



Who are your online customers and what do they want?

The massive growth of the internet and the adoption of eMarketing technologies such as websites, eMail and PPC (Pay per click) has created many opportunities for SMEs (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) to promote themselves and to win business. However the rush to get “in the game” has resulted in some of the fundamentals being missed.

The National B2B Centre is dealing with many businesses asking why their eMarketing activities aren't working. Our first question to them is “who are your customers exactly and what do they want from you, your products and your services?” And many don't know the answer.

Gareth Edwards, B2B Centre eMarketing Specialist, looks at why these questions are so important and what you can do with the answers.

So what's the problem?

In short, money. If you can't answer the question “who are you customers” (or users or visitors or stakeholders) and what do they want (products, services, information, the cheapest, the best, one in blue or that one tomorrow) then chances are you are wasting money trying to communicate with people who aren't interested in what you do.

eMarketing may be cheaper than traditional marketing methods but a trashed email or an inappropriate PPC click-through does have an effect on the bottom line. Just as importantly you, your staff or your suppliers will spend time following up leads or looking at analytics data. And time is of course money.

These are symptoms of the once size fits all approach to eMarketing. It's low cost so let's cast the net wide. Well there is a marketing rule of thumb that says it takes 7 marketing “touches” to convert a prospect into a client. So why not spend your money talking to a smaller group of the right people on multiple occasions.

There is another money related problem to do with having, ironically, too narrow a focus. Some of our clients are adamant that they have only one target customer profile and nobody else counts. Our experience is that this is never the case. The manufacturing client who said that he just dealt with senior people in aerospace forgot that the senior person from an SME aerospace company was probably the MD, while the senior person from a large aerospace company was probably the purchasing director or even somebody from finance. But what about other people in those organisations researching the marketplace? What about agents, intermediaries and consultants? And what about people from outside of aerospace who might be able to buy the product?

Where do the answers become important?

Websites

Knowing about customers and their requirements is important across eMarketing. In websites it is essential.

In the B2B Centre's website planning process we stress the need to both identify potential visitors to the client website and the different scenarios for their visit. This is particular important when you are selling directly from the site. Someone buying flowers

for a wedding, for instance, is in a different state of mind and after different flowers and a different service than someone buying flowers for a funeral.

You can use the answers to the questions in a number of ways.

1) They give you a feel for priorities.

What is most important to visitors, information about the company's history or about a new product? This gives us clues as to positioning of entry points into the website. The highest priority requirements should be near the top of the page naturally.

2) They help you to develop a site structure.

If we have a number of very distinct groups of customers with very different requirements then we may need to deal with their needs in very different ways and ensure that the differences are well sign posted.

One of our recent B2B clients in the leisure sector couldn't understand why their website was failing to generate sign-ups to a training programme. The reason was that there was no distinct entry point for the programme (i.e. no strong text or graphics) and no clear path through the website to get to a sign up.

3) They define key aspects of site usability.

At the simplest level this could be the difference between a "trade site" and a site for the public. The trade may be familiar with serial numbers and product codes for ordering spare parts, for example. The public may need pictures, diagrams and explanations.

4) They provide the basis for successful SEO (search engine optimisation).

SMEs will find it very difficult to compete for rankings on high level, generic search terms such as "CD", "bolt" or "sofa". It is possible to compete on very specific and accurate search terms such as "14th century Gregorian chant CD", "stainless steel anchor retaining bolt" or "leather reclining sofa chesterfield style Dudley". Successful keywords and phrases combine your product and service knowledge with an understanding of exactly who customers are, where they are, how they search etc.

The B2B Centre coached a client in the manufacturing sector through the keyword development process and helped them recognise that clients in different industries had different names for his portfolio of fixings and inserts. This allowed the client to more accurately optimize the website and generate additional traffic and business.

eMail Marketing

A frequent story from our clients is that they have just carried out their first eMail marketing campaign and it hasn't worked. "Half the eMails were bounced. Only 10% read them. We didn't get any click-throughs."

