Process Solutions

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Social Media Marketing Process Automation

Once upon a time, those responsible for an organization's marketing would develop a strategy that included various components. If your organization was big enough, you could outsource most of the execution to an agency that would do the creative work, make necessary media buys and even monitor response performance. If trade shows were involved in the strategy, they might design the booth and possibly hire and train professionals to occupy it.

This strategy could work well because your executives would review the images and messages to be delivered and once they were established, the remainder of the process execution required minimal discretion. If you think today's marketing landscape looks similar, you are living in a fairy tale. The world has changed in a fundamental way.

The New Marketing Landscape

It did not take long for most of us who were already adults at the time to realize that the Internet would change our lives. Those younger folks whose lives were forged in the fires of the Internet may well see the world in a fundamentally different way. Most of us older folks see the physical world of things as the "real" world. To many, the virtual world of the Internet is no less real. To ignore it is to ignore a growing part of society with increasing influence and buying power.

I will not elaborate on the reasons for this phenomenon here. There are plenty of good sources of information on how we got here. What is clear is that any good marketing strategy must fully comprehend the nature of this new landscape. Let's start by breaking down the constituent components:

Search – even at the dawn of the Internet's commercialization phase in the early to mid 1990's, visitors began most sessions at sites like Yahoo, AOL, Lycos, Alta Vista and DogPile. Many of these search engines perished when their technology was unable to keep up with the vast amount of information that was being added daily. Today, Google dominates search and they have upped the ante by allowing firms to buy their way onto the treasured first page of the results. Search is the gateway to every website on the Internet.

Blogosphere – the Internet was, from its very beginnings, about the exchange of ideas. The blog was an early invention that allowed people to post journals online for others to read. This exchange of ideas has flourished and evolved into a rich information environment that has for many replaced traditional news sources. Blogs educate and inform and some bloggers have gained the credibility of any news agency or industry expert. Others use blogs to attract prospects, but readers frown on blatant sales pitches, so care must be taken to inform.

Email – another early invention of Internet technology was the ability to exchange messages. It did not take long for tech-savvy marketers to figure out that they could spray emails with their message to millions of people for almost nothing. The term "spam" (a reference to a low budget product combining "spiced" and "ham") was created to refer to unsolicited emails. A war of attrition has ensued between inbox holders and spammers. Most emails that make it to your

inbox today are likely more specifically targeted to you, even if unsolicited (more on this later).

Forums & Chat Rooms – I'm combining these two things together even though they are different technologies. The reason is because their two primary differences do not affect their purpose. While forums are asynchronous and non-real-time, chat rooms are real-time synchronous environments. However, they both serve to connect people in multi-party dialogue.   These tools have also been around a long time, but variation and sheer quantity of dialogues that are taking place on the Internet now is staggering.   Time and geography have been removed from the equation.

Video – for many, the Internet has replaced the television as a source for moving images. People and organizations are using video as an alternative means of communication. Low cost video production tools allow neophytes to develop reasonably professional videos and the ubiquitous camera phone allows anyone to chronicle almost any event.

Social Media – one could argue that this is not really an underlying technology. Maybe a better choice for this heading would be "data sharing." Call it an honorable mention because it is on the lips of every serious marketing professional on the planet. Many social media sites combine the other components mentioned above with multimedia data sharing.

So there it is in a nutshell. Every element mentioned above should be part of a complete Internet marketing strategy. It's a lot to take in. It asks those of us involved in marketing to take our skills to a completely different place. Unlike the static world of old, this new landscape evolves continuously and it is highly bi-directional. The days of broadcast media are dead. Marketing has become a multi-directional communication between firms, their customers, their potential prospects and between customers and prospects.

Buzz

The very nature of the Internet is that of a distributed structure. It lends itself to ad hoc communication that cannot be completely controlled by anyone – not even the Chinese government. Every attempt to curtail information exchange will be met with a countermeasure. The best option is to do your best to manage relevant information. If you are doing an effective job of creating an online persona for your organization, you will eventually need to contend with "buzz."   That is the communication about your firm that originates with your employees, customers, prospects, and their friends.

Sometimes buzz can go viral and left unchecked can severely damage an organization's reputation (more about reputation management later).   There is a well-known story about an Applebee's restaurant that fired a waitress for showing a picture of a non-tipping customer's receipt on the Internet. The company alleged that they have a policy against posting customers' names on the Internet, but the company's own website had posted a receipt with a positive message on the back only a short time earlier. The backlash from this incident cost the company dearly in lost sales. The days of private action are over.

Reputation Management

This brings us to the flip side of the "buzz" coin. Your response to buzz is to monitor and manage your reputation with continuous active engagement. Your reputation is built by the combination of the messages your company sends out, the messages it receives back and the messages shared without your engagement. Fortunately, there are a growing number of tools to help you monitor and manage this last class of message, so that you can minimize the potential negative consequences.

Online Marketing – The Process

Hopefully, you are beginning to get the understanding that unlike marketing efforts that you undertake in the physical world, virtual marketing is a fluid continuous process. While discrete steps can be taken, the process must be dynamic and responsive. Not only have the strategies

and tactics changed, the tools for managing them have also begun to mature. Since this series is supposed to be about process automation, let's get to it.

