



The digital landscape – on the distant horizon or up close and personal?

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SUMMARY

One of the most radical changes brought about by the digital revolution is the fusing of the personal and the professional. Teleworking, mobile communications and the use of personal digital assistants (PDAs) such as the BlackBerry® and iPhone™ have mushroomed in the past decade.

It is estimated that there are over 3 billion mobile phone users worldwide today. Last year, around 1 billion mobile phones were sold, 13.7 million of which were iPhones (*source: Texas Instruments/In-Stat*).

This means that the customer who receives your direct marketing e-mail or who clicks to your website may have been shopping online, visiting a social networking website or downloading music only seconds before.

They will almost certainly have just sent or received an e-mail.

This white paper considers the pressures on organisations and marketers operating in the B2B and B2C sectors as they compete for their audience's attention. It reviews some of the tools and techniques available to help create compelling online communications. Real-world examples are given and the paper concludes with some 'top tips'.

E-MAIL - QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

When it comes to digital communications, less is often more.

In today's world, it's almost too easy to communicate. E-mail, e-newsletters and e-news wires can be quickly fired off to all and sundry. As a result, information - or inbox - overload has reached crisis point, with an estimated 210 billion e-mails every day criss-crossing the globe (*source: Radicati Group*).

How can you ensure your message is seen and heard?

Avoid being blocked

To stem the rising tide of spam, companies have become more sophisticated in configuring their spam filters and firewalls to identify and block unwanted e-mails. Action was certainly needed: at one point, spam was accounting for an estimated 32% of all e-mails sent on any given day (*source: IDC*).

When sending marketing e-mails, a well-composed text e-mail may have a greater chance of reaching its destination than a graphical (HTML) e-mail containing complex imagery and links. This is because more advanced spam filters are blocking graphical 'marketing' e-mails, whereas text-based e-mails tend to make it through to the end recipients' inboxes.

Depending on the sophistication of your audiences' many spam filters, you may still achieve good results with graphical e-mails. It is often best to test deliverability on a small section of your database first and then modify your approach, if necessary.

Grab attention

Once your communication is delivered, how do you prevent it being deleted unread?

Sending your audience an invitation to opt in may result in fewer names on your database but they will be more favourably inclined to your organisation and what you offer. To be effective,

your communications must then address the opportunities and challenges that keep your target audience awake at night, in clear, simple language.

What's more, if the salient points appear in the subject field and first six lines, there's a much greater likelihood of your e-mail being opened and read.

On the subject of keeping it simple, do you check that your marketing e-mails are easily viewable on the 3" screen of a PDA, the 2" screen of most mobile phones, or the 2"-high preview pane that the vast majority of e-mail applications use?

Remember, too, that although very important in the B2B environment, Microsoft® Outlook® is not the only e-mail client in this arena. In addition to many other proprietary software clients, web-based e-mail services such as Microsoft® Hotmail, Google™ Mail and Yahoo® Mail also need to be considered.

Optimise your online communications

A necessity for the marketer is to measure and continually improve online campaigns. The software exists to allow you to track your e-mail's journey and monitor results to a level unimaginable with traditional media.

You can ascertain:

- Which communications have reached the individual target
- Which have been opened
- Which parts have triggered a response
- What recipients have gone on to view on your microsite or website and exactly where they went on their user journey
- Whether recipients have become members of a community or downloaded further information

In fact, if a recipient of an e-mail clicks through to your website, you can track and trace their movements entirely.

Measurement

Using metrics-based marketing to measure the value of a campaign means you can be much more responsive and proactive in using digital tools and techniques. Improved reporting and analysis will help you squeeze more value from often limited budgets and optimise return on investment.

For example, an IT services company found that the e-mail point of most interest to the target audience was the one explaining that their 'night-time' support service actually starts at 18.00, when customers' staff want to be heading home. They made sure they highlighted this point upfront in future campaigns and also fed this finding back to the sales and marketing teams.

Much of this type of technology has been around for some time, but it is continually improving to provide more advanced techniques. Although metrics and statistics are readily available, it is surprising how rarely these are properly analysed and used as a solid basis for action. This is where responsive, proactive marketing could really give you the edge.

BEATING A PATH TO YOUR WEBSITE

More often than not, your e-mail campaigns will encourage traffic to your website. In any case, it's become a reflex action to go online to check out a prospective supplier's credentials. It's vital, therefore, not to disappoint visitors to your website.

Engaging your audience

Your audience is becoming less and less tolerant of websites that are boring, wordy or difficult to navigate. Unfortunately, after the initial effort that goes into creating a website, the content often then stagnates till the next major revamp.

