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DIY marketing

– is the finished result good enough?

An increasing number of small to medium-sized IT companies now handle their marketing communications in-house, rather than employing an external agency.

The DIY approach to IT marketing is embracing all aspects of the communications mix, from stand-alone websites to full-blown campaigns. And the factors contributing to the growth are varied. They range from the positive (e.g. the availability, affordability and usability of relevant business and design software) to the negative (e.g. IT firms can't find agencies capable of delivering measurable, cost-effective results, so resort to in-house solutions).

Either way, the approach has now spread from Silicon Valley to the UK and continental Europe – and looks set to continue.

**So, why has 'DIY marketing' become so popular?
And more fundamentally, is it working?**

The first step of the gallop towards an online presence is to employ a web developer... even if 'website design' and 'online communications' fail to feature in that individual's job description.

There are many reasons behind the growth of DIY marketing within the IT sector. The most important are outlined over the following pages, and assessed in terms of the results being delivered.

"Quick, let's build a website."

With many IT start-ups and small to mid-sized companies, one of the first marketing-related activities is the creation of a website. Worryingly, this can happen before the company even has a fully fleshed-out marketing strategy or decided upon the core proposition that should underpin its communications.

(For more on this, see "Making mojo – The role of the creative proposition in technology marketing" at www.wilsonmiller.co.uk/brain_download.cfm).

The headlong rush into web-building happens because:

1. There's an expectation that every company must have a site, whether it's a brochure-style 'shop-window', a fully-fledged online retail store, or a mixture of the two.
2. Compared to other marketing collateral (e.g. ads, corporate brochures, direct mail, or additional 'hard copy' tools), a website is relatively inexpensive to create, publish and distribute.
3. IT companies, in particular, believe that they must prove their competency in the marketing medium that's most closely identified with their business sector.

Whatever the reasons, the first step of the gallop towards an online presence is to employ a web developer – or reconfigure the responsibilities of an existing internal resource – even if 'website design' and 'online communications' fail to feature in that individual's job description.

Technical ability vs all-round marketing knowledge

Since most IT companies employ technically-proficient staff, finding someone to 'do the web' is unlikely to prove difficult. But the real potential for problems lies in that individual's balance of skills and level of all-round experience. While a newly-appointed web developer will undoubtedly have the technical ability to build a functional website, s/he won't necessarily have the design skills to create a visually powerful online presence.

Even more importantly, the individual responsible for the website may also lack the communications experience required to create this essential marketing tool. And it is vital. The website needs to achieve a number of communications tasks, including:

- reinforce the company's brand values, visually and in the text
- present the company's key selling points, at a corporate or product/service level
- encourage customers and prospects to modify their beliefs and/or behaviour.

This last point, in particular, is surely the desired outcome of all communications. And to ensure that the website helps to achieve this goal, its architect should have the relevant marketing experience rather than simply a technical ability.

Don't let the website lead...

All too often though, the reality within smaller IT companies in particular is that a software developer creates the online presence, not a marketer. And that this task is completed before any other marketing. The result is that the company's entire approach to design and messaging is then dictated by the style and content of the website.

This is problematic because it fails to understand that 'online' is a very different medium from print. It doesn't recognise how a website often performs a different job from brand advertisements, direct mail pieces or other types of communication.

Once this confusion takes hold, the company is less likely to project itself coherently and persuasively to its audience – and less likely to change minds and boost sales.

The ease of using in-house software works against the idea of applying conceptual creativity to the communication issue at hand.

"We've got the software – let's just do it."

The spread of PCs into homes, schools and offices over the past decade or more has fuelled the growth of the hardware and software industries. It's also encouraged consumers and businesses alike to learn enthusiastically and enjoy using new applications.

CRM tools, spreadsheets and databases (and other business software) are now as popular as creative packages (e.g. desktop publishing and design software) - and they all have far more functionality than ever before. And yet it's also much easier to understand and use these tools.

Applications are so intuitive these days that anyone with even a minimal level of computer literacy can now attempt web design, newsletter production, ad creation and so on. And this trend has been underscored by the 'Web 2.0' revolution (so-called because, using software-release naming conventions, it refers to the 'second version' of the web) described later.

