

Getting a return on impact

Trying to manage digital communication really brings the expression 'riding the tiger' to life. What medium has the most impact, and which one will produce the best return?

Report produced and published by Decision Business Magazine



A word to the wise...

Q How do you decide which approaches to adopt – and how can you measure their effectiveness?

Robert Sanders, Chief Executive, Custom Covers: “When we were paying for advertising, we tracked every new enquiry for two years and when it was clear not one had come from that source, I cancelled it. We were an early adopter of the web but our core customer base is just 1200 marquee providers. We know who they are, so the website really only needs to offer an online brochure, but one which is far more detailed than a printed version would be. We want to be seen as the manufacturer of choice in the

DANNY HABEL



“[PEOPLE] WILL USE THE WEB TO RESEARCH WHERE THEY CAN FIND A PARTICULAR PRODUCT AND THEN GO DIRECTLY TO THAT RETAIL OUTLET”

events industry; our way of doing that is to have an online presence that is as sticky as possible so I have a template that I can update easily myself. All of our efforts have been focussed on search engine optimisation and email. I'm looking for page one status, because if customers see that's where we're positioned, it gives us more credibility."

Claire Peers, Director of Marketing, Wilkins Kennedy: "If our clients are doing it, then we should. And if we aren't, there have to be valid reasons. For example, Facebook could be considered too informal and familiar for a professional services firm, but what it demonstrates is how the boundary between business and private life has become blurred, and that can't be simply dismissed. Twitter might be better to communicate hot topics. It's a really good way of promoting a message in a snappy manner with a link back to our website. Media coverage of problems with Twitter means that there can be concerns about lack of control. We have introduced a sign-off procedure but the time it takes reflects the more immediate nature of social media. Someone in each department will have the responsibility, which means the partners are comfortable and don't feel the need to check everything themselves. Success with Twitter comes from being able to respond quickly and by contributing to the forums on there. We will do a competitive analysis against different accountancy firms each month, to demonstrate internally why we have to go down a particular route; in this profession, people buy into hard facts!"

James Walters, Managing Director, Walcon Marine: "We decided to re-launch our website because we'd been told that it was a bit old hat. I think you have to decide the function of your website. We just want people to be able to see what we can do and find us. We don't really measure how effective the website is for us, although we can see how many hits we've had. I wouldn't say that simply having 'x' number of people visiting your site is a measure of how effective it is. I know there are smaller companies out there with a better web presence, which can give the impression that they are bigger than they actually are. We need to be looking at raising our profile internationally and we'll be using the website to do that."



"IF OUR CLIENTS ARE DOING IT, THEN WE SHOULD. AND IF WE AREN'T, THERE HAVE TO BE VALID REASONS"

Gareth Lloyd Jones, Managing Director, Hippowaste: "Our web presence was in no way satisfactory, because it didn't reflect Hippowaste the brand, and that is crucial. Our site was built at a time when it was more of a brochure web offering, and the idea of using it to actually 'do business' was in its infancy then. Now of course, your online presence defines your relationship with customers, or it should."

Danny Habel, Managing Director, Habels: "The UK market for furniture sold on the internet is the same in value as the total amount of furniture bought in Oxfordshire. And the companies which dominate it are the national High Street brands such as John Lewis, and DFS. A customer will go into the store, discuss what's available, go home to think about it, and then order on line rather than go back to the store. But the major furniture retailers have their own brands so the customer can't really use

the internet to do any meaningful price comparisons. My market is a bit older in age profile. Instead of coming to the store first, the customer will look at our website to see what we do and what we are about, and will then decide whether to visit.

Measuring the effectiveness of a particular marketing approach, that's what I have a problem with. You will need to be able to rely on a sales person asking the customer where they heard of you, and it might be that a company has to incentivise its staff to ensure that vital piece of information is captured."

Peter Manley, Marketing Services Manager, Selwood Group: "I'm not sure that every market sector is into Facebook and Twitter as much as the IT industry would have us think. At face value, so many of these digital channels seem attractive because they're free, but they need an awful lot of management input; at the very least they've got to be monitored or your company's reputation is at risk. If we push certain niche areas, I reckon it can cost the equivalent of no more than a half-page advertisement in a trade magazine to achieve a top three position on search engines – and we can monitor the response. But the trouble with e-marketing is that people get annoyed with it in the same way they disliked receiving what they would refer to as junk mail through the post. And I think we sometimes forget just how useful the phone can be compared to email. We'll get an email enquiry about a piece of equipment, but we'll phone to ask when they want it and for what purpose. It would take an age if we had to go to-and-fro by email."

