

Digital marketing and social media...

how to engage with your customers across the world

Real-time, genuine feedback and communication direct from your customers can give you a strong competitive advantage when growing your brand and business worldwide

Introduction

Any business with serious ambitions of growing its export sales must embrace digital marketing and social media in order to communicate with, listen to and, increasingly, sell to customers.

Across the world, even in many of the developing countries, social media are playing an increasing role in people's lives - just ask the 30 million Facebook users in the Philippines! So you can now sit in your office in Bedfordshire and get immediate, direct response from consumers and customers across the world. No longer do you have to rely on your local partners or British embassies for feedback and consumer information. And some businesses now bypass local partners, sell directly, and thus increase their margins.

As some of the case-studies in this guide demonstrate, the use of digital marketing and social media when engaging with customers across the world is open to companies of any shape and sizes and in different industries.

International social media and digital marketing - it's all exciting stuff!

The online world presents clearer and more direct opportunities for businesses to reach new markets. The main problem is knowing where to start given the plethora of choice. The principal questions that businesses pose tend to be as follows:

- Which markets offer the best facilities and capacity for businesses who want to engage and sell online?
- How can businesses go about digitally marketing themselves in those international markets?
- How will the lie of the digital land in other markets affect the best digital platforms or channels for UK businesses to use there?

For UK businesses looking to build e-commerce foundations abroad or sell digital products, they will be very interested to know that South Korea and Japan have the fastest download speeds, making the consumer's pathway to purchase far easier there than elsewhere. Similarly, English-speaking Australia has the biggest percentage of the population online with 88.8% - presenting an excellent potential audience for their products without having to navigate too much linguistic difficulty.

Beijing, we're told, is desperate to get its 1.3 billion citizens to spend as growth there slows, but it is the US that still offers the largest internet market potential with an estimated \$11.3 trillion at stake. This might be the deciding factor for businesses sensibly deciding to tackle one market at a time. For digital marketing purposes, it's worth noting Facebook is not the leading social network in all of China, Russia, South Korea and Japan. QZone in China has the biggest number of social media users per country with 190 million. Do you know what QZone is and how it works?

Moreover, if you want a Chinese audience to find your products online, you'll need to learn how Baidu works. In Russia, another huge potential market for British products, only 55% of searches go through Google.

Getting started

The key is to first focus on getting your internal culture and attitude focused on building quality earnings by developing a long-term, sustainable business based on brand-building and customer engagement.

If you see your export activities as some sort of 'box-shifting' where you just want to fill some containers and sell to any Del-Boy who can pay for your products then I would suggest that you shouldn't bother with social media and digital marketing.

Somebody within your business has to 'own' your digital customer engagement and that person or persons has to have access to senior management and relative strong autonomy, in order to be able to respond quickly.

Social media benefits companies the most when it's used as *part* of an *integrated* campaign and based on a great brand and compelling propositions.

You cannot develop an engaging social media campaign as a stand-alone exercise, neither can you grow a loyal following online if your product and propositions do not live up to your promises. People will find out and tell each other!

Rising customer expectations continue to drive the pressure on you to improve the customer experience across all channels - regardless of where the customer is. A bad customer experience is the main reason why your customers would switch to a competitor.

12 points to consider for starters

1. Identify what you want social media to achieve for your exports, whether it is building relationships, generating sales leads, promoting offers or reinforcing your brand.
2. Understand your customers' needs and assess how you can address them with social media — whether your customers need easier access to product information or better after-sales service.
3. Work out where your customers are as there are a range of social media platforms customers are likely to use. It is no use building a Facebook presence if your customers choose to network on LinkedIn for example.
4. Tailor your approach to the culture of the social media platform you are using.
5. Research the tools available to help you measure your impact on social media platforms.
6. Create a strong profile on your chosen social media platform/s — think about the essential information you want to convey and the image you want to promote of your business.
7. Make sure your marketing messages are relevant to your customers, informative and engaging.
8. Avoid persistently broadcasting to your audience or delivering hard sales messages; instead, share your knowledge and expertise.
9. Respond to feedback and your customers' attempts to engage with you, even if they are critical. Ignoring feedback can damage your reputation, responding gives you a chance to build your profile and your credibility.
10. Monitor your social media use, measure your progress and make changes to your approach if it is not working. Keep an eye on it - social media is active 24 hours a day, especially for exporters who sell across the world.
11. If somebody in Australia writes on your Facebook page that he/she cannot buy product where they live, you have a great opportunity to encourage your local partner to grow their distribution.
12. Be patient. It is a marathon, not a sprint. Customer engagement is as much a culture as it is a skill. It will **take time to learn** how to use social media successfully, and to build your reputation within your chosen networks.

