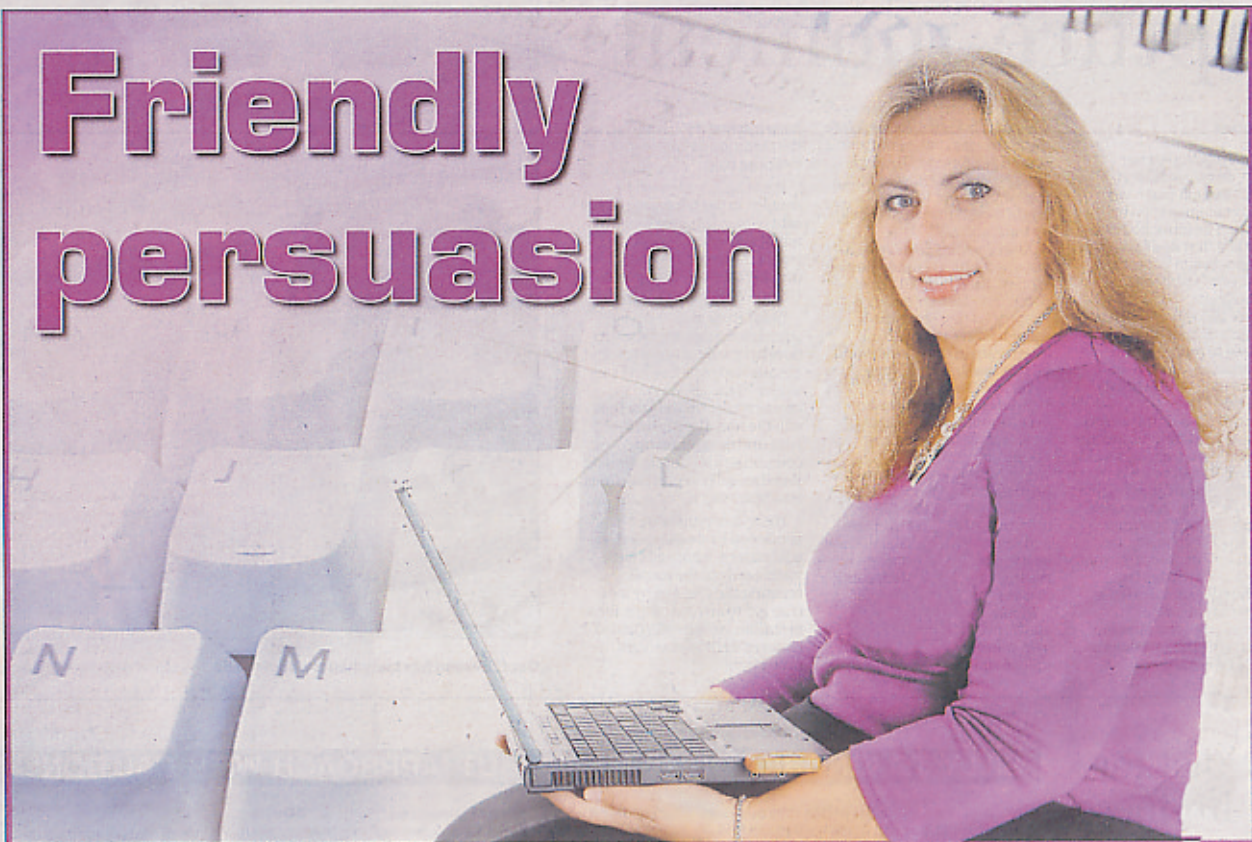


Friendly persuasion



Peninsula website consultant Ivana Katz believes business operators could use social media in a number of ways to get better known.

Picture: VIRGINIA YOUNG

Sue Hoban

SOcial media exploded into the public consciousness a couple of years ago when names such as MySpace and Facebook started gaining currency.

By mid-2008 each boasted about 120 million users, but they are just the high-profile, tip-of-the-iceberg in a space where thousands of online communities now allow people to socialise and interact online.

So it's hardly surprising business has now switched its focus from concerns about the workplace distraction of social networking to figuring out how to harness the marketing potential of the phenomenon.