Ross Breckenridge, Director, B&V Digital: "The key to it really is understanding your customers and knowing what's relevant to them. It's nailing down what matters to them, and the beauty of digital marketing is that you can measure how well you're doing at it! A company should be able to calculate their return on investment in digital communication and marketing and what is worthwhile."

Q What are the challenges in trying to integrate digital media with the rest of the company's marketing and sales activities?

Robert Sanders, Chief Executive, Custom Covers: “It’s not a big deal. Every enquiry and order has a marketing tag on it to identify where it has originated, including the web. Of course, my information is only as good as the sales person processing it, but it does mean that at a certain point I can see how our ‘cake’ is divided up. We also bought a template for e-marketing and send emails through our website so that we can see who has opened them. To do a paper mailshot I’d pay £800 a time for 1200 customers, whereas on the internet it’s free so it’s a no brainer! We put out one a month and have done for the past two years. We sent out 850 emails with regards to a trade show last week, and last time I looked, 250 people had already read it. I will always look to see who has read it and whether they’ve forwarded it.”

Danny Habel, Managing Director, Habels: “On our website we have a picture of our bricks-and-mortar presence and a history of the business which I guess will give more confidence to the customer who only knows us from the internet. What is important is to capture email addresses – that has to be the starting point in being able to make sure lines of communication with the customer are kept open.”

Gareth Lloyd Jones, Managing Director, Hippowaste: “We sell both to individual consumers and to companies. We need to treat them differently, which is a challenge – but the great thing about the web is that it allows you to do that. On the trade side, I want potential customers to be able to download case studies that demonstrate what we can do for them. With the general public, I want us to be on the first search results page so they will come to our site and buy. Good use of search engine optimisation and cost per click is a total no brainer – we’ve got to do it.”

James Walters, Managing Director, Walcon Marine: “Because we don’t measure it, I can’t be sure how many sales are driven by the web site, but I suspect it’s only a very small proportion. We have an enquiry form online which does get filled in from time to time, but our focus has been on the more traditional ways of raising brand awareness. We advertise in the main marine journals, every issue, and our name is everywhere at the boat shows. I also worry about the website giving competitors too much information.”

Peter Manley, Marketing Services Manager, Selwood Group: “We still print our two main catalogues for pumps and plant, and they can also be downloaded from our website. You’ve got to remember that the purpose of a website is information. It’s no good introducing a new product or making a change to the way the company does business if it’s not reflected straight away on the website.” websites should help to widen people’s perception of what the company does.”

Claire Peers, Director of Marketing, Wilkins Kennedy: “We have produced the social media equivalent of a brand management document, which sets out the kind of subjects which can be raised and addressed, and those which shouldn’t. It explains how to respond if you’re unsure of how to answer a point or question which has been posted; it’s like having media training I suppose. Every printed document will portray our brand in a certain way, and it has to be the same for electronic media and when people are representing the firm.”

Ross Breckenridge, Director, B&V Digital: “I would say there’s one overriding issue – because of the technical aspect of digital media, it can get stuck between IT and marketing functions. But in reality, it’s about the impression of a company, and the website is pretty much the first contact a prospective customer will have of a company. So it has to be marketing and sales driven. There has to be consistency of message because a company’s values don’t change; on-line and printed media should be creating the same impression. Using different media doesn’t mean that the messages should be different as well.”

Q Which digital medium will have most prominence or be most beneficial in the future?

Gareth Lloyd Jones, Managing Director, Hippowaste: “Mobile is the key word, so smart phone technology is the medium to watch. The ability to communicate directly to people via something they carry in their pocket is so clever. We can text customers to say: ‘We were supposed to pick up your bag at 3.30. It was collected at 2.45’ and give them a voucher for their next order too. With cloud-based technology, linked to mobile products, there’s no excuse for clunky old servers or not getting close to the customer anymore.”

Claire Peers, Director of Marketing, Wilkins Kennedy: “We’ve been looking at a phone app for the firm. When one form of communication becomes second nature, you need to look ahead now, to see what else people are going to be using in their everyday lives and how you can be involved in that. More of our clients will be using smart phones because they’re on the move, and at the same time they will expect us to be available at the touch of a button – which could be an app.”

Robert Sanders, Chief Executive, Custom Covers: “For us, it’s all about the website. Our competitors have raised their game recently, and everyone is becoming a bit more savvy about it. Companies are realising that you lose people very quickly if your website is not fast and functional, or if you don’t use search engine optimisation. We have to keep looking for ways to up our game to keep ahead – we could have YouTube links to show how a particular marquee goes up for example.”