Here are some key points worth considering:

- Are you embarrassed by your website or proud of it? Does it portray your business or organisation as it is today? Are the text and imagery consistent with recent developments in your online and offline communications?
- Do you review and refresh your web content regularly to give visitors reasons to return? Who 'owns' the content anyway – do you have a nominated web editor? Do they have specific skills in writing for the web?
- If your organisation is global, do the communications you send out locally conflict with a corporate website which has, for example, a very States-side look and feel? What does this say about your commitment to meeting the requirements of the UK, mainland Europe or other markets?
- How could your website work harder? Could you use it to open a dialogue with your audience? For example, could you solicit their feedback on what you do well – and not so well – with online surveys, or could you run topical polls?
- Can your website offer more functionality? Are there systems or activities you have in-house which could be brought to the web? Could you provide more exciting, powerful audio or video materials, perhaps your own YouTube channel or links to other social networking websites?

The 'I want it now' generation will rapidly switch to browsing your competitors' websites if you fail to meet their expectations on functionality and appeal, as well as speed and accessibility. There is a need to provide clarity of communication and to engage your audience as quickly (and for as long) as possible.

Who's doing it well?

Forward-looking organisations, both private and public, are using their websites to create communities, open a dialogue with their stakeholders, and deliver quality services cost-effectively by enabling customers to 'self-serve'.

Here are some practical examples:

- The National Assessment Agency, which supports the secure delivery of the public examination system, offers exam centres a time-saving web-based exam fees calculator. Visit www.naa.org.uk/naa_16419.aspx
- Leading player in the global energy market, BG Group uses a web-based training tool on its intranet to educate its staff in Nigeria in countering corruption.
- Through its website, the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom is sharing best practice in opening up opportunities for high-quality, varied educational experiences beyond the classroom door. Users can contribute their own content to the website, such as case studies, news items, events and resources. Visit www.lotc.org.uk
- London Biotechnology Network, which has over 2,000 members from around 800 life science organisations, runs the London BioGuide Directory online. Much of the content is contributed by its members. Visit www.londonbiotechnology.co.uk

Online communities and portals are becoming vital in many B2B and B2C sectors. They range from IT firms providing advanced information about products and networking opportunities to their customers, through to councils offering property

agents central repositories for advertising vacant properties and forums for business managers to discuss HR issues.

Elsewhere, most of the mobile phone network operators, for example O2 and Vodafone, have developed great looking websites with excellent engagement and functionality for users. Equally, the BBC, Apple, numerous pop bands and sports clubs have also built superbly engaging websites.

Traps for the unwary

In a noisy world, it can be tempting to emulate the best techniques used in exciting consumer campaigns to grab your audience's attention.

But it's worth sounding a note of caution. Many web tools popular in the consumer or home market should be used with care in a commercial (especially B2B) setting.

For example, viral marketing – often termed 'word of mouse' – is an attractive prospect. Why not get your audience to promote you by passing on a video clip, game or competition, and save your advertising budget?

But to avoid falling flat, business viral marketing must have the wow factor that motivates your customers to share the content with their colleagues and associates.

Similarly, starting a blog can appear a great way to give your organisation a human face. But today's web-savvy audience can quickly spot a recycled corporate press release. To have genuine value, a blog must express the opinions of a real person and encourage feedback.

Furthermore, while the upfront costs are low, maintaining a blog demands a long-term commitment of time and energy. A blog is for life, not just for Christmas!

FIVE TOP TIPS

Oculus has grown up with the web. The business was formed in 1992, coincidentally when Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, first released a “web of nodes storing hypertext pages viewed by browsers on a network”.

Since then, Oculus has ensured that customers in the private and public sector benefit from innovative web technologies backed by practical business insight and experience. Here are its five top tips:

1. Make web-based communications an integral part of your overall marketing strategy. Online campaigns and marketing should complement and extend your other activities, such as advertising, telemarketing, customer retention campaigns and public relations.
2. Careful end-to-end preparation is vital. Next steps, calls to action and follow-up activities should be planned in right from the start. Ensure your key people will be automatically alerted and able to provide an immediate response to customer enquiries.
3. Avoid a scattergun approach. Plan targeted campaigns and use the software available to measure which communications and messages hit the spot, so you can develop future campaigns that resonate with your audience. Remember, a short, snappy and easy-to-scan format will make for easier on-screen reading.
4. Capitalise on the power of the web to react with agility to changing circumstances. Your website will be the first port of call for customers and industry watchers to see how you counteract competitive activity or respond to negative press.
5. Don't overlook the importance of internal communications. Your customers should never know more than your salespeople and business partners!

Find out how Oculus can help you exploit the digital landscape for maximum impact. [Click here](#) and we'll contact you today.

About the author

Margaret Cain, MCIM, Chartered Marketer, FRSA, has over 20 years' experience of helping businesses, ranging from not-for-profit organisations to blue chip companies, to communicate effectively with their customers, clients, partners and employees.

About Oculus

Oculus elevates brands now and into the future, with intelligent, creative design both online and offline, which delivers tangible results and provides excellent returns on investment. Our clients include BG Group, CfBT Education Trust, Docklands Light Railway, NEC Infrontia, Oracle, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), SAP and Serco.



OCULUS

Addington House 73 London Street Reading Berkshire RG1 4QA UK
t 44 [0]118 958 9815 f 44 [0]118 958 9875 www.ocus.co.uk