that you have a bigger niche audience to aim at – which is good news when it comes to making money.

Incidentally when you are thinking about the sites that you should be joining, think about the type and age group of people who are using each site. You may need to do a bit of research here but it will be worth it. One site may have a huge audience comprised of college graduates, while another may feature a lot more young professionals. And if you are aiming at young professionals, then that first site – no matter how many users it has – won't be the ideal one for you to join.

THREE POPULAR SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES YOU SHOULD DEFINITELY THINK ABOUT JOINING

Please note that these are my personal favorites. They are well worth considering for different reasons, which I shall reveal as we take a quick look at each one. So let's take the guided tour, shall we?

FACEBOOK

The biggest social networking site out there today. And it doesn't mind you promoting your business either – the right way, which is why it gets on my top three list.

You can actually join by proclaiming that you are a business and opening a business account, but you should be aware that you can't then have a personal account as well. The rules regarding this are quite complex, so it's worth checking out the help section before joining.

TWITTER

If you want big results for less work, then Twitter is the site for you. Why write a long message to people who are interested in what you have to say when 140 characters will do?

That's all you get to communicate with on Twitter, but it makes it easy to keep busy on the site. A minute or two here and there and you will soon have plenty of followers hanging onto your every word.

Some people have even created a series of necessarily short pieces of advice, labeling them '1 of 12' and so on, to create interest. It works well, too, and simply experimenting with using the 140 character limit to your advantage can create some good results.

MYSPACE

It's big, it's popular and most people have heard of it. And those are three good reasons why you should get involved with it too.

They don't like affiliate links, so if you're planning to promote other people's products and you don't have a site of your own, you'll benefit from getting one. But that aside, you'll get a comprehensive profile page that will help you tell people what you're all about, and you can list your interests too. If you make sure these are related to the focus of your business, you'll draw even more interest.

Oh and did I mention you can have your own blog on MySpace as well? People can access this from your profile page, and you can end up with quite a few fans simply by writing a great blog on a regular basis.

ADOPT A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO SUIT EACH SITE

To really make the most of social networking, you need to present yourself as someone down to earth but professional. So let's take a look at how you can do that by focusing on a few important points to remember.

WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

On a very basic level, you're looking for customers. But you're also looking for a certain type of person who is going to become your customer.

What you need to do is to find out who that person is. What do they like? What are they really interested in? And so on. And once you have found out the answers to those questions, you can target your social networking efforts towards that person.

This should be easy to do if you know your product well. And it also means you won't get overwhelmed by the volume of people on the social networking site you are targeting – because you will know exactly which ones you are aiming for.

But make no mistake - knowing your audience is the key to using social networking sites successfully when it comes to marketing your products. If

you don't know who you are aiming at, you won't attract much attention at all. At least, not the type you are looking for.

This follows up on choosing the right sites for you in the first place. Once you have done that, don't assume that everyone on that site is going to have an interest in you. It's just a question of narrowing your focus even more and zoning in on the people you want to reach. Don't try and sell to everyone because it won't work.

ADAPT YOUR PROFILE

Don't make the mistake of going onto one of these sites and setting up your profile just as it would be for YOU.

This really follows on from the last point about knowing who you are looking for. If you know what will attract their attention, then you will know how to write your profile so it fulfills that purpose.

For example, photographers are naturally going to be interested in the profiles of other photographers. Writers will naturally gravitate towards other writers. And people who are trying to make money online will search for others who are trying to do the same. This applies to every niche subject or market you can think of.

Why? Because they are trying to find the knowledge they need to succeed. Or in some cases, knowledge about a subject they like that they don't yet know about. And if other people who share their interests are easy to find through their profile, they'll want to stick with them and see what they have to say, won't they?

Remember that you're not on there for social kicks: you're on there to make contacts and generate interest in your business. That means you need to create a profile that is different from how you would normally describe yourself. The only prerequisite here is that it should catch the attention and make people look closer.

But being professional isn't always going to be the right approach here. You want to seem casual and approachable, so use the kind of language your preferred audience might use. For example, if you sell a range of USB gadgets, you could describe yourself as a USB gadget freak. If you sell eBooks on the subject of saving money, you could refer to yourself as a thrifty money saver.

There are plenty of possibilities here and you should find that you can change the wording you use on your profile page, so don't be wary of experimenting.

You might feel like a bit of a fraud to begin with, because your real passions might be very far away from what you include on your profile. But you should think of yourself as being two very distinct people – a business person and a normal day to day person. And it's the business person that is going to be joining these social networking sites.

There is one other VERY important point to mention here. When you join a site, make sure your first task is to create that profile and get it up and running. You don't want people clicking on your screen name to find out more about you, only to be met with a website address and little else.

If that happens, there is a very good chance they won't be back. So make sure you are ready to create a complete profile from scratch as soon as you join.