But unfortunately, the ease of using in-house software (or starting a blog, for example) can work against the idea of applying conceptual creativity to communications and marketing problems - and this can lead to a proliferation of badly thought-out, poorly-executed campaigns.

Choose agnostic communications

The problem of the 'let's just do it' approach is that in-house teams are less likely to develop communication solutions from the 'agnostic' standpoint that an agency would adopt.

Internal teams often find their solution by turning to the software they're most comfortable with using, rather than by deciding which approach or medium might be best for the circumstances to hand. For example, if the in-house marketers know how to build websites but can't design direct mail pieces, they'll tend to opt for web-based solutions to their communication dilemmas rather than creative (and more targeted) DM campaigns - regardless of which approach is the more appropriate.

Communication agencies take a different approach, looking at their clients' problems objectively and working out the best solutions (and right media) on a case-by-case basis.

The accessibility - and success - of Web 2.0 may encourage more DIY marketing. But will these new campaigns be more effective than previous in-house efforts?

“If it's a Web 2.0 solution, we can do that”

Web 2.0 embraces a fresh breed of online services that allow people to share information and discuss ideas, to rate each other's online efforts, and to work collaboratively and otherwise interact. The result has been the phenomenal success of a wide variety of websites. And naturally enough, the accessibility – and success – of Web 2.0 may encourage more DIY marketing. But will these new campaigns be more effective than previous in-house efforts?

Web 2.0 marketing

Like many other industries, the IT sector has recognised that many Web 2.0 sites have managed to attract and develop highly-engaged communities comprising millions of people. As a result, the industry has seized on the technology (and some of the philosophies behind it) in an attempt to gain and retain its own loyal customers.

Firms have broadly adopted two approaches to employing the collaborative methods of Web 2.0: they've either developed blogs or incorporated other interactive elements within their own sites; or created and distributed material (audio and video files, usually) that they hope existing community-based websites will pick up on.

The fact is that neither of these is wrong, but the skill is to evaluate the rationale and components required, rather than be governed by, “We can pull that together ourselves” .

Stretching in-house resources to cover the tasks otherwise completed by an additional employee or external professional fails to consider the cost-effectiveness of using such a specialist.

"It costs less to DIY."

With in-house resources (such as web designers) in place, some companies will decide to 'get the most' from those people. Following on naturally from the urge to quickly build a website and use the software it's invested in, the company stretches its budget by asking individuals to apply their core skills in other areas – particularly if there are financial pressures at play. Why invest in a specialist if the existing, paid-for resource is already there?

Usually, the new tasks and responsibilities appear (internally, at least) to be related to the person's existing work. For example, somebody hired as a web designer might be asked to design a brochure that's full of client testimonials. While the creation of a website and a credentials document both need graphic design talent, each of the deliverables will probably have a very different communication purpose to the other. And if only one person is responsible for creating both, they need to understand those differences and allow that knowledge to inform their designs.

Speed and efficiency

What's more, stretching in-house resources to cover the tasks otherwise completed by another (skilled and dedicated) employee or external professional fails to consider the cost-effectiveness of using such a specialist. Anyone who earns a living performing a particular job is likely to be more capable of working quickly and efficiently than someone who isn't fully trained in that task or doing it every day.

Even if the company calculates the cost of employing an external resource rather than using a member of staff, this figure probably won't account for the (comparatively longer) time it takes existing personnel to learn new software or to produce the finished article.

Cost is often cited as justification for adopting an in-house approach, but the opportunity cost of diverting existing staff from their normal tasks to work as pseudo-designers, writers and so on is rarely assessed. While it's easy to see a cost estimate from an external supplier – an individual or an agency – as a figure that goes straight to the bottom-line (and to reject it as a result), it's much harder to quantify the financial impact of creating and issuing materials in-house. In turn, this makes it very difficult to accurately and fairly compare those costs.

ROI? Who knows?

What's more, bringing (or keeping) the job in-house doesn't often follow a calculation of the difference between the DIY and agency routes in terms of return on investment. Invariably, companies favouring DIY fail to apply the same judgement criteria to their internally produced communications as they would to those produced by an external resource.

