

DIY social media is dangerous marketing practice

Though social media is fast becoming a mature marketing option for South African business, businesses should be wary of diving in head-first without professional assistance.

This is according to Clinton Muir, MD of Johannesburg-based digital marketing agency, Black Snow Digital. He adds, "Organisations should embrace social media to engage their market, build their brand and promote their products and services.

"With social media, businesses of all sizes can enjoy tremendous online exposure and lead generation at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing. They can also create personalised customer experiences unlike anything available offline and because responses can be measured in real time, they can curb spend on unprofitable campaigns at a moment's notice and fund the winners instead."

However, Muir sees a disturbing trend in social media marketing that could hurt the adoption of the platform as a viable alternative to traditional efforts.

"Many major brands are opting to use an internal marketing team for social media. Only 16% employ the services of professional third parties. While it is critical that organisations take a hands-on approach, it is a mistake not to leverage the experience that digital agencies have gained from working daily in social media since their inception. Digital agencies have much to offer businesses, large and small, by merit of their focus and experience in this specialised field."

Social media reporting unsophisticated

The need for specialist expertise can be deduced from the 2014 report's findings that social media management and effective reporting is unsophisticated in business. For example:

- 83% of companies measure Twitter effectiveness by number of followers; only 48% conduct sentiment analysis.
- 87% measure Facebook effectiveness by number of fans and 79% by number of posts and comments; only 54% analyse sentiment.
- 91% agree that social media offers the potential for promoting their business.
- Only 19% said they were getting the desired value from social media.

"What we are seeing is that most companies don't have the know-how to exploit social media effectively, nor create a positive ROI against their social media spend."

The result is that many companies who have delved into social media marketing in the past have been burned and some have pulled their social media budgets prematurely.



Social media marketing complexity has also been compounded by the emergence of mobile as the main form of access in South Africa - 8.8 million South Africans access Facebook with their mobile phones. The two marketing mediums can no longer be managed as separate entities.

More than 'followers'

"There's more to social media marketing than posting Tweets and counting followers. It requires specific technical and strategic management skills that most organisations do not have or cannot afford and which can't be gained through training alone."

The dynamics of social media that cannot be ignored include long-term reputation management and complex analytics that protect brand image, financial investment and market share. These underlying elements require a level of technical sophistication not easily acquired by employees managing social media in addition to other projects requiring different skill sets.

Companies often find themselves stuck with a trial-and-error experience that either works or falls flat. Digital agencies have a wide range of projects across varying industries and bring new ideas to the table that can help companies reach their goals.

Brand protection is crucial

In terms of brand protection, Muir reports a blurring between personal and business etiquette, as evidenced by a common use of coarse language in online exchanges. "Social media is a very open platform where people are less inhibited in their personal interactions. Unfortunately, some employees bring these bad habits to commercial social communications. So companies risk undermining their brand, as has been seen in the past." Digital agencies give good PR and communication management practices the highest priority.

Companies also need to understand social metrics. "Again, it's more than adding up 'Likes'. Anyone who has worked with tools such as Google Analytics will know that there are a vast number of variables at play on the web that constantly affect one another. Social media is no different. Companies need the right reporting tools and a deep understanding of metrics to succeed. Digital marketers can offer guidance on both.

"Companies can enjoy success with social media once they realise that social media does not exist in a vacuum. It must be managed as an integral component of a larger Web-based strategy that includes websites, blogs, email marketing, mobile photo sharing and much more.

"When it comes to DIY social media marketing, companies should not underestimate agencies as powerful change agents and enablers of business success in the social media space. They have a handle on the entire online landscape and the digital marketing mix so they can offer vital assistance to companies who are limited by the number of resources at their disposal and the fact that they must split their attention between multiple marketing concerns," he concludes.

According to a 2015 report from market watchdog, World Wide Worx, South African social media use has skyrocketed. Facebook jumped from 9.4 million local users a year ago to 11.8 million currently, while Twitter soared from 5.5 million users to 6.6 million over the same period. Other social sites and apps have also seen significant growth over the past year.