



Heart Internet reseller webinars

“Using social media to sell web hosting”

Webinar transcript

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We'll begin by looking at why you might want to make social media part of your marketing strategy, along with positive or negative factors.

Then we'll take a look at the core tenets of an effective strategy, and the methods you can use to integrate social media into your business. With this, we'll look at getting people to interact with you, turning followers into customers, and in turn, customers into referrers.

To finish up, we'll have a Q&A session, we'll make it a little longer this time, as we don't want to run out of time.

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Why should you include social media in your marketing strategy? Well, on a base level, you want to attract as much additional traffic to your site as possible, as more traffic can mean more sales. Together, Facebook, Youtube and Twitter attract over 10% of all visits to websites in the UK, and that's higher than Google, so your potential increase in audience size is enormous.

Almost everyone, consumers and businesses alike, and not just within the technology sector, make use of social media, 88% of Brits in fact. Equally, if more than half of your customer base would be glad to feel as though they were 'being listened to', it would be foolhardy to have their desires fall upon deaf ears.

Social media is an additional channel that allows you to interact very closely with your customers. Feedback in both directions can be beneficial for both you, and your customers. You get more customers, they get a product more closely suited to their needs.

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You know social media is enormous, and that you want to get involved, but before you go off half-cocked, you need to decide what you want to get out of it

Set yourself clear goals first, and stick to them, you don't want to end up sending mixed messages. It's not difficult to find evidence of failed social media strategies online. On one side, you've got the likes of the Old Spice guy, who has done an excellent job of reinvigorating a tired brand, previously associated with 'your dad'. A lot of this was due to the close interaction and communication with online communities, Reddit for example. Of course, the whole advertising strategy was excellent, and I would recommend looking up the videos on Youtube.

On the other hand, you have the failures, like Capcom's recent attempt at developing a community led Megaman game. Due to poor communication of intentions, and lack of interaction, the project failed, and the loyal fanbase were left feeling betrayed.

Make the big decisions before you launch, and plan accordingly. Are you going to build a community around your brand? Do you want to increase sales? *Are you going to use Twitter for support?*

As a webhost, that last one is a very important decision, you can't pick and choose, you need to either support all of your customers, or none of them. If some customers receive support responses, all customers will expect them.

If you are going to use social media for multiple purposes, say marketing and support, you may wish to create I would recommend creating distinct accounts for each. So, you could create @yourcompany as a primary Twitter account for sending out marketing messages, and alongside that, run @yourcompany_support – this way there are no mixed messages, and important announcements aren't swallowed up by support requests.

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Leading on from that, let's take a closer look at the pros and cons of using social media as a business.

- First of all, it opens up relationships with your customers outside of the standard support and sales channels. You can have one-on-one relationships with your customers, without a strongly defined agenda. Customers will always prefer to work with people and businesses that they can relate to.

- If you consistently provide useful and interesting information via social media channels, readers will come to respect your opinion, and are more liable to trust the products that you sell. Let's say you post a number of highly rated blog articles on website and server security. In future, customers and non-customers alike will be likely to view your product platform as inherently more secure.

- Facebook and Twitter allow you to promote new deals or offers instantly, at essentially zero cost, A typical online ad will cost you for every user impression or click, and the conversion rate is generally quite low. If someone has 'liked' you on Facebook, or if they're following you on Twitter, your posts will appear directly in their feed – and they are following you because they want to hear from you, not because they have been forced to view your ad on a website.

- Going on from there, your followers can work as an extremely strong marketing force for you. It's all well and good promoting your services, or providing customer testimonials, potential customers will always take this with a grain of salt. However, if they get a recommendation from someone they know, they are much more likely to be swayed.

- On the other hand, once started, you or your staff will need to dedicate time consistently to your strategy, it is simply not a 'fire and forget' option. I have visited all too many Facebook or Twitter accounts for decent sized companies, only to find a forgotten ghost-town, with the odd 'Is anyone here?' post, and this leaves an extremely bad impression. If you want people to pay attention, you have to demonstrate that you deserve that attention – that means staying in touch with your users every day. Once you've started, you can't simply close down your Twitter feed.

- Social media is a double-edged sword. Any issues that customers have with you, or the services you provide, will be aired openly. If you are providing a substandard service, it will be glaringly obvious to any potential customers. You can easily lose control over a conversation – customers can say whatever they like about you, maybe even things approaching libel. However, you must remain professional – you can't get into an argument with your customers in public, you can't use personal account data to back up your points, it's in breach of data protection, and it's extremely unprofessional. You need to know which conversations to have, and which to avoid.

