

Whitepaper

# Marketing : The Basics

An accountancy firm's perspective

By Jodie King

Tons of our clients come to us with one of the following problems at some point during the duration of their business:

- I need more clients
- I don't know what to do to market myself or my business
- I have Facebook and I just sent out a load of flyers but nothing is working – Help!

It seems odd in many ways but the fact is that when a business owner discusses their cash flow problems and searches for solutions to them they tend to be sat in front of their accountant.

ABC are in a very privileged position, as in we are:

- 1) Successful
- 2) Expanding with new clients coming on a weekly basis
- 3) Pretty darn marketing savvy

So nine times out of ten we help our clients out with their marketing by either referring them to the right people or giving them a starting point to build on. Belinda Darley, ABC's owner, is practically a Facebook addict. If there is a rehab clinic for social media gurus in the future she will likely be one of the first in attendance. But nobody can mock her for it for one glaringly obvious truth – IT WORKS!

Naturally, Belinda's first question to anyone who is struggling for work is – do you have a Facebook page? The second is – are you posting on it regularly? The third is – do you respond timely to activity and update photos/information when necessary?

This is not a social media expert talking but in those three questions she has covered the bare necessities of Facebook marketing.

- 1) You have to be on it to see it work and it is FREE. What possible reason have you got for not being on it?
- 2) Post regular – you have to engage your following with interesting, eye-catching, informative and somewhat quirky/original material.
- 3) You have to be present to respond to queries and interact with people otherwise it is just a lifeless automated system that will not inspire anyone to recommend you.

That is the introduction we give our clients to marketing. I say again, we are not experts, but our methods are tried and tested. We have grown what works and eliminated what hasn't. Every business is different and I will discuss some nuances we have come across in witnessing our client's efforts.

This whitepaper will outline the basics of marketing that all new or established businesses should be doing. I am in charge of ABC's marketing and as such have a background in social media, copywriting, blogging and running measured campaigns. That said, this paper is not about my skills it is about everything this firm has witnessed and actioned. Accountancy firms are very unique in that they get to see a lot of businesses on a daily basis.

A smart accountancy firm takes note of their clients by looking at what they do well and what perhaps didn't work out for them in the long run. Belinda has seen clients network, build up referral circles, embrace different social media platforms, update their websites, revamp their image as well as outsource work to SEO companies, designers and PR consultants. In short, she has seen a lot. Belinda, with the help of a dedicated staff, most notably ABC's second social media guru Michelle Chapman have:

- Invested in designers to revamp branding and the website – [www.abc-accounting-services.co.uk](http://www.abc-accounting-services.co.uk) (courtesy of MMC Agency - Gainsborough)
- Established a strong Facebook following - <https://www.facebook.com/AccountantsABC>
- Set up Twitter, Google+, and LinkedIn profiles - @ABCAccounting on Twitter
- Written how to guides, whitepapers, eBooks - <http://www.abc-accounting-services.co.uk/downloads.php>
- Set up and populated a blog with weekly posts: <http://abcaccountingservicesblog.com/>
- Run e-flyer campaigns and postal campaigns
- Run workshops in-house and presented at local networking events
- Attended and managed networking events both locally and in the surrounding regions

There is plenty of marketing options available to any business and most of them are completely free. What it does take is some time and effort and a little skill. There is little point turning up to a networking event if you are planning on hiding in a corner, grabbing a glass of bubbly and then legging it at the first opportunity. Unfortunately, just turning up isn't enough to make a difference to your client base or sales!

Use these chapters to work your way through this guide to marketing basics. We hope you will find some of the pointers we provide useful – after all businesses doing well is good for business!

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is an odd one because most people know they should be on it but they also seem to think that there is a magical approach to it that no one has let them in on. It has good press and bad press which we will look at but ultimately one thing remains unchanged – it's FREE!

How many times do you get the opportunity to advertise your business for free? Networking events come with an entry fee, online advertising campaigns or search engine enhancements are charged, large numbers of e-flyer or postal distributions also come with a hefty fee. Then there are the design and printing costs of flyers, posters, leaflets, brochures, business cards, stationary, and websites. All we ever do when we embark on a new marketing strategy is spend money and hope for a return from a fresh influx of clients or customers.