Peter Manley, Marketing Services Manager, Selwood Group: “I don’t think electronic media will take over completely. The sheer volume of emails and text messages is already making it difficult to manage time effectively. What has become more of a problem is that companies are harnessing technology to depersonalise telephone communication, making it harder to speak to the right person, or anyone at all.



"GOOD USE OF SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION AND COST PER CLICK IS A TOTAL NO BRAINER – WE'VE GOT TO DO IT"

What all this has made us realise is that relationships matter, and so we have employed more sales people so we can actually provide our customers with a face-to-face service."

James Walters, Managing Director, Walcon Marine: "Keeping the website up to date is most important. We're trying to produce quarterly press releases which will go onto the website as news. I have to admit, we're not great at blowing our own trumpet though as we just want to get on with the job. As a company we've discussed trying to sell online, but I'm not sure that it really suits what we do. Buying pontoons is not like choosing a book on-line. So, I think for us, it will be having a strong website, and good search engine optimisation , so that people can see we are bigger and better."

Danny Habel, Managing Director, Habels: “Regardless of what technology has made possible, going out shopping is still an experience people like to have. What will happen is that they will use the web to research where they can find a particular product and will then go directly to that retail outlet rather than wandering from store to store in the hope that they might find it.”

Ross Breckenridge, Director, B&V Digital: “It’s hard to know. If a company uses social media it’s about driving traffic to their website which will result in enquiries or sales. That’s the goal. I know some businesses will say that social media isn’t relevant to them, but how many said that about having a website in the early days of the internet? It comes back to knowing your customers and how they want to be contacted. If a company really is close to their customers, they’ll be able to identify which new digital developments are going to be appropriate.”

Q Could companies have a more interactive web presence, and what are the potential pitfalls?

Peter Manley, Marketing Services Manager, Selwood Group: “My concern is that the internet could make us less flexible. Let’s say a sub-contractor in Bournemouth wants a particular piece of plant for Friday. If they go onto our site and find there isn’t one available at their local depot, they’ll click onto a competitor’s site. Instead, if they can see that we stock it but there isn’t any information about availability, they’ll phone, and we can say yes because we will either be able to supply it locally or deploy one from another depot.”

Robert Sanders, Chief Executive, Custom Covers: “We don’t use any social media, such as Twitter or Facebook because I’m not sure of the relevance of those interfaces for our business. It could be a rod for your own back because people expect any page you put up to

ROBERT SANDERS



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be about an immediate issue, and I'm not sure there would a return on the time invested. I also worry that you are opening yourself up to criticism unnecessarily. What if someone writes a negative review online? How do you deal with that? The internet makes it harder to manage reputation. I'm open to constructive feedback, but I can get that from talking to our customers and going to trade shows."

James Walters, Managing Director, Walcon Marine: "We haven't even considered Facebook or Twitter. The trouble is that many companies think that because a new communication channel is available they have to use it, rather than focusing on what is going to work best."

Gareth Lloyd Jones, Managing Director, Hippowaste: "My view on Twitter is that you ignore it at your peril, but also that fools rush in! And Facebook is a phenomenon – you have to sit up and take notice of things like this. A lot of MDs fall into the category of wanting IT to block their staff from using Facebook and Twitter, but a well-defined Facebook strategy is really

important to consider. There are very big brands using Facebook very effectively to access a market that would usually be jaundiced towards them. Is social media right for all businesses though? No. Is it even right for this one? I don't know yet. You need to be very confident that your proposition is appropriate, because there's quite an anti-corporation feel there. And using social media as a marketing tool is not free by a long way either, because it's very hard work. But if I was an estate agent in a competitive market, I would be running Twitter campaigns to advertise certain houses for sale in desirable areas because prospective purchasers would be following me like a shot, just to get their hands on the best house in the street before anyone else."

Danny Habel, Managing Director, Habels: "It's been argued that the customer isn't really aware of their rights with distance selling, but it's been quoted that 20% of internet sales are returned; not because an item is damaged but because after receiving it, the customer has decided against it. For an independent furniture retailer, bearing in mind the size of the products we sell, having to deal with returns on anything like that scale would be a logistical nightmare."