How to involve your overseas partners

A key aspect is how your social media engagement should be coordinated with your local partners. In my experience very few agents/distributors see themselves as more than sales people whose job is to sell the products to their local customers. What happens then is that they often ignore the brand building part of the (your) business.

I recommend that you run your social media and digital marketing activities yourself but involve partners when relevant. Later I will show you how Montagne Jeunesse have pages on their website for each of their partners in their local language, so simple yet very powerful

This is not just for the 'big boys':

Even the smallest business can become a highly effective digital enterprise as proven by Tangle Teezers below:

Tangle Teezers - from Dragons Den rejects to global success through innovative social media marketing

Tangle Teezer, maker of the innovative hairbrush was founded in 2007 by Shaun Pulfrey. Tangle Teezer was spurned by the investors on the BBC's Dragons' Den programme later the same year.

The company now generates 85 percent of its £15m turnover from exports, having doubled revenues year-on-year in 2013.

In 2011 the company started getting web orders from China - up to 300 a day! It transpired a famous Chinese model had bought a Tangle Teezer in Oxford Street and posted it on her blog. Its imminent expansion into China is forecasted to increase turnover by up to 100 percent. "China is definitely the fastest growing export market for Tangle Teezer," said Mr Pulfrey. "Demand for all things British is huge in China, as long as they are made in the UK."

To target Chinese customers, Tangle Teezer is working to create marketing content for the two largest social media platforms in China. By targeting Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, and Weixin, Tangle Teezer has the potential to reach 260 million Chinese consumers.

Retailers can make a significant impact by creating a strong social media presence, added Mr Pulfrey. "Almost everyone seems to buy based on personal recommendation. Blogs go viral instantly, new products sell out before they launch."

Re-branding a traditional fashion brand through digital marketing

Well-established major brands can also use digital marketing to completely revitalise and turn around their business. As with any turnaround situation that does require commitment right from the top and a strong sense of urgency, but the results can be staggering, as can be seen with Burberry below:

How Burberry tripled its turnover by becoming a digital brand

When Angela Ahrendts became CEO of Burberry in 2006, she took over a stalling business whose brand had become tarnished. But she saw what no one else could; that a high-end fashion retailer could remake itself as a digital brand. Taking personal charge of the digital agenda, she oversaw a series of ground breaking initiatives, including a website <http://artofthetrench.burberry.com> that featured customers as models and a more robust e-commerce catalogue that matched the company's in-store inventory. During Ahrendt's tenure, revenues tripled.

Sell direct via a multi-lingual website

Malcolm Hall has transformed Hall-Fast Industrial Supplies into an international company trading in 78 countries through 13 fully multilingual websites – without ever visiting a customer overseas.

Hall started the business from his spare room in 2006 as a specialist fastenings supplier for the motor industry – delivering hose bands and trim fastenings to clients including Aston Martin, Bentley and JCB.

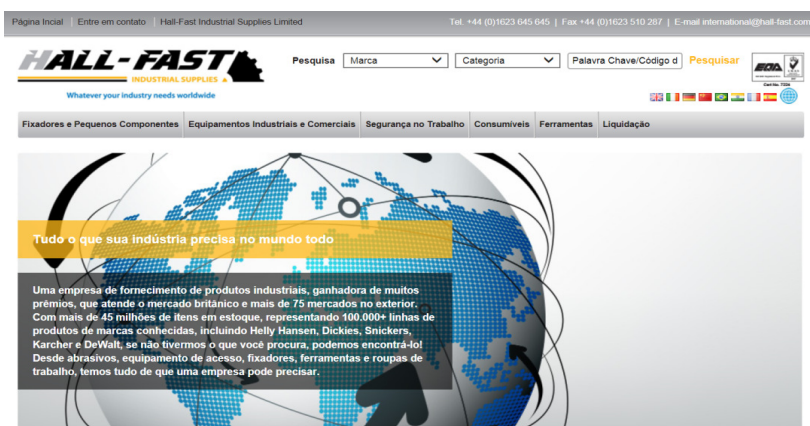
But in 2008, the recession hit Mansfield-based Hall-Fast hard as some of its biggest clients went into administration. It was clear the company would not survive unless it diversified out of its niche sector. "It was fight or go under," says Hall, "and being a Yorkshireman I decided to fight it head on. We knew we had to diversify to survive, not only with our product range but our markets too."

