

# Get clear on your marketing

Your starter's guide to inbound, outbound,  
becoming a thought leader and using LinkedIn

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You know already how important marketing is. But knowing when to start, where to start and what you should be doing is a job itself. Marketing jargon, smoke and mirrors and a myriad of options all promising fantastic results only muddies the waters.

The next thing you know you've spent the national debt on something you never understood (and got no results) or you find yourself standing on the brink of a new marketing campaign – but never quite getting started.

Fear not, I'm going to talk you through the essentials of two popular giants (inbound and outbound marketing) and then walk you through a case study of how it could work for you. Finally, we'll go a bit deeper with two methods which you can use to jump ahead of the game: thought leadership and LinkedIn.

### **First things first - is your business ready for growth?**

So you're keen to get going, I don't blame you. The lure of marketing teams can be hard to resist – your competitors are flooding your Facebook page and everyone keeps telling you, that you must have a blog.

But first things first, before we take a look at the various options, take a few minutes to check in with your business and work out if it's ready for growth. (And just to be clear, what I'm defining as growth in this context is relevant to small and medium sized businesses who are keen to grow their customer base outside of word-of-mouth or referral contacts and into a broader marketplace).

#### **1. Ask yourself what sort of shape your business is in:**

- Are you really busy with more work than you can handle?
- Would it be a problem if your biggest client announced unexpectedly that they are leaving or a high performing director or team member jumped ship to the competition?
- Would you like to swap some of your less profitable, poor-fit, badly behaved clients for some more profitable, good-fit, well behaved ones?

The bottom line is, there's a tendency not to start marketing until way too late. You've done it, I've done it. But if the answer to any of the above is a yes, you need to start marketing now!

Oh and download my free "When to get started" guide if you could do with a little more guidance on the red flags that should send you scurrying to the marketing team.

## **2. But hold on a minute! Before you launch into your first campaign, make sure that you're absolutely clear on your positioning. Ask yourself:**

- Do you find it difficult to explain just who your ideal customers are – so it's harder for you to actively target them?
- Do you have a good number of website visitors or enquiries, but feel there are not enough actual conversions into sales?
- Do you offer a range of different products or services, but are not sure where to focus your marketing budget?

If you haven't nailed your positioning, your marketing efforts will probably fail. Go back to the drawing board (or better still download my free guide on positioning, mission and message for some help with this).

## What marketing is going to be right for you?

Ok, so you're ready. And by now you're probably also trying to get to grips with the following terms: inbound marketing and outbound marketing. You might feel confused by the difference, irritated by the glib terminology, or excited by the many possible ways in which you can get your message out in front of your prospects.

However you feel, let's get clear on a couple of things (note – these are purely opinions of mine).

- Inbound and outbound marketing are actually just fancy new terms for marketing activities that have been around for a while. But before we had digital, we couldn't really do inbound marketing. (Clue!)
- Almost every business needs to do both. Why? Because they do very different things. One – if done well – creates a lovely loyal community of potential customers over time, and the other can drive sales and revenue in the shorter term.

### **So what is inbound marketing?**

My favourite definition is this one – courtesy of Hubspot:

*Inbound marketing is any marketing tactic that relies on earning people's interest instead of buying it.*

By earning people's interest, it specifically refers to publishing useful, relevant and interesting information on the internet for people to find.

### **How do you do it?**

To be enormously (and inappropriately) generalist – everyone researches online before buying stuff now. You know that, and I know that. But, by research, we don't mean simply comparing the actual products or services they want to buy – though that's a big part of it.

People also:

- Research the wider topic
- Gather different viewpoints
- Look for information written by people with similar attitudes or values to them
- Weigh up and contrast input from people who may have very different values from them
- Learn about the different alternatives available

That means that your role in this should focus on being the most helpful and useful resource you can possibly be, in your own particular field.

Your inbound marketing activity might include:

1. Regular blogging or article writing around the subject
2. Giving expert viewpoint on a topical issue
3. Sharing your own experiences – positive and negative, as long as it's useful
4. Providing a forum for people to openly discuss the topic, products, services available – not just yours!

