

GETTING INTO SOCIAL MEDIA FOR INDUSTRIAL SMEs

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There has been much skepticism about the use of Social Media in the industrial market place – even late in 2012 I see that a recent paper suggested that 30% of engineers did not use social media in their work – with the implication that this was a poor result but nonetheless also implying that 70% do use them. I myself was very skeptical for a long time until I carried out a 2 year survey and realized the possibilities – after 6 months of operating a social media plan for our major clients we found almost an 80% increase in their webprofiles - and I knew the time was right – now nearly 2 years on it is just automatic for us to propose a social media program for any client in the knowledge that we would not be doing our best for them if we did not.

Even so I still think that the approach needed to be cost-effective with industrial B2B companies is different from B2C mainstream/retail activities – because it is some years behind the mass market – but I believe it will change as younger engineers come through with their greater awareness of, and comfort with, social media and the mobile devices they are best suited to work with.

Given this situation how can an industrial SME benefit from a Social Media program while keeping an eye on the budget? Let us first appreciate that in my experience few industrial SMEs have much in the way of effective promotion – few have PR (the most cost-effective promotion available) and those that do promote at all often rely overly on expensive advertising and exhibitions without taking advantage of the other low-cost opportunities available.

Developing a Social Media campaign is then quite an advanced approach for an industrial SME and is best done in conjunction with other activities where suitable content may be created and reused across the marketing mix. Given that, *if you haven't done so already then dip a toe in the water* – social media is the fastest growing promotional activity in the Industrial sector – but do not go overboard. Experiment, learn and when you understand then commit.

Before you begin check that your website is attractive and functional – full of useful information which is easily found – otherwise any money spent elsewhere is likely suffer a high degree of wastage – which is likely to be unfairly attributed to the new activity whatever it is.

Begin by creating ideally an independent blog site (or if you must save yourself the small hosting cost, you can add a blog page to your website) and commit to update it regularly with content that's interesting and engaging. Disable “comments” – if you want conversation use other appropriate social media.

To get things going and ensure there is plenty of information for the search engines you can *pre-populate the blog with your past 12 months Press Releases*. An excellent reason to have started a PR program 12 months ago!

While you are at it *remember to use photos, graphic illustrations and videos on your blog* as this will make it more useful to visitors and more attractive – search engines also value pictorial information more highly – I recall a report of a year or so ago which showed that viewing industrial videos was the most popular online activity for engineers (in their work role) while submitting videos was the least popular activity – thus creating a large gap between demand and supply.

One benefit of an independent blog site is the value accrued when you *include useful back links from the blog to relevant material on your website – also to your principals or your corporate site*. This all adds value for visitors who can read a piece on the blog and then click to go straight to the tech data sheet plus it will help the online perception of a bigger presence and greater activity and interest so leveraging you up the organic rankings.

In similar vein *persuade principals or corporate head office to link to you – corporate should ideally put your blog on their menu*. Again this will make your blog more useful, easier to find, will add value to your principals or corporate and the links will show to search engines that you are well connected to other interesting sites – and therefore of interest yourself.

Please *make regular/frequent posts to your blog at least once a week* – this is easy with re-edits of press releases and is ideal for short chatty information bites – e.g. “we are exhibiting at” or “we heard of a really novel application of our widget” ... or “Hot News – we have a new product”, new pricing, new stock ...

This should include posting of Press Releases at least twice a month on the blog with links to data sheets, full range information, application guides, whitepapers etc. plus as much other material as you can manage.

Moving into the wider Social Media now with a sound blogging background you can *set up business pages/channels on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Youtube* – so that you can *Tweet your Press Releases and blog posts – and put them on Facebook and LinkedIn*.

Now you are on a roll so *really get into it by putting demo video clips on Youtube* – make them yourself or get them from principals or Corporate HO - bearing in mind that the web is much more tolerant of quality issues than other media – then *link to them from your website and blog*.

Basically *you or an appropriate (senior) member of staff need to be fully engaged in this process*, whether or not you actually do it all in-house – *and if it does all seem a bit much to do for yourselves - then get a Social Media Manager* – they can be very effective and very professional – and not very expensive – especially when they are able to work closely with your PR or Marketing agency.

One thing you may care to do for yourself is *to join relevant groups* where you can join the discussions and become known for your sagacity and wit – while picking up a thing or two in information or advice.

Of course do not forget to *add your social media buttons and links onto your website and blog* – also add your social media links *to your e-mail signature and all other electronic media* – and add your social media links to *all printed media – headed paper, compliment slips, business cards etc*.

On Twitter search out people who may be interested in your product and follow them to encourage them to follow you. Communicate with your followers and retweet often as this validates them and warms them to you. Then *invite your Twitter followers to follow you on Facebook and vice-versa*. If you are *on LinkedIn make sure all of your social media links are on your profile page*.

Have fun with it and watch your webprofile grow!