SIMPLE, BUT NOT EASY – USING DIGITAL TO ENGAGE

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Organisations in every sector are scrambling to figure out how to use digital tools to raise their profile, win new business, and engage with existing customers. There's a profusion of tools and approaches and a never-ending supply of "gurus" and "thought leaders" purporting to tell you how to do it best. It can all be a little overwhelming, and many of us suspect that we're not getting it quite right. We decided to get a genuine expert on board to help us out, so we turned to **Andrew Davis**.

Andrew was a digital media native long before the likes of Twitter and Facebook were even on the radar, starting as a chatroom moderator for the ITV show Pop Idol and Friends Reunited (we'll wait while you Google those if you're under 30). He now helps organisations get the most out of digital, social media, and in particular using content effectively to engage customers.

In this article we asked Andrew to outline his approach to digital media, and we're pleased to say that he has agreed to return in future editions of Customer Insight to comment on the latest trends.

A lot of people struggle with digital marketing. I like to say that this stuff is simple, but not easy. It's a world where kids can become millionaires, because they're getting results on platforms that brands are struggling to master.

Engaging with customers

To get control of your digital engagement, you need a framework to understand it properly. It's not just about doing the right things, it's about doing them at the right time. This is my digital roadmap, with seven stages that capture every step you need to think about in developing your online relationship with customers. Let's look at each step in turn, and we'll unpack the most important one in detail.

Proposition

Your proposition, whether it's your product, brand, or a specific campaign, is what will get the customer's attention.

Traffic

One of the first things you need to do is get prospects from A to B, whether that's from Facebook to your website or from YouTube to your email list.

Action

Once they're there, you need to get them to take action. That might be a sale, but more often it's something much lighter at the beginning of a relationship, like signing up for your emails.

Digital Roadmap

proposition — traffic — action — nurture — convert — escalate — influence
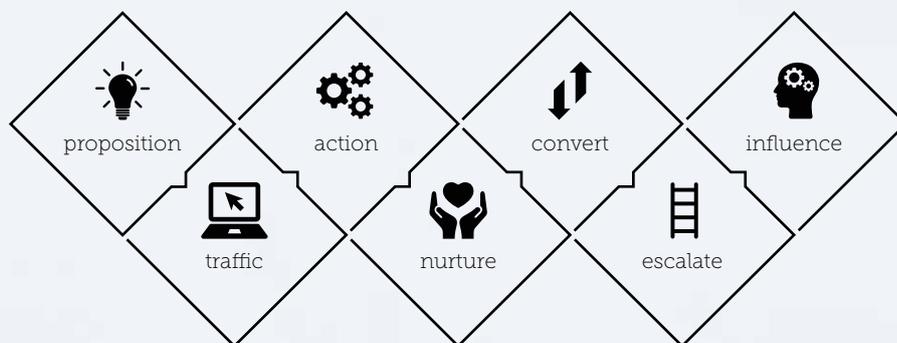
Nurture

This is where you develop your relationship with customers and it's where, as a brand, you should spend most of your time. You should aim to build a community where you can have influence, though not control, over what people see. That might be an email list, a Facebook or LinkedIn group, or your Twitter or Instagram network.

Doing this well is about understanding customer behaviour, for example that they have short attention spans, and combining that with a clear sense of your own brand personality. How is it you want to be seen? Serious? A thought leader? Funny?

The strength of the roadmap is in understanding that choosing when to say something is as important as what you say. Some of the things you can say at the nurture stage would be wrong to say at earlier stages, and that can frustrate a lot of traditional sales people, because they can't be bothered to go through the slow burn of social selling.

To get this right you need to understand what your contact strategy is. Knowing, for

example, that if we send 10 messages out then 2 of them will be sales, and 8 will be value added. I like to use a boxing analogy and call it the jab–jab–jab–cross method (coined by Gary Vaynerchuk). A boxer uses jabs to set their opponent up, and a power punch to finish them. Sales is the same—the jabs are added value content, and the power punch is the sell. Most businesses are throwing power punches the whole time, which means they are always selling something to someone. Historically the content with the least engagement is usually when you are asking people to buy something. In today's world, the platforms will see brands' 'salesy' content not performing well due to lack of engagement and therefore decrease the reach, which means less people see it. That's why people find selling in the social space quite difficult.

On the other hand, if you use too many jabs then you can get people so used to value that it comes as a shock when you do try to sell. It's about getting the balance right.

During quiet periods, like December and January, you might be throwing more jabs, then in campaign mode it might go up to 50:50. The important thing to realise is that most people don't mind that you're selling if you've gained trust by offering them value first. Even people who don't become customers can become valuable contributors, for example by telling others about your product or service.

Getting customers to engage with you is not about being the best or the cleverest, it's about being the brand that they understand the best. Keep it simple, and make sure people understand what you do. Trying to be very clever can actually put people off.

Convert

Get your balance right and you will get your sales, at which point customers will either fall back into the nurture phase (hopefully with an even stronger relationship), or potentially step up to…

Escalate

Happy customers should be primed to buy more from you, so cross-selling and upselling are good indicators that they are truly engaged.

Influence

Best of all, very happy customers will tell people about you or defend you to others. You might also want to consider referral schemes and influencer programmes to make the most of this highly engaged group.

Using data effectively

Data and analytics go hand in hand with your digital strategy. Using data well is crucial to understanding two things: customer behaviour, and technology.

Customer behaviour

A lot of organisations focus on vanity metrics—how many subscribers do we have, how many people sign up to our email lists, etc. Your real focus for understanding customers should be engagement metrics. You need to understand which platforms your customers are using, what your customer engagement is like relative to your industry, what people are talking about, and how your share of voice compares to competitors.

The data about what people are doing and talking about can be used to fuel creativity. Ask what people are doing, and what their behavioural habits are. You need to understand what's going on in the world right now, what you could call "trend marketing". Every day is a day of something, and that means that people (including influencers) are talking about it. How can you connect that to a business objective?

A good example is the mattress company who, rather than focusing on how good their mattress is, decided to focus their messages on what people do in the morning, because that really depends on whether you've had a good night's sleep. They listened to what customers were saying, and found a way to connect that to their product, rather than the other way round.

So the data can be used to understand what's there, but the key is interpreting it to see how it makes sense for your organisation.

Technology

You need to get used to using data to properly understand your digital performance. Algorithms have no soul, all they see is "are people engaging with this piece of content?", in other words is it getting likes, shares, and reactions. Most platforms generally use some sort of points system, so if you reach a certain number of points in a certain amount of time (and you often get more for a reaction than a like) then they'll open up your reach. They might start by showing your content to 10% of your subscribers, then if it does well open it up to 30%, then 50%, and then if it's really popular potentially to people beyond your immediate network.

Reaction time is an increasingly important metric. How quickly can you respond if somebody asks a question? In the future WhatsApp is aiming to be the customer service tool for businesses. They'll charge you to get back to customers if you don't respond within 24 hours, and I can see that deadline is going to reduce bit by bit. It's a clever move by them, to incentivise customers to use WhatsApp as their preferred channel, and that suits businesses who would rather have complaints in their inbox than out in public on platforms such as Twitter.

Knowing where you are

The key to an effective digital engagement strategy is being clear on who you want to be, and then using data to find ways to engage with people using messages that reflect what they're doing and talking about. Selling is part of it, but you need to establish trust and get your timing right or you risk putting customers off and damaging your standing in the eyes of the algorithms. The digital roadmap is a tool you can use to plan your digital strategy, and to make sure you say the right things at the right time.

Andrew will be back in the Autumn issue with an update on the latest developments in digital.