### **Where do you put these resources to attract customers?**

- On your website – to attract those enthusiastic Googlers directly to you
- On other relevant social channels – to spread the word more widely
- In industry and trade press forums – to demonstrate your specialist expertise
- Commenting on other's threads – to link back to a relevant article you've

written

- Guest blogging on other relevant websites – to build greater thought leadership

### **But there are a few ground rules to getting inbound marketing right**

- It has to be relevant. (If you sell training services, there's not much point becoming the world's best resource for beekeeping information. It might be your hobby, and what you know most about, but it won't help your business. Unless you train beekeepers.)
- It has to be informative, helpful or useful. (Give your knowledge away for free, it will be valued and appreciated.)
- It does not sell or promote your stuff. (This is such a turn-off, and sad that all that lovely writing will have been in vain.)
- It has to be easy to read and in plain English. (Avoid the long words, industry jargon – sorry!)

Write in a way that fits with the culture of your business. If you're corporate, write sensibly. If you're more informal or alternative, mirror it. You want to attract customers to read your stuff who will also want to do business with you – and if there's a big mismatch between how you write and how you actually are in business, it will lead to less satisfied clients.

### **So, on to outbound marketing**

My favourite definition for outbound marketing is actually from a quote that includes the phrase:

*"...where you buy, beg or bug your way in".*

Although this can sound a bit grim at first, we can break it down to see what it's referring to.

- Buy your way in = paid advertising.
- Beg = press releases for publicity.
- Bug = sales people, typically on commission.

Outbound marketing is really about you having to go out and find your customers – in

sharp contrast to inbound, where they come to find you. So, outbound encompasses those more traditional marketing activities that stream outwards towards a customer that isn't yet looking for you – including email marketing, telesales, direct mail, trade shows, PR, leafletting, online advertising etc.

When short term sales are an absolute requirement, when start-ups need their first couple of clients, no-one yet knows about you and tumbleweed is rolling along your pipeline – there is a place for outbound marketing, and it is important not to rule it out as inbound marketing raises its more fashionable head.

There are countless small businesses which start off with something as simple as a local leafletting campaign to gather their first customers, and grow thereafter on referrals and word of mouth.

### **A final word on inbound vs outbound**

- Where inbound takes time, outbound can deliver immediate sales.
- Where inbound builds reputation, outbound can raise awareness.
- Where inbound drives online loyalty, outbound can build face-to-face relationships.

So, look at what you want to achieve: take a good, close look at your resources – and then make a common sense decision about what would work best for you. And if you can manage a combination of the two, all the better.

## **A case study - inbound marketing doing its job**

Picture an environmental consultancy of 18 people. Based in say, Hampshire.

This consultancy advises bigger businesses on the impact of new infrastructure and development on the land, air, water, animals, plants and populations.

The sectors they work in include energy, transport, property and heritage. The services they offer include planning, environmental assessments, land contamination reports, legislation, lobbying and more. And they want to start their content marketing. Their marketing.

All well and good. But they are a bit stuck. Which services should they write more deeply about? They offer so many. Which of their sectors should they strive to become

the expert in? They work in several.

### **Narrow your focus for effective inbound marketing**

The challenge starts when you realise that an SME of this size – 18 people including office/admin/finance – cannot claim true expertise in more than one or two areas. It simply can't do this, and be truly believed. It can, however, offer many different services, and have clients in many different sectors.

But if or when you want to be known for something, you've got to choose – and narrow – your focus. Only then will you be believed. But how?

### **The perfect way to find focus – spot a trend**

In an ideal world, our environmental consultancy spots an upcoming energy trend.

How? Maybe it's by digging deeper into a recent change in EU legislation, investing in their own customer research to spot client needs before they appear, or it may even be a lucky guess.

Of course, just by being involved in their industry, attending conferences, sitting on trade body committees and keeping up with their own professional development – they should be the ones in the know.

### **Good news. You don't have to spot a trend *before* it happens**

To be fair, it's pretty rare to be able to spot a trend before it begins. Unless you're a highly disruptive brand who is mostly in the business of creating trends. Hello Apple.

Much more likely, something you already do pretty well suddenly starts to become either legally required, very fashionable, or financially beneficial to your clients. Or even all three.

In which case, move as quick as you can.

### **Back to our case study**

Whatever the reason, our consultancy friends spot a trend on the up. Say... renewables, 15 years ago. They want to be a thought-leader. Yikes, jargon alert – explanation available.

They make the strategic decision to "*become the most in-the-know and expert renewables' consultancy in the UK, servicing energy clients with interests across Europe.*"

Bam! They now know exactly what to do with their marketing.

And they know where it should go. So here's what they do...

