

How to create buy-in and influence buy-ing

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Why a good reputation and brand can lead to more sales.

As a business owner, CEO or MD, you're likely to be overly concerned with your sales performance but less so with your brand and reputation. This is because getting to market or staying competitively in the market is what pays the bills (and keeps your shareholders happy); the other is a nice-to-have... a logo, a fancy pay-off line, engaging website and a few nice things that someone said about you on social media. Right? Wrong.

In an increasingly digital world, your brand and reputation are as much assets to your business as your staff, infrastructure and IT. And something to be aware of as, if it sours, it can bite you, badly. Remember how quickly the public shared damning video footage of KFC staff hosing down chicken pieces on a concrete floor? Or what about the curious case of the plagiarised hummingbird cushion and Woolworths? Both demonstrate how fast bad news can be shared online, and emphasises the necessity of keeping your reputation (read: your service, standards, values and ethics) intact.



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What's a reputation, anyway? It's the collective view of what your stakeholders i.e.: your customers, suppliers, staff, shareholders, etc. think of you.

Accurate or not, it's the perception that they have formed either by interacting with your business directly, or indirectly via

others. While you can control the former by maintaining high standards; ensuring your staff represent you properly and that your after-purchase service is top-notch, the latter is more challenging as your current and future customers' opinions can be significantly influenced by third parties, including the media, bloggers as well as friends and family. Some of whom may not be your fans...

Coupled with the explosion of communication channels that can spread (good and bad) news in milliseconds, it's in your best interest to know what your stakeholders think of you, and then to play a proactive role in influencing their views if it's not what you'd like, or thought, it to be.

Listen...

When last did you audit your business online to see what is being said about it? The internet is the world's biggest focus group, so simply using Google search, Twitter or Facebook can yield hundreds of conversations instantly - some you may not even be aware of. For instance, as a consumer brand, someone may have started a '#Love' or '#Hate' group. What about Hello Peter? When was the last time you looked to see if you're hot or not? Trawling these platforms could reveal a new insight, or you could find that a disgruntled customer has taken to Facebook to spread unfounded vitriol. Being aware of any potential flare-ups provides an opportunity to right or explain any wrong, while positive posts verify you're doing something that your customers like - consider it free market research.

Direct the conversation

Both B2C and B2B businesses have a wealth of tools available to them to use to promote what they do and influence what people think. For starters, there is the company website; its blog; social networks like Linked-In, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook or newsletters. Or, you can engage relevant bloggers and media to help share your content for you (providing it's newsworthy and interesting to the wider public, of course).

Each can be used strategically to positively position your business, communicate your message and ultimately drive viable leads and enquiries. But do ensure that your content clearly ties back to your USP, enhances your values and builds your brand. How? Have a clear idea of what your strategic intent is and how that translates into your marketing and communication plans. Simply posting content for content's sake does not a good strategy make. And, if the tone doesn't reflect your business offering perfectly, is too generic, or worse, is badly designed or written, then it's a wasted effort and could do more harm than good.

It's also a reputational sin to ever claim you are the "best", "first", "most" or "greatest" if you're not. Do your homework by looking at what the competition sell, and how they are promoting it; then differentiate your offering by playing to your unique strengths. This immediately gives you an edge and allows you to build a brand and reputational image around an area of expertise vs. being the best or most (which customers are often sceptical about, anyway). As Oscar Wilde said "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken". Sage advice.

Be bold with your opinion

Building a reputation isn't for wallflowers. It means taking risks, putting yourself out there and taking a stand on a particular issue. After all, you want your customers and other stakeholders to buy into what you are saying (and selling). Package this into engaging content - a blog post, for instance, which can be shared on your or your company's Linked-In or Twitter feed - and begin to slowly shape opinions and perceptions.

Developed in line with an SEO strategy that identifies what your customers are searching for online, your well-packaged thought leadership content can also help claim your position on Google. Few people look beyond the first page of searches, so you want to be seen where your customers are looking.

Know your purpose

Having an opinion and sharing it is one thing, but it must align to why you're in business in the first place. Otherwise you'll build a brand that isn't about you at all. Ask yourself these four questions, and if you struggle, you may not be clear on your strategic intent:

1. What do you do?
2. Why do you do it?
3. What solution do you offer your customers?
4. What do you do that proves this?

Question two is often where the difficulty comes in. Without having a sound understanding of why you do what you do, you may be miscommunicating your message and potentially losing leads and sales.

Does all of this effort generate a return? In the long-term, yes. Reputation is cultivated; not bought. It isn't a quick win, it's a slow race that builds trust and credibility. It's the long-term goal not the short-term fix and should be as much a part of your strategy from the get-go as your sales projections and financial forecasts are.

But you'll need to work at it steadily by producing valuable and authoritative content, engaging your staff to buy into your vision and values and listen on and offline to understand what the word on the street about you is. In so doing, you'll give your stakeholders good cause to buy into you. And once they've bought into and trusted you, there is more chance that they will end up buying from you. Which as an entrepreneur, MD or CEO is what you really want, anyway.

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