USE THOSE TOOLS

One key way of making sure you get other people to follow you on these sites is to use the tools they give you to promote your social networking status elsewhere.

For example, Twitter has a range of badges or widgets that you can use elsewhere. These are ideal for putting on your blog for example, and they even have ones that have been specifically designed to go on MySpace and Facebook.

They're worth using because they enable you to attract more followers from outside the social networking sites. Once they find you they are more likely to follow you – especially if you make it easy for them by using widgets like these.

But there is another tactic you should use as well if you are going to join more than one site. Whatever you do, make sure you link them all together. It seems to be generally assumed that if someone is on one social networking site, they will frequent others as well. So don't be shy about promoting your other social networking efforts; in fact, you will find that some sites actually give you space to put your screen names for those in as well.

START USING FIREFOX!

If you're not using the Firefox browser already, I highly recommend you do so if you are going to be active on the social networking sites.

That's because it gives you far more functionality than many other browsers. People create add ons to use with Firefox, and since many of these are associated with the social networking sites, your marketing will be made that much easier by using the ones you like the look of.

A good example of how much faster and more convenient Firefox is can be seen by looking at just one of the many add ons that are available for Twitter. One of the best ones is called TwitterBar, and it quite simply allows you to make a post directly from the address bar that you would usually type your website address into.

Needless to say, this is a real time saver. But it also makes your use of the social networking site much more enticing. This is because you have that regular reminder – by way of a small dot at the end of your address bar – that you have a social networking site you need to be marketing on.

So whatever sites you decide to focus on, check to see if there are any add ons that will make your marketing quicker and easier to achieve. You'd be amazed at the difference this can make.

THE BENEFITS OF BEING SUBTLE

Marketing on social networking sites is almost like using reverse psychology. Your end goal is to sell your products. But the social networking sites don't generally like you to be that blatant about it.

So what do you do instead? Simple – you sell your subject. Or rather, you promote it. But you don't promote it by telling people how fabulous your book is. You promote it by getting them interested in the subject and making it clear that you know what you are talking about.

You might think there's no difference in this at all, but here's where people go wrong. Let's say you want to sell a book you've written about saving money by shopping online. The last thing you would do is to go on MySpace, Facebook or any other social networking site and try to sell it direct.

Quite apart from the fact that people just wouldn't be interested and would see it for what it is – an out and out advert – you might get problems from the networking sites themselves. The majority of them aren't there for you to take advantage of like this.

So instead you have to think about your subject and find a way to connect with your audience – the very people who ARE going to be interested in a book on saving money.

What you can do here is to dangle a carrot in front of them. Tell them about some of the more unusual ways you have managed to save money recently. If you know of any great deals going on, share them with your readers and followers. They'll be grateful for it, and they'll be glad that they're getting something for nothing as well.

And of course, if you got some useful information from someone you found on a social networking site, you'd bookmark them or start following them wouldn't you? After all they might have more of the same to share...

Now most of these social networking sites will let you add a link direct to your own website – even if that website happens to offer a wide range of goods for people to buy.

So if you are giving away all this free information on a specific subject as part of your input into a particular social networking site, you will find that more and more people will click through to your website. Keep an eye on your website stats as you start to make inroads into this type of marketing. I can almost guarantee that after a while you will see a regular stream of traffic coming from your social networking efforts. And the more you put into them, the more you get out in the end.

THINK SEO – BUT NOT TOO MUCH

Very few people think of putting keywords into their profiles at the various social networking sites. But keywords can bring you traffic on these sites just as they can all across the web.

Most if not all social networking sites give you the opportunity to search for other members. Now think about how you would do this. If you knew the screen name of a specific member you'd type that in. But if you wanted to find other people who were as interested in your hobby or favorite subject as you are, you'd type in the name of your hobby, right?

So if you have written a book on cars, type the word 'cars' into the search box and see what you get back. The same applies to whatever subject you might be promoting.

So what you need to do is to make a list of the most popular keywords that are connected to your subject. Think about what people will look for and make sure those keywords are carefully peppered through your profile and your description.

For example, you might describe yourself as an eBook writer who specializes in books about saving money. You can then add that in your spare time you focus on scouring the internet for new ways to save money on your household bills and so on. Do you get the idea? You're presenting that professional face to people, but integrating it into your profile in a way that doesn't feel like a sales pitch.

If you overdo it you will certainly get the opposite effect that you are after. People know when they are being sold to, so you should always ensure that your writing comes across naturally. That should come before anything else.

The same goes for any comments you add to your profile, or entries you add to your blog in the case of MySpace, or tweets you make in the case of Twitter. Don't overdo it, but the odd keyword slipped in here and there won't do anyone any harm – least of all you.

