

Everyone hears about social media and e-marketing, but how many in the property industry are participating? Michael Day makes the case for...

Social climbing

- W**e should start with some facts:
1. More than 37m people in the UK use *Facebook* regularly and more messages are now sent through this social media site per day than by email.
 2. More than 32m people in the UK use *YouTube* regularly and it has become the second most used search engine in the world, with 24 hours of new video posted to the site every minute.
 3. More than 16m people in the UK use *Twitter* regularly.
 4. More than 8m people in the UK use *LinkedIn* regularly.
 5. *Google* has now moved into this space with *Google+*.

These facts alone about the use of social media should convince businesses that they need to embrace what is already becoming a crowded space and develop and implement strategies to take advantage of the opportunities that exist.

Recent surveys have shown that the main reason for businesses not moving into social media is lack of knowledge (e.g. the Optix Solutions Social Media Survey 2010 www.optixsolutions.co.uk/social-media-survey-2010/). This is no excuse. Businesses citing a lack of knowledge today would probably be the same businesses that were choosing to ignore the internet just 10 years ago. Or they would be the same businesses, were it not for the fact that the majority of them are probably no longer in business.

You do not have to be a social media fan to realise that any medium being used by more than half of your customers has got to be embraced rather than ignored. Remember, they may be your customers now, but they could very quickly become somebody else's.

Make up your mind

Crucially, a business needs to develop a strategy. This could be to ignore it and hope it goes away, but it is more likely to involve some level of participation – perhaps an initial toe in the water before a full headlong dive into the deep end. At its most basic, social media can be used to enhance brand awareness and values, with your presence being an indication of awareness, if not involvement. However, there is nothing worse than 'dormant' social media accounts and, if you are not going to be active, it may be better to not be there at all.

By definition, social media is a two-way medium. Of course it can be used to transmit information to customers and potential customers, but it is really about engagement, a dialogue, a method of communication that should be open and transparent.

Many in the property business seem daunted at the thought of 'inviting' people to engage with their businesses, worried that they will receive bad reviews or negative comment. I take the view that people are talking about your business already; they may even be posting comments online without you realising it. Surely it is far better to have the opportunity to engage and respond directly. Try Googling your own business and see what you find... you might be surprised.

Social media platforms do have different audiences and, as part of your strategy, you will need to plan your presence on some or all of them. They should also all be used as part of a holistic marketing approach with identical branding and links to your own website (the most powerful marketing tool you have).

Facebook is the largest social media platform and very much a business-to-consumer (B2C) environment. The average age of a user

is 27 (although 35% of users are over 50). *YouTube* users have an average age of 36 and, as it is owned by *Google*, a presence can greatly enhance search engine optimisation (SEO) of your website. *Twitter* is perhaps more geared to the business-to-business (B2B) market, as is *LinkedIn*. The average age of users of *Twitter* is 31 and 36 for *LinkedIn*.

Ideally, you should not ignore any of these platforms. Your business may be B2C orientated, but it is still important to operate in the B2B marketplace too. If, for example, you are an estate agent, it can do no harm to be engaging with lawyers, accountants and other agents across the UK, sharing ideas and information and possibly leads.

Content is key

Blogging is a great way of getting your views across and of inviting feedback and comment. Blogs can be posted on your own website or blogging platform and social media can be used to drive traffic to your content. They are a superb way of demonstrating your knowledge and expertise through insights and explanations rather than sales messages.

Social media should not be seen as a replacement (not yet) for traditional marketing, but as complementary to it. It provides a fantastic opportunity to highlight what you are good at and what differentiates your business, and to demonstrate a 'human' and engaging personality for your brand.

While most use of social media is free, you will need to dedicate time and resources to keeping up to date. Crucially, you should look to build your audience by targeting the networks and groups you wish to engage with, joining their discussions and conversations and building a reputation and presence for yourself.

