

B2B social media case study: building a presence

A practical case study on how a conference calling company used social media to build awareness and brand preference

Published: February 2010

**Written by John Bottom,
Base One**

In early 2009, Andy Pearce of Powwownow was like most other B2B marketers in his view of social media marketing. There was no doubting the potential, but actually putting it to work in a constructive, accountable way was more difficult.

Without proof, without hard marketing metrics, how could you be sure of success?

But there was another motive: if his competitors also thought this way, they would remain stuck in old marketing and he had an opportunity to move ahead. There were enormous benefits for pioneers, just as long as they did it right.

Powwownow was, and is, a very successful and fast-growing conference call company. Its business is web-based, with over 100,000 registered users, and offers free conference-calling, with a small margin being made on the cost of the (national rate) phone call. Customer numbers are generated by a combination of search marketing, word of mouth, online advertising, and various other awareness exercises.

To help him manage the social media campaign, Andy turned to Base One, an agency that had been retained for the last six years to build and manage the Powwownow website, as well as helping to devise and produce creative campaigns. The fact that Base One would be managing the foray into social media made perfect sense: not only did they have the skills to understand and exploit the power of social media, they also had a deep understanding of the Powwownow brand and its customers. To extend activities into the social media sphere with such a trusted partner helped reduce the apparent risk of the venture.

Planning the content, establishing the channels

Base One began by assessing the situation. It was clear that no lasting success could be achieved by wading into social media marketing without a solid plan, based on accepted marketing best practice. A lot was already known about the customers, but now some different questions needed to be asked. Where did they go on the web? What did they talk about? And how could Powwownow contribute to those conversations in a way that would benefit the brand?

It was well-known that success in social media Base One began by assessing the situation. It was clear that no lasting success could be achieved by wading into social media marketing without a solid plan, based on accepted marketing best practice. A lot was already known about the customers, but now some different questions needed to be asked. Where did they go on the web? What did they talk about? And how could Powwownow contribute to those conversations in a way that would benefit the brand? depended largely on the quality of content. People use social networks because they gain something from it - ie information. The usual 'outbound' marketing approach, therefore, based on broadcasting sales messages was inappropriate here. Powwownow needed to provide something of value.

In addition, social media was an opportunity to demonstrate the personality of the brand. Choosing a conference call supplier is not usually a complex decision and Powwownow is not the only supplier of its kind on the market. However, the personality of the brand gave it an edge over the competition. A social media presence would be a great way of making sure more people knew about that personality, and would therefore increase the chances of Powwownow being selected over the competition.

Defining 'content triggers'

One of the first tasks was, therefore, to identify the issues being discussed online that were relevant to Powwownow and their customers. These were defined in terms of 'content triggers' - ie types of content Powwownow could offer that would prompt social media users to not only consume the content but also to help spread it more widely across the web, thus spreading awareness of Powwownow as originators. These were discussed and agreed as follows:

- **Business efficiency:** As a business, Powwownow aims to help its customers to make their businesses run more efficiently. The most obvious way this is done is via a conference call service - thus removing the need for time-consuming business travel - but there is also a genuine interest in wider discussions of business efficiency.
- **Green business:** Powwownow is fundamentally a very environmentally-aware business that takes pride in the fact that its service helps other companies to reduce their impact on the environment.
- **Personality: Conference calling:** Whilst not an 'issue' so much as a service, conversations about conference calling were taking place on the social networks. Which system should I use? What is the advantage of one solution over another? What does free really mean? Clearly, Powwownow had a vested interest in this area, but wanted to avoid simply blasting marketing messages at anyone who brought the subject up. The aim was to contribute 'socially', offering advice and joining in the conversations. Again, this is not an issue, but it is a reason - consistent with the Powwownow brand - for creating content that would have a value to users on the social networks. Powwownow has a reputation for irreverent humour, which it aimed to continue.

What were the aims?

One of the first mistakes made by many companies pioneering social media is to expect immediate payback. In the same way that you would not expect a brand advertising campaign to yield sales so much as to encourage a general upturn in awareness, so Powwownow had aims that were achievable, whilst also being linked to real business benefit, ie:

- Drive web traffic. Driving traffic to the main Powwownow site, with the knowledge that some will be converted into registrations and therefore sales.
- Increase awareness. Simply spreading awareness of the name. When researching conference call companies (eg via Google) prospects see a name they recognise.
- Generate brand preference. More than just spreading the name, this is about showing that there is a personality (and an environmental conscience) behind the brand, therefore giving a reason to choose Powwownow over competitors.
- Create advocates. Responding to anyone talking about conference calling or Powwownow itself, establishing a direct relationship between potential users and Powwownow over social media. If someone has a bad experience of Powwownow, this can prevent them spreading their dissatisfaction and even turn them into advocates.

All of these activities would lead to a fifth benefit, which is to:

- Improve the effectiveness of other marketing activities. By doing all of the above, helping to create a social media channel in which Powwownow was known and trusted, it was creating an additional channel through which it could distribute other 'outbound' marketing (without doing it so overtly as to be seen as 'spamming' - the ultimate faux pas on the social web).

Activities

In such a fast-evolving area, it is difficult - and perhaps unwise - to pin down specific areas of activity. After all, the point is to go where the conversations were happening, rather than to decide at the outset where to focus activities.

