



Chris Simpson is Business Doctor for Gatwick Diamond – www.businessdoctors.co.uk

As an independent retailer, one of the biggest advantages you have over your chain store rivals is the ability to let your personality shine through in your marketing.

Free from the shackles of head office dictats on what to say and how to say it, you're free to build up a friendly rapport with your customers via your social media channels, and create or sustain personal relationships that translate into footfall.

FIRST, SOME HOUSEKEEPING

Before you find your online voice, though, it's worth taking a little time to investigate what others are saying about you.

The best thing about social media marketing is also the worst. Yes, you can reach thousands of potential customers with a clever or funny tweet or status update, but naysayers can do the same with negative feedback. Worse still, is if you find yourself the victim of mistaken online identity.

Anyone can go online and leave a negative review and mud sticks – even if that review is meant for another business with a similar name. So before you begin to draw attention to your online presence by marketing yourself via social media, take some time to find out what's already out there.

You may find that you're listed with an online association of health food retailers with an incorrect digit in your telephone number, or you're on a local business directory with an obsolete email address. Worse still, there may be negative reviews left about a previous owner with a level of customer service Basil Fawlty would be ashamed of.

Finding and correcting multiple incorrect online entries or removing reviews meant for someone else can be time-consuming, so if a quick search brings up many incorrect or negative results, it may be best to consult an SEO expert to help clear up the mess. It is possible, though, and it's worth investing time and effort at the beginning of the process. There's no point spending money encouraging people to

Keep it social

Simple steps to building a powerful social media presence for your business.



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find you online if they'll also be presented with old, outdated and damaging information.

CHOOSE YOUR PLATFORM

When you're happy that your online house is in order, it's time to give some very careful thought to what you want to achieve with your online marketing. There are two elements to consider here – the passive online presence that can be achieved by

registering with online directories and listings sites, and the active online activity of social media.

When it comes to listings sites and directories, a sign-up spree will do no harm at all (as long as you've cleaned up your online presence as outlined above).

Google My Business is a free local business listing tool that will direct potential customers to your shop and allow them to leave reviews. It's easy to add a new business using the simple, user-friendly interface and once you're verified, anyone searching for your business by name on Google will see your website at the top of the search results, along with your business listing, map and any reviews.

Other national sites such as yell.com, brightlocal.com and 192.com are free and easy to add your business to.

As well as national sites, there'll be directories in your region, county, city or town, along with specialist directories for health food retailers (these may require membership). It's worth asking your fellow retailers what they find useful, but even if they've registered with a site that doesn't generate enquiries, it takes seconds to add your business and your contact details are there for all to see.

Active marketing by social media requires more effort and a clear commitment. If you're starting from scratch, choose one platform at first and do it well. Build up a following, get the conversations going and establish your reputation as a reliable, engaging, informative online presence before you start on the next medium.

A little research into what your fellow local traders are doing can

give you a very good indication of what works and what doesn't, and there's no harm in asking around if you're not in direct competition.

If you're a village or small town retailer, there may be strength in numbers. Is there a high street retailers' association with an established following? Join up and enjoy the benefit of their followers. Or, if there isn't already a group Facebook page for high street traders, perhaps you could start one and encourage discussions from your customers about what they would like to see more of in your collective stores? If you're based on a city centre commuter route with a more transient customer base, a retweet on Twitter has the potential to reach people who may pass you occasionally but don't want to join a group for regular updates.

If you're keen to establish an online presence, it may be tempting to register for every account out there, but mindlessly repeating the same sales message over five different mediums can do much more harm than good. As an independent retailer, you don't have the following of a national brand with a multi-million pound marketing budget. They can afford to churn out sales messages, because the sheer number of followers means it will be worth it for the tiny percentage who react.

As an independent retailer, you don't have the weight of numbers, but what you do have is personality, and this is what people will react to. You're not tied to a brand or message, and you have local and personal knowledge that you can use to engage people in conversation. You're about so much more than three for two offers – you're real, you're approachable and your customers can continue the conversation with you in person when they come into your shop.

Talk to your current customers: when they come into the shop, ask them what social media they use and whether they'd be interested in signing up to your page. You have real-life relationships to build on that the big chains simply don't have.

WHAT'S YOUR MESSAGE?

You've cleaned up your online presence, you've established that your customers prefer one medium over the other – now, what to do with it?

In a way, the term 'social media' is a misnomer, because it's often anything but: endlessly churning



Global user numbers

- FACEBOOK:** 1.71 billion
- FLICKR:** 112 million
- GOOGLE+:** 300 million
- INSTAGRAM:** 400 million
- LINKEDIN:** 450 million
- MYSPACE:** 50.6 million
- PERISCOPE:** 10 million
- PINTEREST:** 100 million
- REDDIT:** 36 million
- SNAPCHAT:** 100 million
- TWITTER:** 320 million
- WHATSAPP:** 900 million
- YOUTUBE:** 1 billion+

Source: brandwatch.com



UK population 65m

Internet access 92.6%

38m active social media users

That's 63% of the UK population

Source: clicky.co.uk 2016

out sales messages is a sure-fire way to ensure people stop listening. Take the time to work out what it is you actually want to achieve from your online relationships before you start updating your status. Is it online sales? Footfall? Or do you want to be seen as the local expert in specialist diets?

Social media is a very effective method of communication, but in itself it shouldn't be the be-all and end-all of what you want to achieve. You need to have in mind what your ultimate goal is, and work back from there.

If your end goal is footfall – which is usually the case for all retailers – think carefully about the social media messages you want to share to get people through the door and what you want them to do when they get there. If you want to establish yourself as the town's expert in healthy eating, share some interesting research and become an authority on the topic, rather than simply promoting the products you sell. Run an online question and answer session and encourage people to come to you with their queries. Then, when they need to stock up on gluten-free pasta, you'll be the first person that comes to mind.

It's important to remember that social media is a conversation, not a presentation. Don't just set aside the time to tweet or make regular status updates – make sure you're there with a prompt reply if people take the time to respond. Follow other people in your town and engage in their conversation – don't just sit back and wait for them to come to you.

When it comes to social media, people often use the pub analogy to discuss what is and isn't appropriate – you wouldn't insult a stranger or swear at them, so you shouldn't do it online. As an independent retailer, there's no analogy required: your online presence is an extension of who you are and what you do.

If you speak to your friends and followers the way you speak to your customers, share your knowledge and good news and make time to chat, you should find that your social media takes care of itself.

Business Doctors are a national network of small business experts offering hands-on support to help business owners overcome individual challenges and achieve growth. www.businessdoctors.co.uk