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Sage One tool kit
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for connecting with
.....
local customers online

CONTENTS

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1. Promoting your business through local influencers
 2. Promoting your online presence on-site
 3. E-marketing to local communities
 4. Social media for local communities – Top tips for Twitter and Facebook

1. PROMOTING YOUR BUSINESS THROUGH LOCAL INFLUENCERS

We often hear about ‘influencers’ but what exactly are they? Influencers are people your customers or potential ones are listening to, be that online or offline. They could be journalists, bloggers, the people behind popular Twitter accounts, the best-connected guy in town or the village trendsetter. Their advice and opinions are valued and have an impact on others people’s behaviour. As a consequence, influencers can affect your target customers’ decisions by giving them positive or negative feedback on your product or service.

In short, you need influencers spreading a positive message about your business.

As your business is starting to grow, the most immediate and fruitful influencer relationships you can build will be in your local area. This means you need to a) identify local influencers who are right for your business and b) work out how to successfully network with them. You have to take both the offline and online worlds into account, making sure you're covering all bases. Here are some suggestions for how to find local influencers, interact with them and win them round:

1. Collaborate with relevant influencers

Start with thinking about your target audience. This is who you are trying to get to. Next, ask yourself who your target audience is listening to. If your potential customers are mums-to-be it might be that the person they look up to is a local mummy blogger, or maybe they take the advice of a group of local day-carers. Whoever they are, if they're influencing your targets' decisions you need to get in touch and give them the best introduction to your business possible. Strong **third party endorsement** is key to getting your message out there, so find a way of collaborating with influencers, be it offering free products for review or maybe even a special tour of your building, shop or studio? Perhaps it makes more sense to meet up in a local café and have a chat over a coffee or tea? Make sure you adapt your approach to whoever you're trying to engage and try to make sure there's something in it for them. Money, free products, exclusive previews, special offers... or maybe you can do them a favour in return? Give your influencers a reason to take an interest in working with you in exchange for their time. And once you've connected – keep in touch! Don't let that relationship cool down.

2. Get to know your local chambers of commerce

The **British Chambers of Commerce** have a ready-made network of local businesses and business-owners, many of whom could be potential partners, collaborators, suppliers, mentors and even customers. All of them are influencers. Pretty much every city will have a chamber of commerce, so whether you're near **Manchester** or **Norwich** or **Bristol** or **Sheffield**, get to know your nearest one. Once you're involved you'll be able to take advantage of numerous networking opportunities, such as workshops, lunches, networking events and even local business awards ceremonies. What's more, many chambers of commerce have newsletters in which they'll include local business news and announcements and may have advertising space too.

3. Support other local businesses, online and offline

Successful, established small businesses and business owners can be powerful local influencers. Bearing in mind that **95% of the UK's business are micro businesses** with 0-9 employees, there should be plenty around for you to interact with! They've spent years, sometimes decades, building a profile in the area and will have a network of customers and partners who they speak with regularly. In the offline world, building a happy business relationship with them may lead to further local opportunities through their professional network and customers will appreciate your efforts to support the local business community too.

When it comes to the online world, many local businesses will have **Facebook Pages** or **Twitter Profiles** so make sure you Like, Follow and engage with them online. There's a strong chance they'll return the favour and help you to build to your local online reputation.

4. Harness the power of search

When turning to the digital realm to look for local influencers, many business owners don't know where to begin and indeed, identifying effective 'influence' can be a challenge to say the least. As a starting point, doing some digging on Google and Twitter's own **search engine** can actually be very effective. For example, typing Birmingham business blog into Google brings up the blogs for the **Birmingham Business Alliance** and **Coffee Birmingham** – a blog and community hub for Birmingham's independent coffee shops.

When searching on Twitter, your results will show you who has Tweeted about your chosen topic most recently. If it's a local business or business owner with several hundred followers, who regularly Tweets, then they probably have a reasonable amount of digital oomph so start interacting with them.

Remember:

Google and Twitter automatically prioritise their results by relevance to your search, but also those which have more clout online.

2. PROMOTING YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE ON-SITE

Every customer who visits your place of business is a potential Facebook Fan, Twitter Follower and subscriber to your email newsletter.