- Many of you will have heard of the Barbara Streisand effect whereby the actress took legal action to prevent aerial photos of her house being published, initially taken as part of a coastal erosion project. Her efforts attracted News outlets were to the story, and it received far more publicity than it ever would have otherwise, all of it negative. Trying to hide information will only ever garner you negative attention. People are much happier to hear that you are aware of an issue and you're trying to fix it.

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So, having heard what I've said so far, you've decided that social media is for you, which social networks should you use? The big two to focus on are Facebook and Twitter. If you can produce video content, by all means use YouTube to add another dimension to your marketing. If you are targeting businesses or business people, definitely consider LinkedIn. For the purposes of this webinar, we will focus on Twitter and Facebook, and to a lesser extent YouTube. The table on the left here is slightly misleading, Twitter users don't typically go directly to the Twitter website, they generally use a third-party management solution, like Tweetdeck, or Hootsuite, so the stats look a little low. Going into the future, it's an extremely good idea to keep an eye on Google Plus in the future, although businesses are not yet permitted, there is still a lot to play for in the Social Media market

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The next step is to plan your strategy. When beginning, it is important to keep in mind the four Ps of social media marketing, Perceive, Protect, Participate and Project.

Perceive

In my mind, perception is the most important factor, you need to know what's happening online, and understand what it means for you and your business. Pay attention to what people are saying about you, and about your competitors – are they doing better than you? Worse? Is there anything in particular that they are commenting on? Maybe they particularly like a certain feature available with a competitor. That is definitely something worth checking out.

Protect

Likewise, if customers are making negative comments about you in social media, be prepared to protect yourself. The best strategy is one that is both pro-active and reactive. On the reactive front, either put them in contact with support, or assist them with the issue. On the pro-active front, investigate what steps you can take to avoid the issue entirely in future. Just be prepared to respond to your critics in some way.

Participate

It is important to participate openly and directly with online communities. If a customer points out a problem with your product on an online discussion board, respond to them directly. Whatever you do, however, don't set up shell accounts under fake names – long-term members of communities will spot you a mile off. It shows that you care, and makes it clear that your company is constantly seeking to resolve any issues that may pop up. It is an excellent idea to set up Google Alerts, for regular updates of when and where your brand is mentioned around the Internet.

Project

Blogs, media sharing and social networking sites can be useful for promoting your business (just avoid the activities that lead to active opposition). Social media are also good for projecting your personal brand. But as you speak, remember to keep listening.

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When planning your strategy, remember that the idea behind social networking is integration, and interaction, however running each of your social media channels separately makes no sense at all. Think of website as your primary hub, all traffic should eventually be led back there. Let's say you produce video tutorials on Youtube, as we do, promote them via Facebook, or your blog. Links to Youtube in turn point back to your site. Aim to drive traffic/ awareness towards website, maybe promote a competition on Twitter that leads to your main site. However, be careful not to compete with yourself. Don't send exactly the same message via multiple channels (say Facebook and Twitter), or users will feel that they only have to follow you on a single channel, and thus you risk segregating your customer base. Make a few things Twitter, or Facebook exclusive.

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Your ideas about your social media strategy are starting to take shape, but it's a good idea to get it all down, in the form of an action plan. Think first about what goals you want to achieve – we spoke earlier about different goals, think hard about what you want to get out of it. Your goals can be quite specific, or more general. If it is your first jaunt into social media, you'll likely function better with general goals, but particular plans for your methods.

You don't need to jump in right away, take your time to survey the market, look at your opponents' strategies – follow them on Twitter, Like them on Facebook, sign up to their newsletter. You should be prepared to borrow and adapt the best ideas. One thing to remember, a large number of followers does not necessarily equate to a successful social media strategy. Some companies pay firms for followers, or request followers in return for following them. Having a small, involved community is far better than a large, disinterested group – that's something I'll touch on again later.

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This is actually our original plan, prior to setting up our social media network. If you look at how we interact with our customers via social media, you'll see that this matches up fairly closely with our plan. We don't support our customers via Twitter, nor do we respond to disparaging posts referring to other hosts.

Over the period, we have run a number of Twitter exclusive competitions and promotion, as well as linking to promotions on Facebook and our main site. We use Twitter to make customers aware of our latest blog posts (which are retweeted with good regularity).

Our Facebook and Twitter strategies are closely linked, but Facebook allows for a much greater degree of customisation. Our Facebook page includes.....

I won't dwell on this too much, but I would definitely recommend having another look at this slide once the presentation is over, even if only to give you a starting point.

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Right, this is a fairly complicated looking diagram, but it contains some interesting information. Take a look at the orange section. As you can see, you can pick up around 40% of your online followers by providing special offers or deals, via the medium. Whilst these users may be less likely to interact with you in the longer term, you are definitely in the position to capture sales.