If you create a profile on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest and LinkedIn you reach out to a huge audience and it does not cost you a penny. Yes, it takes time to set these profiles up and yes you do have to post to these platforms if you ever want to gain exposure that will lead to actual results. Any marketing campaign takes time and effort. Still weighing up the pros and the cons? Let's take a look at them in black and white.

The cons:

- The time and effort needed to post fresh and engaging content on a regular basis

This can be time consuming but it can also be scheduled and managed so that it doesn't take over your working day. Rather than have the platforms open 24/7 visit them three times a day (mid-morning, lunch and mid-afternoon) and respond to queries and comments in the allotted times.

- Everyone is on there fighting for attention

Yes, just about everyone has a personal account (apart from those who value their privacy). But, there are not that many businesses on there and even fewer who are actually active, engaging, and capturing their audience's attention. Surprisingly, social media is still an area of huge potential because so few businesses commit the time and quality of effort to the job that is needed. Are your competitors on their? Are they active? If they are not then this is a massive opportunity for you and your business. If they are then you need to get on there to neutralise their advantage.

- It's just a form of work avoidance that doesn't amount to actual sales/new clients

In our experience businesses have successfully attracted new clients to their business with consistent posting. The hook may be a special offer, a free pamphlet, a fresh approach, an enlightening perspective, or just the fact that they are used to seeing your stuff and feel as though they know you better than they know other firms. In terms of work avoidance that

comes down entirely to the self-discipline of the individual. Spend a reasonable amount of time on social media and do not let it take over your day – simple enough.

- It isn't measurable

In one way it is difficult to gauge the full impact of social media profiles. This is because sometimes a client will come to you after visiting your website or talking to a friend but the initial push came from a post they saw on their Facebook news feed. They may have been friends of the page for years and that push to contact you may almost be classed as subconscious. I am a big believer in the fact that social media builds trust and familiarity between your audience and your brand. The true extent of this is unmeasurable as is the true reach of word of mouth. But we know that it works.

All of the social media sites now have analytics that show you how many people visit, like, interact, share and comment on your page/posts. They show you if your activity is positive or negative and for the analytically savvy there is tons more information to digest, especially on Google+.

- Too informal and dumbed down for business

In many ways this is the biggest curse of social media. It does carry a stigma and that is because there are a lot of people on there that post rubbish and fill news feeds with pushy plugs, boring updates and tiresome links. Ultimately, this is just the same as spam that we receive in the post and via email. You filter out the rubbish and concentrate on the good stuff. You have control over who you follow/like and what you comment on. In the same way people who are impressed with the integrity and quality of what you share will return the favour.

The pros:

- Massive audience

As previously discussed just about everyone is on a social media platform so if you say the right things a

t the right times there is huge potential here.

- Local, National, International

Social media gives you a global reach. You start locally and build up a network of businesses and clients/customers as you would face-to-face. Then you can expand this into other counties and potentially attract audiences from much further afield. The digital landscape is extremely accessible and instant. You can talk to people that live on the other side of an ocean. If your product or service is good enough then what is stopping you from selling it to people that do not live in the same country as you?

- Informal – less suited and booted than the more traditional view of business

It is often the biggest curse and bonus of social media. It breaks down boundaries and gives people a live insight into you and your company. The key word there is live. The only other way people get current information about you and your company is via face to face meets at networking events or during appointments. This is a live stream of evidence showing that you are an active, interesting and modern presence on the web. You can be a little more casual with the information you share mixing insightful articles with funny quotes and thought provoking images. It has huge potential but there is also a code to abide by. Do not be unprofessional, too casual, or too informative. This is a window into your world but personal details and information that are not integral to your business have no place on your page/posts. Keep it clean and business orientated but do not lose your sense of humour.

- Multimedia

Social media is very three dimensional in that you can fill it with any media you wish. Mix it up and keep the content original. The use of video and images should be frequent as we know for a fact that this grabs our audience's attention. You can add graphs/tables, interactive quizzes, images of your team, how-to videos, visually enhanced quotes/verse, or links to other pages/websites. The only thing that can hold you back is your imagination and creativity. Check out successful pages and see what they are doing.

- It's free

How often do you get free marketing? Do I really have to say anything else here – it's a no brainer!