### **12 steps to get to the top**

1. Write about it. All about it. In various European languages.
2. Write case studies up on every bit of renewables work they've ever done. In UK and Europe.
3. Build their contacts in renewables. A few at first, on LinkedIn. Then more, in person. Across Europe.
4. Learn renewables inside out. Because they can't *pretend* to be an expert.
5. Share what they learn. Give briefings and workshops about it.
6. Run roundtables on it. Introduce relevant people to each other. Connect to more.
7. Write press releases on what they learn. Aim for the wider European energy trade press.
8. Set up the first (European) industry trade body for it.
9. Present at conferences about it – across Europe.
10. Write a book about it. E-book or hardback. Write one in German. (?)
11. Commission some original research on it. Collaborate with European scientists and academics. Write up research papers.
12. Write training courses on renewables. First short courses, then B.Sc and M.Sc modules. Get them into European Universities.

24 months later – they're the experts. After all, they've written the books and taught the courses.

### **How far do you need to go ?**

You don't have to go as far as this example – it depends entirely on what your plans are for your business, how *ambitious* you are for growth, what your work-life balance should look like, what investment you have available etc. etc.

### **Only you know those answers**

Imagine work being a bit like hiking. If hiking is your hobby, then conquering Snowdon might be your bag. And that's fine. You won't need to do all those 12 bits of content marketing to just get to the top of Snowdon. The first six or seven will get you well on your way.

But if you're a professional mountaineer, then your aspirations might be more K2, Kilimanjaro or Everest.

**# If you're determined to grow, preparing for sale, ambitious to develop or your strategy includes getting seriously talked about – then get yourself properly positioned, go find your trend and start taking the first of your steps.**

## Making thought leadership part of your plan

In the case study above, our fictitious company became experts. In fact, more than that. As they pushed forward in their search for knowledge and expertise and expanded their research, they started to become thought leaders in their field.

Done well, thought leadership is a very powerful tool for improving your positioning, raising awareness in your industry and target market, acquiring new business, increasing both revenue and profit and recruiting great talent. And it is perfectly doable for you too, with a bit of tenacity.

Having said that, it is still an irritating and dramatic expression that should perhaps be permanently excised from the English language.

### **So what (actually) is thought leadership?**

When I first heard the phrase bandied about years ago, it was by PR people who couldn't clearly define or explain it themselves, let alone find a way to demonstrate it. So I struggled making sense of it myself and finally came up with my own simplistic definition – now very useful in helping me talk about it in plain English with my clients.

### **The 12 sentences that define thought leadership**

1. It's when a person or business talks about what they know best
2. They know more about this topic than most/many other people and businesses
3. They talk about it so much that people start to hear about them

4. And they write about it, make films about it, draw pictures about it, sing about it...
5. This gets them more attention, which is their aim
6. So they **SHOUT** about it. More and more. Louder and louder
7. Then they get quite famous for it (within their business or social circles)
8. Then they get asked to talk, write and present about it
9. So they learn more about it, to get better at talking about it
10. Next they get **PAID** to talk, write and present about it
11. And of course, make keynote speeches all about it
12. Then they make a business out of it

It looks surprising similar to the steps in our case study huh? And when you look at it broken down into those 12 points, you can see how it could be used to make up a bit of an action plan for your business.

### **Thought leadership: action plan for your business**

I'll break the points down into a little more detail so you can see what I mean.

#### **1, 2 and 3. Talk about what you know most about**

This one is simple and it links to how well your business is positioned. The better your niche, your focus, your positioning: the easier it is to work out what you know **most** about.

It becomes easy to talk about it, because you should know a lot of stuff about a very particular topic. More than anyone else, in fact. That's why you're the one that people contact when they need that service.

So, if you supply Amazonian frogs trained in classical ballet to the film industry – then you are where the film industry goes when they need those frogs. And what do you talk about?

- How to train frogs.
- Why Amazonian frogs are better trained than the native African species.
- Why it is that frogs can be trained for classical but not contemporary ballet.

- How frogs in film need better representation by agents.

You get my drift.

#### **4, 5 and 6. Giving more**

This is about giving more in order to get more (in a good, pay-it-forward way when you are in it for the long game).

- Give more content.
- More quality.
- More useful information for potential customers.
- More tips and resources.
- Give your time, your effort, your knowledge.
- Find interested people and give them more of what you have.

#### **7, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Getting more**

This is where all your giving and hard-work is rewarded with the attention you wanted. Enough of the right content means Google will start to love you. Your social media circles will hear about you. Your prospects, competitors, suppliers, clients and the media will know about you.

The word is out and people will be sharing it. And next, they all start to want a piece of you. They will engage (magic word) with your content and they will move through knowing, liking and trusting you. They'll be:

- *happily* signing up to subscribe to your resources
- *avidly* downloading your free e-books
- *excitedly* buying tickets to hear your keynote speeches
- *wishfully* applying to work with you...