GO FOR REGULAR EFFORTS

This is one rule that could be applied to every single type of marketing you do. And just because the social networking kind might seem more casual, it doesn't mean it should be on your side of things.

These sites allow you to attract followers. They also allow you to follow other people. Have you ever heard the saying 'give and you shall receive'? If you have you'll be delighted to know that this applies to the social networking sites as well.

Your main focus is to generate a large following of people who will be interested in what you have to sell. But to do that you need to attract attention – and sometimes the best way to do that is to become interested in other people.

Think of it like this. If you have a product that has to be sold to people face to face, what would you do? Would you go out and talk to people about it? Or would you sit at home in the hope that they would come and find you?

This is very similar to what will happen if you get your profile ready for action on a social networking site and you don't go out and find people yourself.

Start by looking for people who have the same interest as you (or at least the same interest that 'the business person you' has!).

You can then start following them or become a friend of theirs. This is by far the best way to start building your network on each site. You will normally find that a proportion of the people you start following will check out your profile and start following you in return. And since you're all sharing the same interests you should find that they will take a look at your website as well.

An active start is certainly the best way to get results as quickly as possible. And this means being regular with your efforts. If you're setting up a website you can get away with putting in a lot of effort to get it up and running and then just tweak it every once in a while.

But if you are going to try social networking for your marketing efforts, you will need to keep at it. People won't follow someone who only pops up every couple of months.

KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR RESULTS

Marketing via social networking is much like any other form of marketing. You need to be aware of how you are doing to see whether your methods are working or not.

It would seem to be a great idea to get involved in a particular site and start making connections all over the place. But along with perseverance and effort, you must also be prepared to MONITOR your results.

Let's say you resolve to try all three of the sites I mentioned earlier. After three or four weeks take a look at how you are doing with each one. Are you getting the results you wanted? Or is one site not working too well for you?

If this is the case, don't drop it. Take a closer look and see what you have been doing that could be at fault. If the methods you have tried so far haven't been working, you need to find an alternative way to connect with that audience. Each site attracts certain types of people, and what may work really well in one place could fall flat on its face elsewhere. So be aware, experiment, review and revise as necessary to get the best results.

You also need to be honest and ask yourself whether you have been putting enough effort in. This is one reason why using the Firefox browser with the required add ons is such a good idea. It serves as a constant reminder that you need to log in and get active within that community.

So don't expect great results in a short period of time. Expect sensational ones within a longer period of time instead – and believe me, it's perfectly possible.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER POSSIBILITIES WITHIN SOCIAL NETWORKING?

The phrase social networking automatically makes you think of websites like Facebook. But in truth you can network online in other ways as well.

For example, think about YouTube. It's not strictly a networking site but you CAN network on it by filming short videos on your chosen subject. People can follow you and subscribe to the videos you make, so it can still be a good place to connect with people who have the same interests as you.

Hubpages is another one that comes to mind. Some people do rank this as a social networking site, but to me it is so much more. You can get plenty of fans and followers here for the free web pages you can build, so it is worth joining and experimenting with building different pages about your business and various different aspects of it.

And hey, maybe you could build a page on the benefits of social networking? If you do, make sure you add all your widgets and badges to it, so people can see where they can follow you. Hubpages is a very responsive site and it's not that difficult to gain a following there if you put some effort in.

Basically any website that is interactive can be used to further your internet marketing efforts. You just need to remember to use the personal approach rather than a business one.

CONCLUSION – WHY DO SOCIAL NETWORKING AND

MARKETING WORK WELL TOGETHER?

There are probably lots of reasons for this if you really dug down deep into it. But in my opinion there is only one that really matters. It's that people are introduced to you as well as your business – and that breaks down the biggest barrier that exists online today.

Being able to sell stuff all around the world is a huge bonus. But not being able to see people face to face can be a huge downside. Similarly, being able to set up an online business on a shoestring is a huge bonus... and not being able to fully convince people you are legit is an equally big downside.

And that's where social networking comes in. The very fact that many of these sites don't like you to promote your business blatantly actually does us all a huge favor. It forces us to get creative and engage with our potential customers in a much more active way. And in the end, that can only be a good thing.

It's also the case that the people who are going on these sites are going there with a social mindset. They are social networking sites, after all. They aren't going there to find products. They're not going there to be sold anything either, even though some of the sites do have adverts of varying kinds on their pages.

They're going there to meet up with like minded people and share experiences and knowledge. This means that if you can get into the same mindset, you stand a great chance of connecting with them and building the trust that is so vital for all businesses to establish online. They're not expecting a hard sell, so if you don't give try to hard sell them, they may well end up buying something from you through choice in the future.

Sounds crazy doesn't it? And yet there are plenty of marketers out there today who beg to differ.

So make sure you persevere and establish a profile and a presence on the sites that matter. And you will find that the audience you seek will start coming to find you.