Your current customers are of course, also likely to follow you and you should look to getting them involved with your social media channels as soon as possible.

The other main section, in grey, is people attracted to interesting or entertaining content. This is where blog articles, youtube videos, or other extra content comes in. There is a cost, in money and in time, to produce this, but there is definitely a considerable payoff.

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Getting people to interact with you consistently does require some work, as with any interpersonal relationship. You need to keep them interested . Four ways to do this are through

- offering rewards, such as prize draws, or exclusive discounts.
- providing interesting discussion, including asking questions, running polls and getting involved in debates
- sharing new info is the most resource intensive, but if you have an interesting blog or offer free resources, people will help promote you by sharing this content.

- raising awareness about the social media in first place is obviously key and there are multiple ways you can do this very easily, such as your emails, website and any other signatures you have.

I'd also like to make the point that you shouldn't just chase a number, increasing your number of followers shouldn't be an end in of itself. Focus on quality over quantity e.g. it is better to have 100 active followers who have an interest in your product than 1,000 who pay you no attention and have no interest in web hosting. The key is to getting started is to be active and not dip in and out once a week or less. It is a daily commitment, especially at the start.

This brings me onto an article I read recently, about Facebook's Edgerank algorithm, which is used to determine which items appear within your newsfeed. As you interact more frequently with your followers, or rather, the more frequently they interact with you – posting on your wall, commenting on your status, viewing your profile, the more prominently you will feature in their feed. I'm sure many of you have had a sneaky peek at the profile of a male or lady-friend that you quite like, only to find them featuring rather more prominently on your newsfeed in the future. If you can get your customers interacting with you on a regular basis, they will be more likely to see any future updates that you make, so, constant interaction is key. I would definitely recommend reading the article, and I've included a link to it at the bottom of this slide.

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Once you have a set of interested followers, you can look to increasing sales from them group, either directly, or having them become referrers, to attract external customer.

There are multitude of approaches available to you, ranging in complexity from simple (and cheap), to rather more complex.

On a simple level, you can retweet positive comments that users make about you, so that they reach a wider audience. Whilst you may have a newsletter, not everyone reads them, so you have a great chance to announce new products and features.

As I've stressed, a two way feedback system is extremely important. Listen, and respond to, feedback – customers are always pleased when you listen, and any opportunity to improve your product is a good one.

As we go up in complexity, you can look at providing Social media exclusive discount codes and short term offers, Dominos Pizza do an excellent job of this, offering new pizzas to Facebook fans first, with exclusive codes for money off large orders.

We've recently seen big a rise in Crowd source deals, they are used to build excitement for new products, liker films and games. e.g. If 20000 people 'like' a page on Facebook, a new deal becomes active, or a new trailer or screenshot is released.

At the top end, you have things like integration with an affiliate program, or allowing customers to purchase products directly through Facebook . Although not really applicable to webhosting, you also have things like Alternate reality games, wherein people work together to find solutions to unusual, logic based puzzles on website, all to reveal information about an upcoming product or service.

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Right, your strategy is now in place, but how effective is it?

Fortunately, there are some great tools available to assist you in finding this out.

For Twitter, Hootsuite And Tweetdeck perform a very similar function. They allow you to constantly track multiple streams, for all mentions of your company, and also for those of your competitors. The default Twitter interface is not ideal for this, so I would strongly trying out both of these products.

Google analytics is key.. Right away you'll be able to see how many impressions and sales you are receiving as a result. You'll be able to see which types of post attracts the most attention, and which, if any, attract negative, or no attention. This in turn can be used to help you shape your future strategy.

shortening services like bit.ly also include built-in stats , you can tag all your shortened links with your analytics software's tracking data.

The metrics you should be looking at are nearly all things we've talked about today. Whilst direct revenue is likely to be your primary measure, and it is an end in of itself, it does not tell the whole story.

Your number of visitors, followers and mentions are all important, but your influence with the online public is what determines success. It doesn't matter if you have 10000 followers if the majority are expressing negative sentiment. If people are retweeting negative comments about you, rather than positive, or complaining to their friends, then you need to find out why. If you're using software like hootsuite for Twitter, it's a good idea to set up search streams to catch all results related to you. For Heart Internet say, you'd want to be looking for @Heartinternet #Heartinternet Heart Internet with a space, Heart Internet without a space. Just because you know the correct syntax to use, it doesn't mean that everyone else does as well.

If you're producing additional content, just like this webinar today, it's important to track whether people are consuming that content, as it is definitely more expensive to produce than a simple 10% off deal. Just remember, walk first, run later – you'll capture the most followers initially with a simple strategy, you have no reason to overinvest.