The immediate response is to blame eMail marketing but our experience is that, you've guessed it, that the problem is lack of knowledge. Oh and a tendency to think that a 5 year old database that somebody has passed on for free is likely to be any good.

List brokers and email database firms frequently provide sophisticated selection tools with all sorts of detailed selection criteria: turnover, SIC (standard industry classification) code, number of employees, post code, income, job title etc. etc. This means that you can create very highly targeted emails constructed (in terms of look and feel and style of writing) precisely for the type of person you are contacting: if you know who they are. And by only buying the records that you want, you can save money.

Knowing what potential customers are after then means that you can construct your eMail content (the text and graphics) to suit each customer type or group:

- For some groups you might decide that text only eMails are better because they look more business like and convey your high value service better than an html eMail with graphics.
- You can prioritise information just like with your website – this may be very worthwhile with newsletters where clients will be less interested in you activities than what you can actually do for them.
- You can also decide what part of your website you want to link to: general pages (like the home page) or specific product or special offer pages.
- You can choose an appropriate, eye-catching subject line that won't get ignored and, hopefully, won't include terms like "Free!!" or "Special Offer" that might get your eMail designated as spam.

The process is designed to make sure that eMails are read and acted upon and not just deleted. Generic eMails, particular in the b2b environment, are just fodder for spam filters.

Pay Per Click

The points raised in the overviews of websites and eMail marketing are just as relevant in the use of Pay Per Click as an eMarketing tool. The difference is that the effect of badly chosen keywords and poorly focused keywords can be seen

immediately. Your monthly budget will be exhausted fast and the site traffic generated will just bounce straight off the landing page.

We looked how we can use customer knowledge to define more effective keywords earlier in the article. That lesson applies just as much for your PPC keywords. Selecting a generic keyword like “candle” will attract visits from people looking for all sorts of mundane information about candles (How do you light a candle? What are candles made of? etc.) These visits will waste your money and your time. It also puts you right in the middle of highly competitive (and therefore expensive) bidding for this term. So relate the keywords you use to your target customer groups – overall traffic might decrease but profitable traffic will rise.

Then there is the question of your PPC advert. Carrying on the candles theme here are two examples of advert text from ads listed against a search for “scented candles”. The first reads “Ancient Wisdom. We supply a wide range of wholesale gifts and giftware.”... Hmmm. The second reads “Scented Candles. Long lasting scented candles enriched with organic essential oil.”

The second ad picks out the use of “organic essential oil” which made it stand out against a long list of similar products. Of course it would be particularly appreciated by people who are into organic produce or healthy lifestyles. Interestingly in this case the company had a different ad running against the keyword phrase “scented candles organic” – the ad though promoted aromatherapy?

How can we find the answers?

With many of the B2B Centre’s clients the truth is that that they already know the answers. Simply posing the “who are they and what do they want” question tends to elicit all of the built up knowledge about who exactly who you do business with (at all levels) in client organisations, what they ask for and the way they ask.

If you still don’t know, and perhaps you are just starting up, then do a bit of homework. Do your own internet research. Try different search terms and see what results you get. Check out competitor sites. Look at the PPC ads on the right hand side of the browser. Look at the eMail shots and newsletters you receive. Look at industry focused websites and trade associations. It isn’t hard to start.

If you already have a user base then you have two big advantages. Firstly you can simply ask site visitors for information, ring up contacts in client companies, organise focus groups or have a game of golf! Secondly you can use the myriad statistics that are generated with eMarketing technologies a bit more thoroughly. Web stats, analytics and PPC statistics will tell you a huge amount about who people are, how they get to you and what they do when they arrive. And if you are thinking “I already know that” then congratulate yourself for being in the minority of SMEs who do.

Summary

“The customer is king” is a well worn marketing cliché. Let’s dust it off and reuse it for the era of eMarketing. Having a deeper understanding of the people who are going to visit your website, open your eMail or click on an ad is fundamental to staying ahead of the competition.

Small businesses are able to listen, think and react more quickly than larger (and richer rivals) so use your advantages to the full to be successful eMarketers.

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