So now that you are coming round to the idea that a social media site might be a sound investment of your time – which one is the one for you? Now, I am no social media expert, but I have picked up a bit of useful info on each of what I like to think of as the big four social media platforms. This may be helpful as you decide where to focus your efforts.

## **Twitter**

Everyone uses it from individuals to the largest multinational corporations. You can interact directly with brands using the @ and their nametag. You have to be a driving force on twitter so ask questions/lead conversations and start conversation threads. A trending hashtag #subjectmatter can increase your chances of engaging with people not currently on your follow/following lists.

Post on twitter multiple times per day at various times because the tweet is gone in seconds so has limited exposure to your audience. It is guaranteed that at this moment in time there is a conversation going on that is relevant to your industry or business – are you part of it?

## **LinkedIn**

Seen as the social media site for professionals and very popular with businesses as well as recruiters and job seekers. In many ways it is an old fashioned networking tribute site in that posts do not have to be regular but they do have to be carefully crafted. LinkedIn users expect quality and a slightly higher brow debate. It is people focused instead of business so you connect with other employees/employers and usually have to know something about them or perhaps have just met them at a networking event.

You only need to post 2-4 times a week – there is not a high level of interactivity on LinkedIn. There is a very intimate link between likeminded individuals on LinkedIn as our profiles share more than on any other platform. Make sure all employees are professional, appropriate and on-brand at all times.

## **Facebook**

Literally everyone and their uncles are on Facebook – it was and still is the social media phenomena of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a massive range of what you can share from all types of online content to ads and events.

Posting etiquette is 1-2 times a day though many businesses abuse this and can lead to overexposure. There are also plenty who post 1-2 times a week and are quickly forgotten. You can consider advertising or paying to promote your page on Facebook to increase reach and interaction. Another viable option is to choose a friends page rather than a business page so people see each post you make.

If someone comments on your post then their stream sees it so Facebook can quickly advertise your message and brand to new audiences. It is a more personal and sociable platform that people use as a distraction throughout the work day and also when they have clocked off and are sat at home with a glass of wine. The right message could find its recipient in a very amiable and open frame of mind!

## **Google+**

This is the newcomer that has the potential to combine the best bits of all the others. We just have to figure out how to use it. It is more formal and professional than Facebook and has the added bonus of hashtags that make it more searchable.

You have to invite people to your circles and spend time searching for people you know to build your cluster of followers. It is also nice that you can separate your circles into colleagues, friends, acquaintances and post different material depending on your audience.

You only need to post 1-2 times a day as with Facebook. Google+ comes into its own with regards to keywords and search engine optimisation. Google have provided all the tools to make this platform a heavy hitter once it is integrated with your other sites (website/blog). Look at the google analytics supplied and look closely at [Google Authorship](#) to really understand what Google+ is all about.

## WEBSITE

This is most businesses greatest marketing tool but far too many take it for granted. There are a few approaches when it comes to websites that do not lead to great results. These are as follows:

- Spending very little on it (less than you can afford to)

A cheap website lacks interactivity and doesn't wow your audience. Yes, we cannot all afford glamorous websites when we start out but there are basics to abide by. The text must be clear and quirky. The images have to be clean and avoid generic images in favour of some shots of you, your team, your work/products. Make the site personal to you so that it is unique and original. You don't have to spend a lot of money on it but spend enough to make it stand out and count.

- Setting it up and then leaving it alone

You must stay on top of the content and refresh it regularly – at least annually. If something changes within the company then the website should instantly reflect this. Build onto it as you can afford to and as your marketing reach spreads. Once you have a Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and/or Google+ page you will need icon(s) or 'follow us' tabs placing on the website. If you plan to write a blog then that can be an additional page to the website incorporated into it or hosted separately. You also need to measure the success of the website and have an idea of how each page is performing – for this you will need to become acquainted with webmaster tools and analytics. Some sites have these included in the hosting package but many people add free google tools and analytics themselves. Talk to your hosts or designers for more details. Whatever you do make sure you can access your site, add new and fresh content, and do not abandon it or it will be forgotten by you and by your potential clients.