Claire Peers, Director of Marketing, Wilkins Kennedy: "Because we have no physical product, we're selling expertise, so we've got to demonstrate on our website that we know what we are talking about. But at the same time we've got to keep it simple and readable. I don't want the site to be full of 'technical' content, because that's part of the advice and strategy that the client pays us to provide. It's about balance, being able to pitch the site at the right level. When our firm is recommended to someone, they'll still do their own research, and if they are impressed by what they see, they'll make contact with us. If our website doesn't live up to expectations, they probably won't."

Ross Breckenridge, Director, B&V Digital: "There are so many options – video, data capture mechanisms for example. The pitfalls I suppose are because there are so many features and ways of doing it, companies include them whether the customer needs them, or wants them. I would always say that a company should decide on a particular avenue to go down

and focus on that. Make sure something works and then look at another avenue. Spreading yourself too thinly means that nothing gets updated, and although social media seems like a free opportunity, the big investment is in time compared to traditional media.”

Q Is there a danger that websites have become generic and peer group facing, rather than meeting the requirements of the individual company and its customers?

Gareth Lloyd Jones, Managing Director Hippowaste: “The look of a website should be secondary to its functionality. I love good design, so it pains me to say it, but if I can’t get the information that I want or is appropriate for me, then a website is no good, however attractive it looks. I want everyone who visits our site to feel that it is appropriate and effective, but also that it demonstrates the charm and wit of the Hippowaste brand. I want everyone to have a pleasurable experience when they visit the site – that’s what’s important.”

Robert Sanders, Chief Executive, Custom Covers: “I think glossy design, just for its own sake is out and websites are becoming more functional. Ideally you want a good combination of the two. Websites fall apart if they don’t have the content to back them up. I want our website to reflect what we’re about and engage with people straightaway. You’ve got to keep the look fresh – it’s key. I try to change the picture on the home page and put on news stories regularly.”

James Walters, Managing Director, Walcon Marine: “I wouldn’t say our website is peer group facing; in fact we didn’t even look at our competitors’ websites before we did ours. I think there is more of a danger that a website can reflect the personality of the designer rather than the company.”



Danny Habel, Managing Director, Habels: “Of course you look at the market leaders to see what they are doing, but you won’t survive long unless you individualise your site to appeal to your own customers. The problem is that manufacturers will provide their dealers with the same product photographs, so you have to make the effort to make sure everything around them reflects the personality of your business.”

Peter Manley, Marketing Services Manager, Selwood Group: “A website has to be simple and easy to use – here are the products, this is what they do. People expect more information on a website than they would find in a printed brochure. The problem is that to a certain degree, a website has to be all things to everybody, but that isn’t the same as being general. Different sections can meet the specific needs of each target audience. Load time is also important because people lose interest and patience on the internet very quickly. The other, obvious point is that the website needs to be kept up to date. Earlier this year, in the news section of a competitor’s site, the last item was dated 2008, which must create uncertainty.”

Claire Peers, Director of Marketing, Wilkins Kennedy: “It’s one of the reasons why we changed our website providers. The first thing that a potential client will do is to look at our website, so it has to define our individuality immediately. And if the content isn’t refreshed, then they aren’t going to visit the site on a regular basis, or again. Our firm’s policy is that each department has to produce at least five new pieces of content every month. The joy is that the response is measurable so I can report back on the number of people who have clicked onto those pages.”

Ross Breckenridge, Director, B&V Digital: “A definite danger – essentially having a generic website is the safe option, because if everyone else is following that route, how can you go wrong? You need confidence to break out of that kind of thinking, but if you know your customers, what they will appreciate, then that should be the reference point. It should be the customer who is comfortable with your website, not your peer group.”

References:

www.bvdigital.co.uk – internet marketing consultants, specialising in web design and development, search engine marketing, email marketing, audio and video services, online PR, social media, viral marketing, digital marketing strategy; grown out of B&V Creative, a full-service marketing, design, and public relations consultancy established twenty-eight years ago. Email: wiseguys@bvdigital.co.uk

www.customcovers.co.uk – manufacturers and suppliers of marquees and interiors to the UK events industry.

www.habels.co.uk – independent furniture retailer with two outlets.

www.hippowaste.co.uk – providers of the Hippobag alternative to the skip for commercial and domestic waste management.

www.selwoodgroup.co.uk – the UK's biggest privately-owned pump and plant rental business, with thirty branches across the country.

www.walcommarinas.com – design and construction of yacht harbours and marinas.

www.wilkinskennedy.com – chartered accountants and business advisers with eleven offices in the south (including London) and one in the Falkland Islands.

Photography by Andy Scaysbrook – 07901 885799

Report produced and published by Decision Business Magazine – www.decisionmagazine.co.uk

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