

HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has transformed the way companies talk to their customers online. It means that businesses of all shapes and sizes can now get the sort of exposure previously only available to brands with deep pockets. **TIM BARNES-CLAY** explains how social media could benefit your business.

HAVE YOU EVER MULLED OVER THE best way to create a presence for your company? I have, and I'm only a one-man band. For me, Twitter works well; I use it to showcase my work and to connect with current, and potential, clients. I can also fire off updates about a new car when at a launch, creating engagement with motor manufacturers and prospective consumers.

Of course, Twitter isn't the only form of social media. In this generation of sophisticated technology, there are a lot of options. Your name can now get out there in more ways and places than ever before, which is a must for most businesses when trying to market yourself and the services you offer.

As I have discovered, taking advantage of social media enables you to post about your professional activities, but it's also a way for you to chip in on conversations and debates. This can be a major chance to share your expertise.

The use of video is growing as well. It's an ideal way to relate in a more personal way with your audience. Personally, I find Vine very useful. Owned by Twitter, this application lets you record and distribute six-second looping videos online. In my experience, pointing my iPhone at a car in some foreign location and quickly recording what the vehicle looks and sounds like can generate a lot of engagement online. There are even sites where you can broadcast live 'real-time' videos.



WHERE TO START?

■ **DECIDING WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA channels to devote your time to can be puzzling. And the choices and perceived graft involved in generating your online presence can, at first, seem overwhelming.**

It all comes down to understanding the mixture of social media and determining where you want to have your business seen. Also, appreciating what each medium has to offer and its demographics can help you cherry-pick the right online avenue. Choosing who you want to reach and deciding what you want to communicate are the two crucial elements to consider

when raising your profile. If you are not on social media yet, you are not alone. But businesses that don't take part in it are now in the minority, and gradually they are in danger of becoming sidelined. The truth is, no matter how successful your company is, no matter what size it is, your clients now expect to find you on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn. And if you are not easily found, you are missing out. But which social media channels are right for your organisation? One thing is certain; the more sites you are on, the more time you will have to spend overseeing them. So it's best to start gradually, and then strengthen your presence in a way that fits your purposes.

HERE ARE THE MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

FACEBOOK



■ With 1.5 billion users worldwide, this is the most popular of social media sites. Facebook shows you how to set up a page for your business and, once completed, you can display the 'human face' of your company. This site makes it easy for you to post content, inspire your audience to give feedback and it gives you the opportunity to handle any complaints quickly. You can also gauge the influence of your posts using the 'Page Insights' tool. Furthermore, Facebook allows you to advertise to particular groups based on demographics and location.

TWITTER



■ Twitter is used extensively by businesses to correspond and make contacts. Setting up a profile is simple and, once completed, look for applicable hashtags to find key people and specific themes. For example, type in #chauffeuring and you will see tweets from chauffeuring businesses and service users.

Twitter is a two-way street; so don't just put out announcements. Take notice and reply to others; lend a hand whenever possible and acknowledge those that support you. Utilise the retweet tool to distribute posts and 'favourite' those messages that you enjoy.

Trending topics on Twitter often echo the spirit of the moment, so by being a part of this you can become more involved with your audience. And with over 315 million Twitter users globally, your slice of the audience is potentially immense. But remember, keep it tight—tweets can be no more than 140 characters long.



GOOGLE+

■ Google+ came a little late to the party, but with 300 million users it has more than made up for its tardiness. This social media platform isn't just any site—it's Google and that means it can help you show up in internet search results. This is obviously essential for any business, because people who are searching for, say, private hire operators will more than likely look on Google. On Google+ itself, most of the conversation goes on within 'Communities'. These groups can be private or public, and if there isn't an appropriate one for your company, you can start one up. Undeniably, the biggest challenge for many businesses is time. True, social media does demand commitment, but once you have begun, it can be

stress-free to manage and the rewards will definitely make it valuable.

LINKEDIN



■ LinkedIn has 380 million users and it lets you promote your business credentials and reach prospective customers. You will get the best out of LinkedIn by creating a company page and joining special interest groups within your area of expertise. The site acts as a useful forum where you can post content and motivate contacts to endorse you and give testimonials. LinkedIn's 'Showcase Pages' also enable you to plug what you do and advertise to targeted groups.

INSTAGRAM



■ Instagram is all about images, so it's a great medium for sharing pictures and video. Facebook owns it, and with more than 300 million users, the site's popularity has created fresh opportunities for businesses. Once you have set up a profile you can upload pictures and video clips. It's then straightforward to share your content on other sites, and hashtags enable you to push your content even further. You can even get user endorsement by inspiring customers to post their own pictures and videos about your company.



CASE STUDY: CLOUD CARS, NOTTINGHAM

■ The private hire and executive chauffeuring sector is increasingly using social media marketing to boost business and increase customer satisfaction.

Cloud Cars is Nottingham's first 'green' taxi service, operating a fleet of eco-friendly fourth generation Toyota Prius hybrids.

The environmentally-aware cab company was founded by entrepreneurs Gary Holmes and Wayne Prospere in 2012.

"Cloud Cars has been into the social media scene from day one," says Wayne. "We check Twitter every day, and we post as regularly as possible. When we're not tweeting, we're looking at customer feedback and responding."

The trick, Wayne believes, is to grow without losing interaction with clients—and social media is the ideal tool for helping with that. "It's important to learn from any mistakes, and social media is perfect for getting a feel for what you're doing right and wrong," he says.

Wayne and his colleagues all help to keep an eye on Twitter: "It's not a full-time job tweeting here, but we all chip in. Sure, bigger companies probably need a team to run it, but in my opinion it's best to keep the social media team internal. An outside source isn't working at the 'coal face', so won't be able to engage properly with customers."

When Wayne has a moment in between dispatching calls, he tweets from his desktop computer. And when he's not in the office he keeps an eye on what's going on in the 'twitterverse' on his smartphone. "I'm always connected to the internet," he says. "You can never really overdo it because it's important to be 'on the ball' in this business."

But it isn't just Twitter; Cloud Cars also uses LinkedIn and Facebook. "We don't use these as often, but we have a presence, which is important," says Wayne. "Instagram is something we're also looking at developing and we have set up an account, but we are not overly active on it just yet."

Twitter: @cloudcarsltd
facebook.com/cloudcarsltd