#### **Making a business of thought leadership**

Not everyone wants to get to this stage. Just getting past 6 is enough for many – and that's fine. Once you begin to get famous (in your circles) for what you know most about, you can leverage that in many ways.

Awareness is up, sales are up, pricing is strong, profit is up, recruitment is up and growth follows.

But – you can get to number 12 just by getting past number 6 – because you've made your business out of thought leadership.

Whatever stage you want to get to, make it part of your plan and your whole business will benefit! Over to you.

## Using LinkedIn and building thought leadership

Perhaps you set-up a LinkedIn account years ago, connected to a few colleagues and contacts at the time, but haven't done much since. But you know you really ought to be doing something with it.

Or you are someone with 500+ connections – including a good amount of clients, prospects and high-level influencers people in your industry. Your profile's up-to-date and looking reasonable (though to be fair your photo is a wee bit misleading as you haven't looked like that since 1998).

But you've got that nagging feeling that you could – and should – be making a lot more of LinkedIn strategically to support your own career or your firm's business development.

Apart from any expert advice, common sense tells you that by being active instead of passive – by connecting, commenting and making original contributions – you could raise either your own profile, or that of your business/employer.

Or both.

So just *what* are you waiting for?

### **Who is LinkedIn right for?**

LinkedIn is a **professional** social network – and that puts it firmly into the world of work. For you, work might mean career – employment, job hunting and recruiters searching for talent – or it might mean getting your own job done, or running your own business.

You will see some people posting the good old inspirational quotes and funny pics. But you can tell by the responses (often negative, and becoming much more so) that if you're serious about your work reputation, these are best kept for Facebook, Twitter and

other social networks.

### **LinkedIn is for business. LinkedIn is for reputations!**

I'm going to leave the topics of job-hunting and head-hunting to one side. These are a huge part of LinkedIn, but it's not what I'm focusing on now.

I'm looking at how you can use LinkedIn for business development, to improve your marketing, grow your reputation and drive sales. Because it very much can do that, but only when you use it in the right way.

### **The biggest and longest-lasting industry event you have ever attended**

Start by thinking of LinkedIn as a networking group, or an industry conference. The biggest you have ever attended, with some of the most influential people in your industry speaking, presenting, mingling, running workshops, offering useful advice and connecting with others.

And remember. You've paid to be there (in time, if not in money) and you are there for a reason.

Since I went freelance 15 months ago, I've picked up three prospects through LinkedIn, and one client. Not huge numbers, granted, but highly significant for a self-employed consultant like me – with only one mouth to feed.

One prospect contacted me again recently after a gap of around nine months.

"I've been reading your LinkedIn posts with interest, and wondered if we could schedule a call to talk about our content marketing / social strategy..."

An earlier inbound email from another prospect began with:

"I Googled sales and marketing consultant on LinkedIn (*I'm sure Google would love that*), and you were the name that came up. I saw how close you live to us and that you were also a sailor (*this was a business in the marine sector*) and I thought it must be fate."

This lovely prospect may not have known LinkedIn inside out, or even understood its basics, because she was simply using Google to actively search for a supplier.

And such is LinkedIn's domain authority (and Google's location-based thinking), that Google chose to present my LinkedIn profile to her in its first page of results.

And why did I appear? Thanks to Google (maybe), but I'd never have shown up had I not

been an active LinkedIn commentator and contributor of long-form, original content for the past 12 months. If you're curious, take a look at my profile and you'll soon see the type of content I post, about what, and how often.

### **Will LinkedIn work for you?**

If your prospects are on LinkedIn and are somewhere between having an up-to-date, half-decent profile through to actively contributing and posting, then it has the potential to be a powerful lead generation tool for you.

Here's a quick checklist to help you find out whether or not LinkedIn can be any use to you (Open a new tab on your browser and start now. Run through these questions and jot the answers down on a notebook):

#### **1. What percentage of your customers / prospects are on LinkedIn?**

If you can hardly find any, take a look for others in your circle.

Trade bodies, networking groups, suppliers and colleagues – seeing how many, or how few, have their profile on LinkedIn will get you thinking.