Sharing content is one of the great opportunities created by social media. If someone likes what you have said or shown, they will share it with others by 'liking', or 'retweeting', or sending a message with video content to *YouTube*. If you have articles and properties on your website, add *Facebook* and *Twitter* buttons to enable people to click and send to their friends and contacts.

On a serious note, and to avoid a Gerald Ratner-style situation, think about what you are going to say, because once you've said it, it is open to the world. As I often say to clients, "Don't worry, it'll go no further than the internet..."

Getting started

With a little forethought, it is easy to get started on social media, and both *Facebook* and *Twitter* provide guides to setting up accounts and profiles. If you are not familiar with social media, there are probably others in your organisation who are, or you can engage outside help. It is important to get things right (particularly with *Facebook*), as it is not always possible to go back and change things later on.

Once you have secured 25 fans on your *Facebook* page you can secure a vanity url (e.g. www.facebook.com/integratpropertyservices) which is easier to promote.

- Profile name is crucial and needs to be consistent across all platforms.
- Profile content needs to reflect your business.
- Ensure contact numbers and emails are included.
- Content is king – ideally link back to your own website.
- Let people know you have a social media presence by promoting and engaging.
- Enjoy the ride.



Of course, your own website is the most crucial part of your online business armoury, and this, at least, is under your complete control: the look, the feel, how easy it is to use and, crucially, what it offers. It should be updated regularly with articles, blogs and other interesting content. This has enormous benefits for SEO, as *Google's* new search algorithms use a 'freshness' test as part of the ranking criteria. By using social media to link back to content on your website, you will increase traffic and SEO.

The email option

Another great way of improving your business is via e-marketing. This can include regular, targeted emails sending relevant information to specific databases. Regular e-newsletters enable you to keep in contact with customers past, present and, hopefully, future. One of the best uses of such newsletters is to link to articles posted on your website, thereby expanding the audience for your website content, driving increased traffic numbers and improving SEO.

A huge advantage of e-marketing is that it is possible to track every click made by your customers. You can see who has opened or read which article or link and thereby more accurately target contacts and/or future mailings. One client of mine secures around six new market appraisal appointments every month through an e-newsletter which encourages the recipients to use the market-appraisal link.

E-marketing also fulfils elements of customer relationship management (CRM), in that it is a way of keeping in touch with past customers who would otherwise never hear from your business again after completing a transaction. It is also very cost effective. The better your database information the more targeted you can be with your contacts. Why use a scattergun to hit a target when you can use a guided missile?

One of my clients is a supplier of database information used by lettings agents eager to track and contact landlords. The information provided is accurate to within hours and includes not only addresses, but telephone numbers too.

Pay-per-click advertising can also be highly targeted and therefore cost-effective, with adverts appearing on *Google* or *Facebook*, but seen only by people in the demographic/geographic sector you are aiming at.

Offline marketing should link to your online presence too. As you would include telephone numbers on letterheads, business cards and adverts, you should include web and social media links. There are also more sophisticated ways of bringing your offline persona closer to your online presence. QR squares are sophisticated barcodes that can link a static, offline advert to the relevant section of your website via the user's smartphone or tablet. For example, local press adverts for property can carry a QR code for every property, taking the reader directly to a video or static page of the specific property on the agent's website.

'Near field communication' (NFC) technology is now available (already in use on some agents' billboards) and, again, links users directly to the information they require via their smartphones.

In developing or upgrading your website, you should think about mobile technology. Almost half of all visits to websites are made from mobile devices, yet the majority of websites fail to provide a good experience for these users. Mobile-compatible websites recognise the device the user is accessing the site from and present the information in the way best suited to that device. Apps do the same thing, but require downloading onto the user's smartphone or tablet.

This is a huge subject area to do justice to in a short article, but I hope I have given you a flavour of what is currently out there and some of the opportunities you may wish to pursue.

Michael Day is Managing Director of Integra Property Services, a business and marketing consultancy for the property industry

msd@integra-ps.com

www.integra-ps.com

Twitter: @integraps

Facebook: *www.facebook.com/integrapropertyservices*



Related competencies include: T072, MOO