- The slick generic website

This is the website that has selected the same theme to hundreds of other. The content is useful but completely generic. In other words just about any company could have designed this website and populated it because it lacks originality and any kind of spark. You should always break the mould when marketing and as I said your website is your greatest statement. It tells people who you are and what you stand for. So think about what makes you different and why people would be wise to invest in your product/service.

Avoiding these three common mistakes should steer you along the right lines. The ingredients of a website vary depending on who you are and what service/product you are offering. There are a few rules that can make you more likely to produce a great website instead of an OK one but the main rule will always be spontaneity. ABC's website started out as a simple single page but it was eye catching, straight to the point and outlined exactly what the company stood for.

The current website has clearly been revamped with more pages and more content. Belinda had huge input on what she wanted her website to say and how she wanted to say it. A good designer will be able to convert that along the lines of what you were imagining (in this case MMC Agency were the designers used). If you do not like what they come up with then make sure you tell them and they will come back with different approaches until you pick one you like.

Just think of your website as the flagship of your company that sits out ahead of all other contact you will make with your audience. Make sure it is befitting of this responsibility by:

- 1) Spending as much money as you can afford to on it
- 2) Avoiding any typos (grammar/spelling errors)
- 3) Making sure it reflects the message of the company and communicates to your audience exactly what you want them to hear/see
- 4) Be consistent with branding throughout the site
- 5) Make contact information visible and site navigation accessible and clear
- 6) Have a balance of text and image content so there is not too many images and too little information or too much text and no visual impact
- 7) Make sure features load quickly and that the website is compatible with different browsers
- 8) Have a hook on the home page so that when they land they instantly see something they like/something that draws them deeper into the site/something that will bring them closer to acting on their initial enquiry

If you follow the above suggestions then you will have a webpage that will be active rather than dormant. Remember, this is where people go to find out about you before they call. If someone recommends you they will check out your website first. If they are searching your industry locally your website should feature in their search. What would you like to know if you were looking for your service/product? What would make people stop and take notice of you above all the other sites they are scanning?

## NETWORKING

This is what Belinda has taught us about networking here at ABC:

- 1) Be yourself because the room is full of human beings and if you go in as a salesperson people will avoid you like the plague – they will also tell other people to avoid you!
- 2) Talk about normal, natural topics of conversation and relax because once again the room is full of human beings just like you!
- 3) Be confident and proud of who you are and what you represent because if you are not then why would anyone else be?

It helps that Belinda is a fitness instructor so she is used to dealing with people and enjoys engaging with new faces and getting to know interesting individuals. We are not all natural networkers. It takes time to build on what you have, get to know a few faces and start to feel confident in this new environment. Here are some basic tips to help you on your way:

- Say hello and people will say hello back
- Have an idea of what you usually talk to people about before you approach someone and that way you can steer a conversation onto a topic you are comfortable with
- If you don't know someone then introduce yourself and what you do, then politely ask what they do
- If you really do not like someone or feel awkward then tell them you must refresh your coffee and catch someone else on the way to or from the coffee pot
- Ideally take a colleague or friend to the first couple so you have a safety blanket and someone to retreat to
- Only laugh at things that are genuinely funny – fake laughs are really obvious and totally unnecessary – besides you don't want someone thinking they are funny if they are not! We have all done it
- Go and get a drink and snack on any nibbles available because it gives you something to hold and settle the nerves
- Ask to be introduced to other people if there are regular attendees in the room
- Be brave and remember why you are there – bailing is always an option but it isn't a very productive one!

Ultimately, everyone finds their own approach to networking but there is no question that it can be immensely effective. As the next chapter will show, word of mouth is like gold dust so if you can get people talking about you then the chances of referral and positive connections increases exponentially. The best advice when it comes to networking is just do it. Jump in with both feet and make sure people notice you. You are not there to hide in corners or inspect the toilet facilities!

## WORD OF MOUTH

Without doubt the oldest and most valuable form of marketing that exists! The consumer will trust a recommendation by a friend/colleague above any other advertising. What do you do if you need a good plumber? You ask your mates if they know of a decent plumber. What do you do if you can't decide on Nike or Adidas trainers? You ask others which they prefer and mingle their responses with your own gut feelings. And what do you do if you need a good accountant? You don't ask the accountancy firm if they are any good – you ask their clients and try and get a gauge of word of mouth feelings about them.

