"Banned Social Media From Your Business? - You Need to Think Again, but Set the Rules First"

During the past week I've met with a number of small business operators and we've talked about social media and how they can integrate it into their on line marketing strategy. Using social media networking channels to not only promote your business but to help market products and services is a very cost effective way of driving new business.

Surprisingly, I've met some resistance to the concept, coming from an electronic advertising media background, I'm always on the lookout for ways to drive my business, and developing on online presence that I use as a online CV has been very successful for me in generating leads and driving new clients for my consulting business, and I've done all of this with very little financial output, as the social media networks I've set up have created a distribution network which allows me to get my message out very fast and very efficiently.

Some of these businesses I've talked with are now pulling back on their social marketing efforts and several of them are stopping their marketing all together, right at the very time that the number of consumers using social media in this country is growing at such a rapid rate that it is almost impossible to keep up with it.

Now why would you do that?

Let's look at the research first before I answer that question, The Nielsen report, released in mid March shows just how aggressive the growth is amongst Australian Internet users, close to four in five Australians or 78% of the population shared information, photos and links. Twitters audience grew by more than 400% in 2009 and more than one quarter of online users read "tweets" in the last 12 months. 14% of Twitter users followed companies or organisations via Twitter.

Nearly 2 in 5 Australians are now interacting with companies via social networking sites, which reinforces the point that we are very open to engaging with brands and companies online. Nielsen themselves make the statement, "The opportunities for brands and companies to tap in to the social media phenomenon are really just beginning to emerge and to date we've only seen the tip of the iceberg".

The facts are this, nearly 9 out of 10 Australian internet users (86%) are looking to fellow internet users for opinions and information about products, services and brands, and Australians engagement with online word of mouth communication is going to increase in coming years as social media plays an increasingly important role in consumer decision making.

In some cases, businesses have banned Facebook altogether in the office environment, and I know of one big media company, that actively monitors their staffs internet browsing and terminates their internet access if they use the site during working hours.

Given that the average Facebook user spends 8:19 hours per month on the site, and that's the average, I know some people who spend considerably more per month than that on Facebook, small business needs to find a better way to harness this giant, banning it from their business is not the way to control it.

Now to get to my question above, why would you as a business pull back on your social media strategy at the very time that it's gaining so much popularity?

The answers are simple:

1. Lack of Resources

2. Fear of negative comments and inappropriate content appearing on company sites

3. No clear rules, policies or procedures being set up within the strategy framework

4. Lack of knowledge of social media within the business

5. No strategy in place, just add hock usage of sites because everyone else is using it

6. Lack of a risk management assessment

7. No reputation management strategy in place

8. Fear of the Unknown

9. Older Business owners with a traditional view of marketing

10. Marketing managers with little or no experience in social media marketing

11. Fear of competitors gaining business secrets

These are a few objections that I've personally encountered and in every case, none of these businesses has a marketing strategy in place that covers online.

Don't stop your social marketing efforts, but do put in place a strategy that covers the essential areas that you need to have locked in place before you begin your social media activities, these are:

1. **Risk Assessment** - Make sure those in your business understand the risks involved and put in place policies and procedures **before** you start

2. **Define** very clearly your reasons for using the sites, what strategy will you employ and how will you manage the engagement from online users. Each site you use needs a very clearly defined set of rules and game plan. Set these for each site you use and monitor the performance of your plan, build engagement and community around your business.

3. **Clearly identify the rules,** what can be published and what type of information do you want out in the public arena, what is acceptable and what isn't. Get your staff to sign a disclaimer and make it clear to them what the rules of engagement are. It's very important that you do this before you start.

3. **Resources** - Select a social champion within your business and use them to build your profiles and encourage them to help build your community online. Don't ban it, play it smart.

4. **Online reputation management** - Now essential for every business working on the web. Set up your management, monitoring and repair rules no matter how big or small your business is. Make sure you know what online consumers are saying about your business and you know how to manage and control those comments if found.

Having a strong online presence will be, no is essential, for your business if you want to compete. No point banning it, you'll just end up doing your business damage and giving your competitors an advantage, and I really can't see the sense in that, can you?

Author Mike Andrew is a technology consultant to small business and operates a web consultancy that covers areas such SEO, social media strategy and Internet marketing.

You can visit Mike's web site on social media more information at
http://www.mikeandrewconsulting.com