Obviously, you need to make sure your website or blog gives people reasons to visit: interesting and valuable content, regular news and updates, holiday promotions, special deals and more. But assuming you offer all of those things, how do you get people to start checking you out online? Here are a few simple steps to get you started:

1. **Put your web address and social media contacts everywhere.** That means including your URL on as many of your printed materials as possible: business cards, stationery, flyers, brochures, postcards, catalogues, newspaper ads, phonebook ads, etc. Don't forget to do the same on any promotional products you might use, such as pens, pencils, t-shirts, coffee mugs, keyrings, notepads and so on.
2. After that, look for other places where it might make sense to feature your web address and social media contact details. This could include employee uniforms, delivery vehicles, display banners and of course, your shop window or door (so people walking or driving by after-hours will know where to look for more information if they see something interesting in your shop).
3. Next, find ways in your real-world interactions with customers to encourage them to join you online as well. This could be something as simple as encouraging people to leave their email address or business card so you can add them to your mailing list in return for updates on special offers, events and entry into a regular free prize draw.
4. The easier you make it for people to interact with you online, the more likely they'll be to keep coming back. Make sure your website offers customer self-help options or FAQs so people can find out more about what you do without having to call you, email or visit your store. You can gain even more of an edge by providing advanced services like mobile apps or **live chat** on your website which customers increasingly expect. A **blog** can also provide an informal way to engage with your business, as well as conveying the company's personality. One post a week won't take too much time and if you're writing each post as an advice piece tied in to local events and news then it'll always be topical and helpful. Another way to engage with your local customers online is to ask them to visit your website and write a review of a product or service they've used. **Customer reviews** are not only easy to produce (after all, they're writing the content, not you), but they boost your business' appeal both online and off. In fact, one study found that a website with customer reviews has a **63 percent better chance of making online sales** than a site without.
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6. If you're keen to get the word out fast, set up a **'Tweet Shop'**. In a nutshell, this is exchanging physical products or services for tweets from customers. Several brands have done this, such as Kellogg's and Marc Jacobs, but the scale and duration of the Tweet Shop can vary hugely. If you own a bakery then it could be as simple as offering a free cake for every person who Tweets about the bakery on a specific day – they just have to come in to collect their reward. This activity provides the perfect bridge between online and off, making it easy for locals in particular to engage.
7. Another creative way to attract your local customer base to your online resources is by collaborating with a few other complementary, non-competing businesses in town. For instance, BestSmallBizHelp.com suggests organising a regular **'Blog Party'** where local entrepreneurs get together over snacks and coffee and brainstorm ideas for promoting one another via posts at high-profile blog websites in their particular niche. Done once or twice a month, such posts can provide businesses with dozens of valuable **'backlinks'** to their websites over the course of a year. The more backlinks your site has from popular websites, the higher you are likely to appear in online search results.

3. E-MARKETING TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

What are the best ways to attract local customers to your business? Nowadays, some form of e-marketing is a must, even if your business has been open for many years and you have a solid base of loyal customers.

But what types of e-marketing should you pursue, and how much will it cost? It all depends on what kind of business you run, the types of customers you serve and what sorts of marketing strategies work best for them and you.

If you start with the idea that you'll try a little bit of everything and see what works, you may not see much Return on Investment (ROI) and will undoubtedly get frustrated. It's easy to become overwhelmed, confused and spread yourself too thin when you're a small or micro business, especially if you work on your own.

To help you navigate the many online tools available, here's our step-by-step guide to targeted, local e-marketing.

1. Consider how much you're able to invest in your e-marketing efforts. If you have more time than money, the **SEO specialist Moz** says your best choices for online marketing are Facebook, Twitter, Google +, Pinterest and the various forums on LinkedIn. On the other hand, if you don't have time to spare and would rather pay for e-marketing expertise, your preferred options will be mobile apps, website SEO services, online video marketing, e-loyalty programmes and text-based advertisements.
2. Once you have a sense of your ideal budgets (in terms of time, effort and money), consider the e-marketing opportunities that each social media platform can provide:
 - **Facebook Pages** – A no-cost, easy-to-manage way to share news, updates, photos, videos and more. Facebook also has a well-established contextual advertising programme, allowing you to pay for advertising that only targets users within the local area.
 - **Foursquare for Business** – A mobile app that lets people share information and search for places based on their current location. Foursquare for Business lets you manage your online listing information to increase your odds of finding new customers (**Facebook Places** offers similar, location-specific information for businesses.)
 - **Twitter** – In addition to its basic service for sharing Tweets with followers, Twitter offers how-to guides and premium, managed services to help businesses communicate with existing customers and attract new ones.
 - **LinkedIn** – A must-use resource for business professionals who want to network with others online. LinkedIn is also a great way for B2B companies to reach out to prospective customers and partners. It also provides a wealth of tips, best practices and paid services to help you build your local following.
 - **Pinterest** – If you sell products with visual appeal, you should probably have your business on Pinterest, which is a highly popular picture-based bulletin board.
3. Focus on the strategies that are best for you. If you operate, say, a pub or restaurant that draws a lot of customers on foot or by car, start with mobile and location-based tools such as **Foursquare** or **Yelp**. These are the apps people are most likely to use when they're in your neighbourhood and looking for a place to eat or drink. On the other hand, if you're a B2B supplier for local beauty salons or provide tech support to offices, focus on Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and targeted outreach.
4. SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) means making sure your business can be easily found via the most commonly used search tools. **Google My Business**, **Bing Places for Business** and **Yahoo! Local** offer free (as well as paid premium) listings and/or page services for local businesses. These improve the odds of your company appearing in locally relevant results when people search the web. However the most straightforward tip would be to optimise your website or blog content for search by making sure you include the most popular keywords and town or city names. This means that when people enter these into search engines you should come up near the top of the list.
5. If you have a budget to spend on advertising, **Google Adwords** might be the one for you. In a nutshell, you bet on words relevant to your company so that when people search for those words your website comes up in the results. Campaigns can run for budgets big and small and there are often interesting offers for beginners, too.
6. Don't forget to keep up the relationship. While you're optimising your strategies for attracting new business, make sure you connect with your existing customers by asking them to sign up for your email newsletter using a tool like **MailChimp**, like you on Facebook, follow you on Twitter and Google+ and subscribe to your blog.
7. The best way to ensure that both new and current customers always know where to find you online is by including your website address and social media contacts on all of your offline materials: business cards, flyers, brochures, local newspaper ads, etc. It helps if you add a little incentive – say, a 10-percent-off coupon or a free prize draw – but often all it takes to get people to connect is to ask.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES – TOP TIPS FOR TWITTER AND FACEBOOK