Nielson states that 92% of consumers believe recommendation from friends and family over all forms of advertising. Presumably the 8% have untrustworthy or slightly dodgy friends and family. That is why networking is so important because it gets people talking about you – making you a familiar and more comfortable brand. If someone has heard of you before you are recommended to them then you are almost guaranteed a sale/consultation.

This all comes down to the quality of the connection. There is little point gaining 1000 Facebook likes from people who do not even know you. Whereas if you get your clients to like you then they will comment on your posts and tag friends in. This is adding a layer of quality and depth to your message that will carry it further and to the right audience.

The three Es still apply here as much as they always have:

- Engage your audience by listening to them, offering them free advice/guidance. Be part of conversations as an individual so you establish trust and knowing. Hopefully this is not just a sales ploy and you genuinely like helping/supporting people.
- Equip them by giving them something to talk about. We write a lot of material to help start-up businesses and whitepapers on subjects like marketing/Real Time Information/ Bookkeeping. We give people a reason to talk about us and tell their friends about the useful stuff on our downloads page.
- Empower your audience by making sure they know they are important to you – you couldn't do this without them! Make yourselves accessible and approachable over lots of different mediums (social media, email, blogs). Make it easy for them to share you and your material with others.

It will always come down to what people say about you so make sure you capture your clients testimonials and promote a few. Other clients are likely to agree and comment on positive posts making you visible to wider audiences. Be tactful and tasteful – establishing trust is a long process that you want other people to do for you. If you provide a great product or service then people will talk about it, you just need to make sure that those conversations flow.

## POSTAL CAMPAIGN

I will address a question here that is fitting for both postal and e-flyer campaigns and that is; do we still need them now that we have social media? It is a sound question worthy of a bit of thought. The simple answer is no – clearly everyone is on social media. But, that creates a thought that I often ponder. If we are all on social media then isn't it getting a little flooded creating the possibility that our message is standing out less and less?

I think there is an element of truth to this but ultimately the more time and quality of effort you invest in social media the more likely your message will be noticed. Also, yes if we are all focusing on the digital landscape then maybe the savvy business person is grabbing the bulk of the postal audience because this area is less susceptible to spam nowadays and less worked by other firms. So, I have a soft spot for this approach and there is always room for a mini backlash against our absorption into the World Wide Web.

There are plenty of people who wish to see the Royal Mail survive and to see more letters and tangible pieces of communication back on hallway floors. There is something authentic and hardworking about this approach. Plus, you know that they will have to pick it up and even if they are transporting it to the bin that gives you a few seconds to peak their interest during that journey.

It may be a nostalgic viewpoint but for me postal campaigns are in no way last century yet. As with all leaflets/flyers/letters make sure they are excellent quality and that they are:

- Bold/eye-catching
- Carrying a simple and clean message
- Not cluttered with text or low resolution images
- On silk rather than gloss paper (it is just more sophisticated and provides a smoother finish)
- Free of any typos (spelling/grammar errors)
- Targeted to the receiver where possible (addressed to the MD/Marketing Dept)
- Focused – offering a specific service or special offer so the call to action is clear
- Proof read, edit, and tweak to perfection

Postal campaigns are not cheap. You have the cost of the design if you do not do it yourself (an experts touch is preferential), the cost of print and the cost of distribution. You could frank your own letters but leaflets will have to be delivered door to door so you either have to factor in a big chunk of time or distribution costs that do not come cheap.

The best approach is to start small so that the campaign is measurable and you are not spending lots of money on something that does not work. ABC started out with a postal campaign. A few letters delivered to businesses of interest were all Belinda needed to kick start her journey into self-employment. Another one several years later saw 20 letters delivered to the owners of local businesses and resulted in one client.

As with any marketing strategy make sure it is measurable and that way you will know soon enough if it works for you. If it doesn't work then you haven't failed you have just learnt to tailor your marketing strategy and focus on other methods.

## E-FLYER CAMPAIGN

I am not a big fan of e-flyer campaigns because let's face it our spam folders are crammed and we are fed up of Groupon, Amazon, SecretEscapes, Tesco direct or whoever else feels like telling us about their newest most amazing deals! Yes, I probably did buy something from them and I may not have ticked the box. The one that sometimes you have to tick to opt out of regular newsletters and sometimes you don't have to tick. I don't know! I didn't realise months later I would still be getting regular updates about lawnmowers that I must have a secret urge to impulse buy.