Hall decided to bring forward his plans for the future of the business and start exporting. The traditional route to market for a fastenings supplier would be to visit and supply through agents or distributors within each country but Hall found this path blocked: it would have taken too long, the major distributors were already in strategic partnerships with competitors, and the bank wanted his house as collateral for increased lending – a step Hall was not prepared to take.

Instead, Hall turned to the internet. He expanded his product range to include work wear, tools and specialist protection equipment, set up a number of sales websites around the world – all linking back to a central database – and in January 2009 started to export.

"At the beginning there were people saying it wouldn't work – but to be honest we had no real option at the time," remembers Hall. "We generated sales very quickly because we were supplying original equipment to manufacturers direct and not via the traditional distribution channels, so we were very competitively priced."

The innovative strategy was also relatively low risk. Setting up websites in German, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese is clearly a "big, costly job" – but it is nothing compared with the time and investment needed to build up networks of overseas distributors in the traditional fashion.



Hall-Fast's website for Brazil in Portuguese

Before the recession, Hall-Fast supplied around 20,000 products to the automotive industry in Britain; now it supplies more than 175,000 product lines to diverse customers in 78 countries. The company stocks 45 million items. Recent deals include supplying vacuum cleaners to a hotel in Bhutan and embroidered workwear to a company in Nigeria – and Hall-Fast's Chinese website is starting to generate business too.

The whole operation has low overheads as it is run with just eight people – including four sourcing new products and optimising the websites, and two in the warehouse, dispatching stock all over the globe.

Selling globally directly via your website can be great - as long you observe a few simple rules

1. **Remember the miles and borders involved.** A few types of items are best sold domestically, even if you plan to start selling some goods internationally. Heavy goods (certainly anything requiring freight shipment, extremely fragile goods, and goods that are extremely valuable or that may encounter border-crossing or customs problems are not good candidates for international sales.
2. **Give international-friendly specifications.** Wherever you happen to be based, remember that different areas of the world use different common measurements. While inches, pounds, and quarts might be necessary measurements to include for United States sales, for example, European bidders are more likely to buy if they can see specifications in centimetres, kilograms, and litres. Be particularly careful about critical specifications that may prevent goods from being viable across borders—DVD region encoding, for example, or the fact that many United States mobile phones won't work in other markets due to frequency differences, and vice-versa.
3. **Remember spelling and language family differences.** Even English words can vary from place to place, meaning that you might miss buyers if you include only the phrases “colorful jewelry” or “aluminum caliper,” forgetting their counterparts “colourful jewellery” and “aluminium calliper.”
4. **Use lots of images.** Because of deeper language barriers that can be involved in international selling, verbose descriptions of item conditions or features might not be understandable to all of your potential buyers, which can lead to all kinds of problems once the deal has been closed. Instead, go heavy on photos. Get a close-up of every blemish and every feature that you would otherwise describe in text, since it's much more difficult to misunderstand a photo.
5. **Account for currency conversion and other costs.** Most international trading involves currency conversions that *someone* is going to pay for. As a seller, most of the time you'll probably be paying PayPal cross-border transaction fees for automatic conversions. You'll also need to account for increased shipping and packaging costs. Know what these adjustments amount to and account for them in your planning, lest you be (unhappily) surprised at the outcome of your international selling activity on your balance sheet.
6. **Include strong disclaimers.** Whether you're selling on an English-based site or selling on an international site in another language, be sure to include a strong set of disclaimers for any cross-border trade warning of significantly increased shipping costs and times, potential customs troubles, the increased difficulty of return and exchanges, and so on. Clearly indicate who will be responsible for picking up the slack should a disagreement arise—is the listing AS-IS and strictly buyer beware? If so, be explicit. If not, be equally explicit and be prepared to back it up.