You've set up a **Facebook page** and **Twitter profile** but now what? Getting onto social media is the first step but it's a pointless one if you don't know what to do once you're there. What's more, you need to have an idea of how to use the right platforms to engage with your local customers. A 'Like' or 'Follow' from someone in another part of the country isn't as useful for you as engaging with potential customers on your doorstep, unless you're selling online with **Sage Pay**.

Below is some introductory advice on using Twitter and Facebook to engage with local customers but first, 'Three Golden Rules' to follow for both platforms:

1. Be active and locally-focused

If you've set yourself or your business up with a social media profile then make sure you're using it frequently. This might just be a couple of times a week or maybe once a day, but make sure the updates are regular and focused on local issues and news. No one will pay any attention to a Facebook page that looks like an afterthought, or a Twitter handle that's been neglected for the past month, and if you want to attract local engagement then your focus should predominantly be on the local community.

2. Engagement before numbers

It's easy to become obsessed with the number of Followers you have on Twitter, or the number of Likes on Facebook, but these aren't the most important things. You want to be aiming for 'engagement.' That means interacting with people, many of whom could be potential customers or influencers and the key to engagement is reactivity. It's all about having conversations so Retweet, Favourite and Reply to Tweets when you have something useful or helpful to say. On Facebook, Like the Pages, Posts and Statuses of other organisations and people. If you're targeting local customers then it's far more valuable to have five good conversations with people just down the road than receiving 50 Likes from people in another part of the country or living abroad.

3. Be visual

Wherever possible, add photos or video to your social media updates. Tweets and Facebook posts with images – moving or still – are twice as likely to be shared by other users, so they're a vital part of building engagement. This is particularly important if you attend any events in the local area, as you can then tag other businesses or people who attended.

Twitter

In a nutshell: With a 140 character limit on Tweets, this platform is ideal for quick, succinct updates.

- Make sure you're Following and interacting with local businesses, organisations and regional newspapers. These organisations will already have built a network of local fans and potential customers, so engaging with them is a stepping stone to engaging with their Followers.
- Hashtags act as a marker helping people to find information on a chosen subject. For example, **#SmallBizSaturday** for small business tips and advice and **#SageOne** for information about our software for small and micro businesses. If there's an event going on in your local area, see if it has a particular hashtag and make sure you include it in your Tweets. You can also search for a local hashtag and see who is Tweeting it as these could well be potential local customers! (NB: Although hashtags started on Twitter, they're increasingly being used on Facebook too)

Facebook

In a nutshell: Users share photos and videos, write posts, organise events and numerous other things - the ideal portal for you to show off your business's personality in full.

- Once your Facebook Page has been created, search for 'Groups' dedicated to local activities that are relevant to your business, then raise your profile by taking part in the discussion. For example, if you're a specialist camera dealer in Glasgow then join the **Glasgow Photography Club** group and get involved in the conversations.
- The ability to quickly and easily organise events makes Facebook an ideal platform for organising and promoting your own offline activities, such as a 50% sale. If you make the event open then local users who already follow your business on Facebook can share the invitation with their friends, spreading the word for you. Once these new people accept the event invitation, you'll also have a longer list of potential customer for future marketing activities.

One final tip: If you're worried about finding time to post updates then try using **Buffer**, a tool which allows you to schedule your Tweets and Facebook updates hours or days in advance. That way you can have multiple updates ready to be sent out at specific times, rather than needing to regularly log in when you're busy running your business.