We're not going to discuss your online marketing strategy here as that goes beyond the scope of this Column, but we will suggest that you should develop a robust strategy that addresses each of these areas:

- Website (search engine optimization or SEO)
- A Blog containing regular posts
- Social Media presence on:
    - LinkedIn
    - Facebook
    - Twitter
    - Google Plus
- Participation in several industry discussion forums
- Youtube video publishing
- Email blasts to registered users of the company website
- Pay-per click Google AdWords campaign

There are many more activities that could be included in an online marketing strategy, but these represent the most common and if you're serious about it, you should probably be doing all of these things to some degree.

Tools

In preparation for this Column, I spent a few hours updating myself on tools. I make it my business to know what's going on in the world of Internet technology, but boy did I feel like I'd been asleep at the wheel.   There is a plethora of tools available to help you with every aspect of your online existence. I quickly realized that this Column could not do justice to all the available options. So, I will leave it to you, dear reader, to research the specific tools you should use and instead provide a set of tool categories. A Google search of "best <tool category here> tools" will provide all the research fodder you need. Any mention of specific tools for example purposes should not be construed as a recommendation on my part.

SEO – of course any tools that will help you optimize your natural search ranking in a particular search engine will need to be designed to understand the particular search engine you are optimizing your website for. Google and Bing, the two most popular search engines, provide their own tools to assist in this effort, but there are many others that will help you select effective keyword phrases and help you determine if your site is optimized to improve your ranking for those phrases.

Social Media Management – I am hesitant to use this term because it means many things to many people, but it is a commonly used category for tools that help you manage the posts that you make to various sites, including your own. Tools like HootSuite will allow you to generate content within their environment and push it in various forms to your blog, Facebook, Twitter, etc. These tools generally have some sort of analytics included that will keep you apprised of how your content is influencing your reach.

Reputation Management/Buzz Monitoring – in an immature marketplace terms can become interchangeable. In this case, these two terms probably should become interchangeable, but Reputation Management often refers to a service that includes a human backend that responds to negative content that appears about your firm on the Internet. Buzz Monitoring is the actual process of finding that content. Although, buzz can also be good and it's always a good idea to nurture a positive situation as well as ameliorate a bad one.

Ad Campaign Management – Google AdWords is not the only game in town when it comes to online advertising. The Pay-Per-Click model has become the most popular, but some sites still sell impressions (when someone sees your ad, versus clicks on it). Tools like WildFire allow you to centrally manage all your ad campaigns and track their effectiveness. Major players like Google and Bing have their own tools for managing their ads, but if you're diversified, it might be a good idea to look for a single tool for all of them.

Email Service – if you've got a hundred email addresses on your list, sending them an email is no big trick, but if you have 100,000 addresses, great care is necessary. The biggest challenge with mass emailing is keeping your delivery rate high. Many large commercial email forwarding servers require your delivery rate to be in the high 90% range (99% or better in some cases) or your source email address will be blacklisted. That means you will not be able to send emails from their server. Further, receiving servers can check blacklists and block emails from blacklisted senders. There are ways to validate email addresses before sending emails, but these tools are used by spammers, so (as mentioned earlier about the war of attrition) some servers detect a verification and send a false positive, in order to fool the system into thinking the address is valid. Then, when they send the email, it is rejected and their delivery rate is dinged. Reputable mailing services like Constant Contact require you to be responsible to have a good list or they will cut you off themselves, but they do help you keep up to date by alerting you about failed deliveries and can also track clicks from the email to your website and other performance metrics.

Site Specific Tools – each social media site has its own special capabilities. Tools like Listorious will help you find who on Twitter is talking about topics of interest, so you can participate and hopefully attract relevant followers. There are tools that specifically allow you to track your ranking on Facebook and still other tools that manage your LinkedIn contacts and/or job postings. Google recently upped the ante with their Google Plus (g+) social media system, but introducing the concept of AuthorRank, which helps improve your visibility if you follow their procedures for attributing authorship of your content.

Video Editing – if you're going to use YouTube, you need to make videos. Even if you don't, you should have some video on your website. Sometimes video can provide the sorts of robust content than no other media can emulate. If you provide software, you may only need a screen capture program with an audio interface to capture a software demonstration. If you sell a service, the same tool can be used to walk someone through a PowerPoint type presentation. Products like Camtasia can take multiple inputs (audio, video, graphic) and allow you to combine them with transition effects and titling to make a very professional looking video without an advanced technical degree. Many of the tools have built-in functionality to upload directly to YouTube, which you can then embed back onto your own website.

Using the Tools

Of course we all know that tools are no substitute for a good process. You will still need to develop a marketing strategy and pick which outlets you will use to build your online presence. Once you have done that, you can select the right tools to support the process you've defined for yourself. As with almost anything, you're not likely to get out more than you put in. If you maintain your online presence once per week, you will see very little in the way of results. Once per day is more acceptable, but smart companies are hiring full-time staff to manage their online marketing efforts on a perpetual basis.

Summary

Unlike a billboard or a magazine ad, the Internet changes form on a continual basis. Websites that were considered central to everyone's strategy (like MySpace.com) have become irrelevant and websites like Pintrest.com, which nobody had heard of a year ago, are showing up on the radar of an increasing number of businesses. This changing landscape requires continual re-evaluation of your strategy. Never before have businesses been able to engage their customers, prospects and the general public is such a direct manner. With great opportunity comes peril.

Tools that help you evaluate the effectiveness of your current strategy are readily available and should be employed. Other tools can help you define changes to your strategy by identifying new trends that can affect interest in your products or services. Managing this effectively can take you from being a local player to a global player.   It can help you identify new areas of opportunity. Even if you don't think you need it now, you should engage your organization in the virtual world because for a growing number of people, the online world **is** the "real" world.

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