

The Growing Case for B2B Businesses to Go Digital

While the use of social media has become second nature to consumer brands, business-to-business (B2B) organisations have been much slower to utilise the likes of Facebook and Twitter, or RenRen and Weibo, their Chinese equivalents. Things are changing, however, with businesses learning how to harness the potential of digital to transform the way they communicate. Recent ground-breaking B2B campaigns should encourage other organisations to reassess what social media can do to help them reach and engage their audiences.

Gaining Social Currency

The business case for companies that depend heavily on influencing consumers to adopt social media is clear. Such brands seek to gain 'social currency' – interacting with their markets by sharing information and securing influence in the process by leveraging individuals' own followings. It's a cost efficient, engaging approach to marketing and all manner of brands from [Cathay Pacific](#) to [Coca-Cola](#) have sophisticated, multi-channel digital campaigns.

In a fast-changing and fragmented landscape, learning how to exploit digital to meet objectives has been harder in B2B. Now, the ecosphere has matured and several channels have reached critical mass on a global scale (with some notable exceptions, particularly in China), making them much safer bets for long-term investment.

The same principle of 'social currency' can be applied to B2B organisations trying to build closer relationships with their stakeholders. Broadly, there are four areas where social media can support organisational goals:

- External communications
- Employee engagement
- Customer service/relationship management
- Sales

Perhaps the most spectacular example of a company which has embraced social media to great effect is [Maersk Line](#), a highly unlikely digital pioneer. Eighteen months ago, the Danish shipping giant set out to use digital engagement to "get closer to [its] customers." Its initial strategy has been so successful that it has since developed social media campaigns to cover all its stakeholders.

When you see Maersk Line's social media pages – spread across a variety of channels such as [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Vimeo](#) and others – you get a vivid sense of what the company and its people are about. There is no hard sell.

Different digital media channels provide the perfect outlet for fascinating glimpses into what the company does – such as shipping sea ice from the Scott Base in Antarctica to Europe for scientific research, and the journey of a giraffe from New Zealand to her new home in Melbourne. Maersk's approach is highly transparent, narrative and visual, relying on its people to tell the story of what the business is doing day in, day out.

Despite the difficulty in measuring success in social media, with almost 1 million Facebook likes and 62,000 Twitter followers, Maersk has a huge and engaged following that has transformed its corporate image both internally and externally. The company reports that nearly 70 per cent of its customers said its campaign had improved their perceptions of the business.

How to 'Think Social'

Maersk avoided a traditional top-down approach to digital communications and instead focused on growing a social media culture within the organisation. But encouraging people internally to 'think social' often requires moving out of the comfort zone of a company's culture, with management shifting from a role as content creator to curators of content created by employees.

The public, global nature of digital means that such an approach is not without its risks. A robust process is needed to mitigate against reputation-damaging incidents such as the leaking of confidential information or posting of inappropriate remarks.

For businesses that have relied on tried and tested communications techniques such as events programmes and media relations, an evolutionary process towards 'thinking social' may prove the best strategy, involving some experimentation with different channels to establish a social presence first and then foster a culture.

Deciding how to take the plunge into the digital world requires clear sight of the objectives, the audience and the resource that can be committed. There are countless businesses which have dipped a toe into digital in a piecemeal way without really thinking about what they are trying to achieve or how.

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The offspring of an ad hoc approach to digital may include infrequently updated and/or poorly crafted blogs, or Twitter feeds that are treated as one-way sales channels. The mere process of opening social media accounts does not equal a strategy and is unlikely to support business goals.

By adopting some creative thinking, however, businesses that succeed in digital can come from unlikely sources. Corning, a manufacturer which sells speciality glass to other industries, has invested in digital with the clear objective of humanising its applications. To that end, it produced a futuristic film, 'A Day Made of Glass,' which shows what life could be like if all glass surfaces were 'smart.' It's an amazing piece of work that really brings the capabilities of its products to life. The film has gone viral across a vast audience, clocking up a staggering 22 million YouTube hits.

While Corning's film is slickly produced, the beginnings of a social media strategy need not be costly. There are plenty of CEOs tweeting interesting content on a regular basis, such as Jack Welch and Sir Richard Branson. Whether they're heading to a summit, offering a view on some breaking news or celebrating a win for their sports team, Twitter can be a dynamic and informal way to share nuggets of insight both with employees and the wider world, while bypassing more labour intensive platforms such as a press release or intranet.

There are now enough examples of B2B businesses that have cracked social media to remove the mystery and encourage others to explore what digital can do for them. Moreover, as people integrate social media into their personal lives, the case for businesses to incorporate digital into their communications activities will only grow.



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