However, if we put aside our dislike of spam, there is a useful side to email. If we establish a newsletter for our clients we can keep them apprised of any new services/products or industry specific information we feel would be useful for them to know. This builds a bond between us and our clients increasing trust/loyalty and making them more likely to buy from us again in the future. Clearly, posting a new offer every week will become tedious but a monthly offering of engaging content could be welcomed.

Treated as a drip feed of informative news bulletins, engaging articles, updates on expanding services/product ranges, and key facts, e-flyers can be useful. Some of the ABC team receive AccountancyAge newsletters to stay apprised of news within the industry, a few of the team geeks (Ian, Shell and Fiona but I am not naming names) get a thoroughly engaging read from HMRC delivered to their email box, and we are all susceptible to the Thompson subscription because who doesn't spend the odd lunch break gazing at pure turquoise seas lapping up to golden sandy beaches, imagining a sun bed within reach of the cocktail bar?

If you have a subscription base (clients that are willing to opt in) and can write something monthly or fortnightly that will not crowd but compliment your client's array of incoming emails then give this some thought. You have to be methodical with what you deliver and when but the right audience will be grateful for the direct sharing of information. Here are a few things to consider if you try this marketing method:

- Always get the recipients permission otherwise you are spamming and there are laws against this
- Some e-flyer platforms offer design templates and so many thousands of e-flyers per month free – start with Mail Chimp for an insight into email marketing
- People have short concentration spans so more than a few lines will have them switching off and pressing the delete button
- Always have an image on the page
- Check that they can read it as you intended because some email accounts will display html only and some browsers may not be compatible

- Do not overdo it or you will just become an annoyance
- Think outside of the box – there are a lot of emails out there – what is going to make yours any different?

## BLOGGING

What is blogging and why do people do it? I know what you are thinking – I don't have time to write articles every day and I don't know what I would write them on!

Firstly, it is not as time consuming as you think. You only have to produce one blog every one to two weeks and the content can be varied. You could produce:

- A picture timeline of a job you have just completed – showing how it progressed from start to finish.
- A short article on a niche subject linked to your professional. Marketing businesses might write one on LinkedIn. Roofers might write one on thatch roofing. Accountants might write one on tax codes. It depends on what is linked to your area of expertise.
- A longer article on a bigger area or topic of conversation like corporation tax avoidance, the rise of UKIP, Graffiti as vandalism or art, the greatest sporting individual of all time, or nature verses nurture.
- A quiz for readers to fill in and influence your next blog piece.
- A video entry: a how to guide, presentation caught on camera, office antics!

Blogs can be varied and while some require extensive research and time others can be quick and more casual in content and ambition. Blogging is the amateur writers/journalists dream and they can showcase the very best of the industry you are in. However, if you are not a natural writer and produce boring content then they are a complete waste of time. As with all marketing approaches you have to be unique, original, fresh and imaginative.

Blogging platforms are full of experts in various fields of expertise all sharing their skills and wisdom to encourage debate and conversations about their industry. There are opportunities to guest blog and comment on other blogs creating a great networking arena between businesses. There are large portions of the public who also use blogs as their way of catching up with current events and news. This is because they are created by experts in each industry so there is that integrity to the source who is speaking solely out of experience, immersed in their subject matter on a daily basis.

Blogging is not for everyone but it can be a great way to show your audience that you are up-to-date with the goings on in your sector. You can also add [Google Authorship](#) to your blog and become a recognised Google Author which increases your search ranking and showcases your expertise. This increases your professional status and authenticity on the web making you stand out from the crowd particularly on a local level as not everyone is Google Authorship savvy yet! It is a thought if you have the time and dedication to commit to this.

In conclusion...

There are many more marketing techniques/methods out there but these are the ones that I could write upon from experience. Hopefully, you have found some insights useful and gained the necessary spark or trickle of momentum to take a good look at your marketing strategy and decide if you are doing all you can.

It will never sell itself so any attempt at marketing is 100% more likely to be successful than doing nothing!