The role of influencers

What's an influencer? Influencers are journalists, bloggers and key people within the sector where you are operating. They may write about issues and or review products. These people are often knowledgeable and passionate and can influence the opinions of tens of thousands and really lift your business.

This is what happened to Tangle Teezer in Germany, according to Shaun Pulfrey:

"In 2009 we sent some Tangle Teezers to some celebrity hairdressers, bloggers and top magazines. It worked like a dream! One magical day, Bild newspaper (circulation 2.5m) ran a big feature on the British "Wonderbrush." And then the 'phones started ringing. In 2012 I was asked

to speak at the British Embassy in Berlin about our success in Germany - all down to sending samples to social media influencers!"

How do you get new business in Dubai from a standing start in less than a month? Here's how Northern Lights PR started promoting their services and winning business through LinkedIn

During the depth of the recession Victoria Tomlinson, CEO of Northern Lights PR, a small Harrogate-based PR firm, started discussing the idea of doing business outside the UK. From a standing start in January to receiving their first payment for work was less than four months. As ever, some of this was fortuitous timing, but the critical factor was LinkedIn.

Find out which markets might suit your business best. Victoria had lived in Saudi Arabia when young, so had a familiarity with and respect for the Arab culture, as well as speaking rusty Arabic, so it seemed logical to start research in the Middle East.

Their first step was to understand the economy post-crash, so they posted on their LinkedIn accounts: 'Anyone knowledgeable about current economy in Dubai/Oman?' Within the hour, a director from Yorkshire Water gave them the name of, and introduction to, a consultant they use who travels to Dubai regularly. They arranged to meet, the consultant gave them three hours of time for free – and it gave them confidence to get on a plane.

But who should they meet? All their team used Advanced Search on LinkedIn to see whom they knew with contacts in Dubai. The trump card was the best man of a colleague – although she hadn't seen the old friend for 20 years and he now lives in Italy. He was connected to three former Cemex colleagues who are now chief executives of different businesses in Dubai. They asked him for introductions and meetings were set up with all three, along with another 17 senior people whom they found through contacts of contacts on LinkedIn. Victoria's very first meeting in this new market turned into a year's contract with a prestigious company operating in six GCC countries and with 450 employees.

They did look at UKTI support, but their service would have cost £1,200 to research the market for their business and then set up meetings with six companies. This could have great value for companies with limited networks, but our view is that an introduction from a credible business peer will generally have more impact than from a government agency.

To make LinkedIn work effectively, you need 100 percent complete profiles and a strong, quality network. What it tends to do is cut through hours of research (did you know your best man has mates heading up businesses in the Middle East?) and formalities.

Generally, people on LinkedIn recognise they are there to be 'social' and helpful.

Requests for advice and introductions receive much greater responses than through traditional methods – and everyone can do it far more quickly, increasing the effectiveness.

Of course, social media is not a magic wand. You still have to meet people, have something they need – and convert the sale. But used strategically, LinkedIn is a powerful tool that could save you thousands of pounds – and hours of legwork.

How to benefit from the social media activities of your big retail customers

Lidl has just entered the record books as the food retailer with the biggest European Facebook Community with 10 million Facebook fans now "Socially devoted" to Lidl.

All this has been achieved since social media activities were rolled out in 2011 in seven pilot countries: UK, Spain, Ireland, Holland, Croatia, Romania and Finland. Now in 2014 Lidl has 26 Facebook pages in Europe.

Lidl has succeeded in creating and using dialogue and not only advertising campaigns. This strong engagement with customers/users has led to the Facebook followers having had their say on which Lidl products should go on a special offer in the stores.

This is all good for Lidl but what 'is in it for me' as a small exporter and brand owner, you might think...

- Work with your sales channels to pilot new countries and markets – share all the new knowledge and align your product/services to your customers, the pilot countries and markets. Do not be afraid of different languages – easy to translate on-line.
- Tailor your sales propositions to your customers' own "fans".
- Pro-actively use the free product/service information and feedback you can openly follow on your customers' social media sites. Offer to help your customers to address and follow up, where needed help your customers to improve the situation. Use Google Alert for your monitoring to save time on your searches.
- There are massive opportunities for being half a step ahead of your customers for new product development/improvements and spotting trends to further strengthen your business relationships across all borders.