#### **2. How active are these people on LinkedIn?**

Rate them 1 to 10 by benchmarking them against these descriptions:

- Very few contacts, no activity
- Building contacts with a reasonable amount of connections
- Lots of contacts and connections but no activity
- Varying numbers of contacts, shares random Facebooky stuff, pictures, quotes etc. (Arghh!)
- Active by liking/sharing other people's content
- Active through commenting on other content
- Shares relevant content with added opinion – you feel as though they are actually reading the posts they share
- Creative original posts relevant to their occupation or specialism
- Creating original posts which other people are liking, sharing and commenting on

- Sharing relevant content with added opinion: creating regular, original posts on their own feed which others in their network engage with; and actively contributing within a number of relevant groups

Work out which groups of people, and how many, fall into each category.

### **3. Where are your competitors?**

Identify a bunch of people or businesses who would be looking after your customers if you weren't.

Or those who are looking after the customers you would like to have.

### **4. How active are your competitors?**

Assess how well you think they are using LinkedIn – referring back to the statements above.

### **5. Which groups are they active in, if any?**

LinkedIn groups are a very mixed bag. Many were, and still are, started by proactive suppliers in their relevant sector with the aim of driving debate, sharing opinion and inviting engagement and involvement.

All well and good.

Many, however, are started in order just to sell. So beware.

Don't just go about joining relevant sounding groups without assessing them first – and make sure you clean up your group membership on a regular basis.

## **LinkedIn builds reputations**

By going through this exercise, you'll quickly learn and understand whether it's right for you. You'll see examples of best practice – and probably some of the worst – and you'll start to get a feeling for the way LinkedIn can build and grow a reputation.

It is usually an individual's reputation that is built, because the voice that others see and hear is theirs. It is only their connection to a business – through employment / ownership – that supports that firm's own reputation.

So if and when a person moves on to another company, the reputation they have built will travel with them. Which, you see, is why recruiters and head-hunters love it so much. And ambitious people.

## **How to build your reputation on LinkedIn**

I've got some overview thoughts to help get you started.

### **Write original stuff**

Yes, I mean it. Original stuff that answers real questions or solves real problems that your customers have. You might want to think about doing a spot of customer research to find out what they what they would find valuable.

### **Quality is better than quantity when it comes to content**

There is so much noise, don't add to it.

So many blog posts of 300-500 words that – in truth – say nothing new, relevant or interesting. Or even worse, they are self-promoting and salesy. Me, me, me. My firm, our services, buy us.

The content is light, bland and devoid of opinion or value. And so often, badly written to boot.

### **Google tells us to hire expert writers**

Google didn't specifically mean on LinkedIn. It meant everywhere, online, if Google is your search engine of choice. (!)

In a hugely layman's nutshell...because Google's algorithms have changed, it knows when writing is focused, valuable and well-constructed. So it values it more, and ranks it higher.

When the writing is poor quality – sentence structure is weak, grammar questionable, spellings just plain wrong – it values it less and ranks it accordingly. I'm just hoping it can tell English from American...

This is a big thing to think about if you're planning on writing your own stuff.

If that's the case, it's worth finding out more about Google's view on expertly written content. This'll have you thinking seriously about hiring a professional copywriter by the end of the third paragraph.

### **Look closely at what the people you follow do and say**

If you don't follow anyone or read any industry opinion on LinkedIn, you're either new to it or not taking it seriously enough (yet). Or, of course, it's not right for you (more on that

in the next paragraph, but my writing isn't expert enough to segue into that in quite the right place).

But if there are people on LinkedIn whose posts you read with interest, whose opinions you take seriously and who you would be proud to have engage with your own content – ask yourself why that is.

Especially if you haven't met them yourself, or you're not connected.

Suss out exactly what it is they've done – and still do. Look for their LinkedIn strategy behind the content, and apply it to yourself. I don't mean copy what they write – that would be up there amongst some of the worst things you can do – but apply their methods to help get you started.

You then just need to find your own voice, your own niche, your very own topic of interest to become an expert on. I'll warn you, this can be harder than it sounds – and guess what, it's all about your positioning.

### **LinkedIn is not for everyone**

Of course, it isn't. No media channel is right for everyone. It would be a nightmare if there was one that was – because the whole population would be on it, all the time.

Imagine the noise.

If your customers, influencers, suppliers, thought-leaders, spokespeople and associations aren't active on LinkedIn, chances are you can give it a miss for now.

Or – and I have to say this – you just might want to get to know it better to be the one who leads the way.

### **Time to get started**

So you're ready for growth. You've got some exiting ideas about inbound and outbound. You're ready to be a thought leader (or at least to stand out in your field).

But (there's always a but isn't there?) before you spread your wings ... it might just be worth checking your website. And guess what? I've got a free download that can help you with that.

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