A team was assembled, led by Powwownow's marketing manager, Casey Williams, supported by the in-house PR manager, as well as specialists from Base One who would offer input on both content and strategy. This team meets on a monthly basis to decide how best to invest time and resources, assessing the value of new ideas and social media 'routes' put forward by different members of the team. In this way, activities are constantly evolving, although certain key activities remain at the heart of operations, eg:

- Blogging
- Twitter
- Communities (Facebook, LinkedIn)

The 'Life Behind Powwownow' blog

The Powwownow blog was created with an enthusiastic team enlisted to provide content. Base One created a constant stream of blogs based on 'green' and 'business efficiency' issues, while other members of the Powwownow team were encouraged to post social and 'fun' material. The aim was that the blog would show the personality behind the brand while also making the link between Powwownow and the wider issues relevant to potential customers.

Twitter

Three separate Twitter accounts were created, allowing each one to focus on a specific area of interest:

- powwownow_green: environmental issues, whether about global climate change, renewable energy or practical steps that could be taken to help the environment.
- powwownowbizfsh: business efficiency, cost saving and general discussions about running businesses.
- My_Powwownow: the direct voice of Powwownow, following up on any comments about the Powwownow service, and addressing any customer concerns voiced over Twitter.

Base One undertook to run the accounts, providing a regular presence for the different aspects of the Powwownow brand on Twitter.

Communities and forums

With a number of talking points raised, either on the blog, on Twitter or in other areas, it was possible to repurpose these into discussions held on LinkedIn and other community sites. Using community sites was an effective way of targeting user groups that were appropriate to our message - eg environmentally conscious small business owners - since they already had their 'favourite' forums.

The approach was not a direct sales pitch. Instead, this was an opportunity to demonstrate how Powwownow was participating in social media - nonetheless, links were provided to the blog and the main Powwownow site, with a beneficial return in terms of traffic. These community sites included bookmarking sites such as Delicious, Digg and Reddit, a number of discussion forums, and there were also comments (and links, of course) left on other relevant blogs.

The viral effect

While Base One was responsible for generating content across channels such as the blog and the Twitter channels, much of the benefit would come from viral propagation of that content, ie other people viewing the content and forwarding it to their contacts, whether by 're-tweeting' or by posting links to the content elsewhere on the social web.

Combining inbound and outbound marketing

One of the key benefits of building a presence on social media is that it provides a channel that can be used to complement traditional 'outbound' campaigns. It was important not to sell directly via this channel, but Powwownow was still aware that there was an enormous value in the growing levels of trust in the Powwownow online identities: it did not want to abuse this trust, but carefully use it when required.

One such example was when Powwownow placed an ad in the London Metro in response to an earlier ad by low-cost airline Flybe. Flybe claimed strongly that business travel was the only real way to win business - an argument that was both incorrect and, Powwownow felt, irresponsible given the moral pressure on companies to show their environmental side. A humorous parody of the Flybe ad was created, then widely distributed across social media channels in order to ensure that it was not just seen by the paper's readers, but that it also created a stir online. Three different angles were found, and the presence on Twitter and various other networks was used to promote them:

- **Business:** Powwownow put forward the business argument that air travel was not the only way to win business. This message was directed towards business users.
- **Green:** Surprise was expressed that the environmental factors were completely overlooked in the original Flybe ad. This message was distributed to green bloggers and other online influencers, who picked up and spread the message more widely to their readers.
- **Marketing/advertising:** The marketing and advertising communities online were invited to see the parody ad as an amusing and effective example of guerrilla advertising.

In this way, the value of the exercise was greatly increased. The most expensive part of it - the media - was a fixed price. The careful use of Powwownow's social media presence allowed it to more than double the number of people who saw the ad. Effectively, it had achieved the equivalent of an additional ad placement, which would have carried a ratecard price of over £10,000.

Results

As Andy Pearce knew at the start, the aim of the exercise was not to achieve a monetary return within a few months. But he did demand to see proof of the growing long-term value of the social media engagement. As Powwownow's presence within social media networks increases with each month, the following benefits have become clear:

- Traffic to the main site has increased significantly, with an additional 10% of traffic coming directly from social media sources
- Readers of the blog increase by over 20% every month. On a single day, the blog had over 600 readers, a spike in activity that could normally only be achieved by expensive outbound campaigns.
- Twitter accounts have matured, and increasing follower numbers mean's that Powwownow has daily access to over 20,000 followers.

- Registrations - the acid test of Powwownow's core marketing - have also been achieved directly from social media sources. While monetary ROI was not a requirement of the social media initiative, the cost-per-acquisition measurement of these registrations is comparable with that of existing recruitment methods.

Powwownow has established a foothold in the social media world and is well placed to react to any new developments. The company has instant access to many of its customers and is able to speak directly to them, establishing a level of relationship that would have been impossible by any other means.

For more information on how social media can be used to achieve your marketing objectives, please get in touch with us at Base One. Conventional contact details below, or just Google, tweet, LinkedIn or whatever does it for you.

Harlequin House,
7 High Street,
Teddington,
TW11 8EE
Tel: 020 8943 9999
Fax: 020 8943 8222
Twitter: @basebot
www.baseonegroup.co.uk
info@baseonegroup.co.uk