Montagne Jeunesse

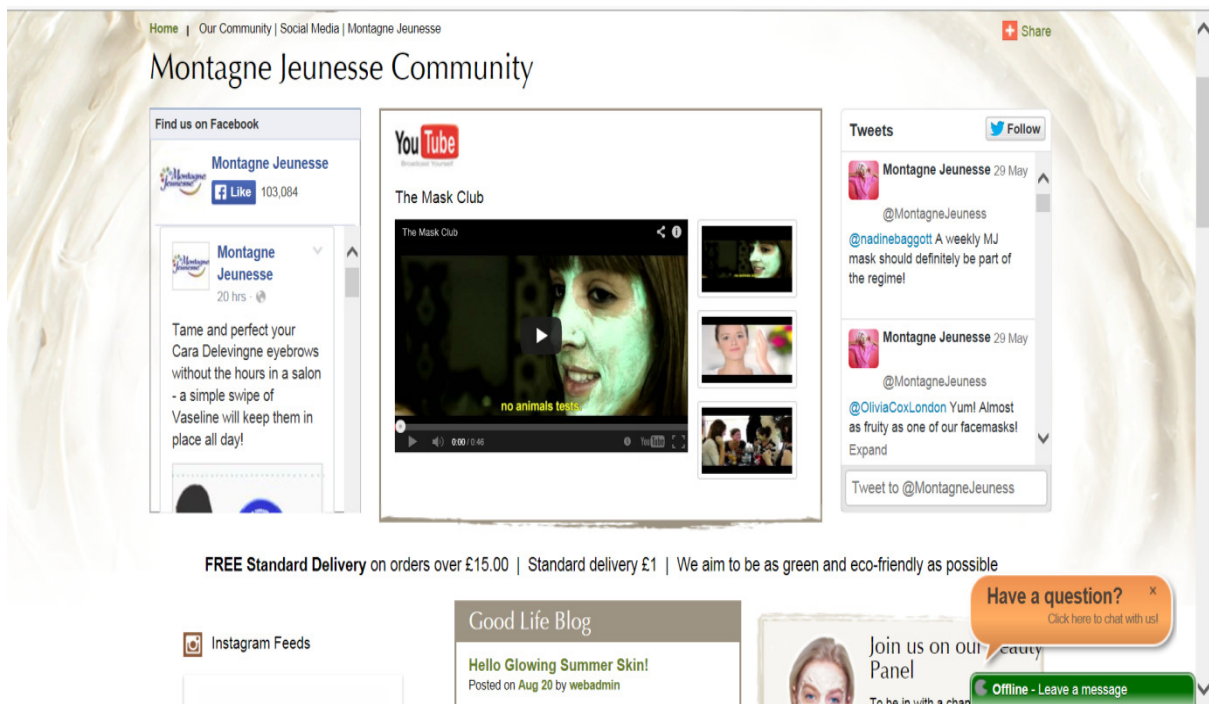
Montagne Jeunesse is a beauty-product business based in Baglan Energy Park, South Wales, UK, with products being sold in 82 countries worldwide and listed in over 1000 international retail chains across all of the major global retailers. The business has been built around a range of natural beauty products with face masques being their main product, along with foot, bath, hair and body products in single-use sachets.



Their website includes pages where overseas partners each have a page in their respective languages which includes the logos of retailers where their products are stocked.

When you click on the 'Our Community' button you then go to a page where you can access all their social media:

Optimum
Export



You can join their 103,000 likes on Facebook and their Mask Club on YouTube. You can also follow them on Twitter and read their blogs.

This inexpensive product (it retails at around £1.00 in the UK) has developed a strong, loyal following in a number of countries through the company's innovative use of social media to engage with its consumers. And, remember, they are competing with major multi-nationals like Estee Lauder and Elizabeth Arden.

To conclude:

There is not one single right way to use social media and digital marketing to support and grow your sales, but hopefully you now have a better picture of what can be achieved almost regardless of the size of your business and the industry you are operating in.

Get in touch

If you want to learn more about how Optimum Export can help grow *your* export, please do get in touch and we can have an informal chat.

Kind regards

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