And it seems small business is at the forefront of the trend. Analyst Anne Bartlett-Bragg, Australian managing

director of social computing consultancy Headshift and educational adviser to the Australian Businesswomen's Network (ABN), believes the sector actually has an inbuilt advantage over larger competitors in using social media.

Ms Bartlett-Bragg, who developed the ABN's own online learning community, MentorNet, said smaller operators could take better advantage of its interactivity and the chance it gave them to engage and have conversations with existing or potential customers.

"It's all about communicating more effectively and reaching out to people you wouldn't necessarily have had communication with previously," she said. "What small businesses can do is position themselves as authentic, real people which

corporates can't do. They can try, but they're less likely to succeed."

She said they could use this opportunity to gauge sentiment and expectations and better meet customer needs. She said many people in business were deterred by the negative possibilities of a forum that allowed free and unfettered two-way comment, but smart operators could turn that into a positive.

"People often say to me, 'What if someone says something really bad about my business' and my response is, 'Don't you want to know?'"

She said they could turn it around by taking the criticism on board and being prepared to respond to it.

Peninsula website consultant Ivana Katz, founder of Websites 4 Small Business, said business operators could use social media

in a number of ways to get better known – by creating their own profiles on one or more sites, by setting up their own groups or forums or by becoming regular contributors to existing groups.

She said the big advantages for small businesses with limited marketing budgets was that they could join and participate for free and it was a potent, viral marketing medium. But she said the key to being successful lay in avoiding any hard sell and being prepared to make genuine, helpful and interesting contributions.

"When a business has a profile that people recognise, they can then influence discussion, create content and push visibility for links, all of which then gives them the power to influence," Ms Katz said.

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"Once a business has a voice, marketing becomes a soft sell rather than a hard sell."

She said the first step was to find a social network that fitted the target market. "They have to find where their market hangs out and the way to do that is to sign up and then just listen and watch what is happening on that network, what people are talking about, what their problems are.

"It's not about selling, it's about making friends, so if you see somebody asking a question about something you know about, then you would make a post."

SILLY TO IGNORE SOCIAL MEDIA, BUT 'APPROACH WITH CAUTION'

DAVID MOORE, founder of Dee Why business I Hate My PC, has just made his second foray into social media by joining LinkedIn after a less than encouraging attempt two years ago.

He said he now regarded it as "another tool in the toolkit" but an essential part of the marketing mix for small businesses.

"If you're in business and you want to get in touch with people, it's a bit silly to ignore the medium where so many people are gathering," he said. "I'm hoping it will help me raise brand-awareness and get some viral networking going so that people see my brand, find out what I do."

Mr Moore said he bailed out of LinkedIn at his first attempt because it was then poorly designed and "misbehaved" but these problems had clearly been resolved.

He said he generally counselled his clients against becoming early adopters of new technology for similar reasons. He said people still needed to approach social media with a bit of

caution. "A lot of it is still a bit dangerous," he said. "Only today I was sent a viral message via Facebook that looked genuine but when I looked into it I found it infected people's machines."

JULIET POTTER of Avalon, founder of automotive website for women, AutoChic, is an enthusiastic proponent of social media, regularly posting to six different sites.

"I get a report telling me where the traffic to my website is coming from and 30 per cent of it comes from those sites or the articles I have submitted to other sites," she said.

Ms Potter said it was a great tool for putting small businesses on a more level-footing with "the big guys".

She said: "In this online space you're only limited by the man hours you want to put into it.

"We are a website business so finding people who are already involved in the medium and already active online gives us a great start."

DOs

- Submit original and interesting content – focus on quality over quantity.
- Be cordial, friendly and positive.
- Participate as much as possible.
- Think longer term – you need to give something to the community before you start looking for a return.

DON'Ts

- Avoid any hard-sell. Instead provide information and offer solutions to problems.
- Never spam social networking sites or submit press releases.
- Try not to submit items and run – the more time you spend on the site and the more active you are the more comments you will receive.
- Don't get angry at negative comment. Use it as constructive criticism and try to learn from

– by Ivana Katz, Websites 4 Business