The effect of this oversight is that nobody knows whether or not the in-house approach is having the desired effect in terms of leads, sales and market share. And, just as importantly, no-one is really sure if the internally created materials are improving the company's image and generating goodwill (which can be attributed a value) or making it look worse and devaluing its worth.

Every company will reach a 'tipping point' where it must decide to take a more professional approach to marketing communications if it wants to achieve sustainable growth.

"DIY is good enough."

If an IT start-up has a product or service that appeals to its target audience in relation to the classic '4 Ps' (product, place, price, promotion) of marketing, it will probably be possible for that company to establish itself and achieve some success – particularly if it's creating a new market or entering an existing niche.

And this is true even if a company in this position takes a DIY approach to marketing. No matter how professional or amateurish the marketing activities and communications, the company will still make sales if the other three Ps are in evidence and if the product or service has some inherent quality or usefulness. Indeed, satisfied customers may recommend their new supplier or place repeat orders themselves.

Good enough to grow?

The danger is that early success like this encourages the company to believe it needs do nothing else to keep turnover rising. In particular, it may think that its in-house communications have been 'good enough' to generate sales to that point, and will therefore be sufficient for the trend to continue. But the reality is different.

In fact, these early achievements will be limited both in terms of value and longevity – partly as a result of the commitment to DIY marketing. Every company will reach a 'tipping point' where it must decide to take a more professional approach to marketing communications if it wants to achieve sustainable growth.

And yet start-ups and medium-sized companies are often reluctant to employ external agencies. This is possibly because the in-house personnel have had negative experiences of working alongside the creative industry in the past, or might be because they're fearful of losing their own jobs.

Some communication agencies undoubtedly do the industry a disservice because of their bad account management, poor creativity, inappropriate recommendations, and exorbitant charges. However, even the best practitioners – those which don't commit these sins – are sometimes ignored because they insist on playing up to their role of communication arbiters.

Constructive friction

It should be part of the agency's remit to assess the client's communication plan and budget – and to find the most cost-efficient and yet effective creative solutions to address the issues. However, this involves a certain amount of constructive friction between the agency and the client as the two parties discuss a communication's objectives, the creative proposition and treatment, and so on.

Clients who decide that agencies should only 'do as they're told' are ignoring the wealth of communications experience on offer. This includes the expertise of the designers, writers and media planners, plus the account handlers whose job it is to understand the client's mode of working and industry sector.

Consider calling in 'the professionals' and developing an approach that combines DIY with external expertise to ensure a perfect finish.

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If not DIY, what else?

While the reasons for the growth of DIY marketing in the IT sector are varied (and its continued existence inevitable at least some of the time), it's clear that the resulting communications can be indifferent or even damaging in the worst situations.

Accordingly, as in the real world of DIY, it may be better for your in-house team to work only on the smaller, more achievable activities. For the bigger tasks, consider calling in 'the professionals' and developing an approach that combines DIY with external expertise to ensure a perfect finish rather than a bodged job.

Some agencies now offer a tiered, modular service that ranges from off-the-shelf applications through to the provision of these tools plus access to other facilities including design, copywriting, customer relationship and database management, distribution and so on. This means you get the software you want, as well as a wealth of communications experience and added-value services.

When using a mixed approach like this, you need to:

- **Research the talent available** – resorting to the phone directory may help with the decorating (if you're lucky) but your company's marketing is far more serious. Dedicate time to investigating which individuals and agencies specialise in your area of business and have the experience you need to supplement in-house resources.
- **Favour all-round skills** – appoint an agency with a range of talents and a 'big picture' approach that gives you access to agnostic communication recommendations. A media-neutral partner (unlike a niche player such as a 'new media' or web agency) will be able to pressure-test the creative ideas and different media, and provide the most appropriate solution. Additionally, there are many advantages and efficiencies to be gained by partnering a single service provider.
- **Insure yourself** – ensure that your chosen agency has the capacity to provide back-up to your DIY efforts, as needed. Perhaps your internal projects have slipping deadlines? Are your planned campaigns beyond the capabilities or capacity of your in-house team? Get your agency to help.
- **Choose the right tools** – go for scaleable applications that are likely to provide the right level of content, design and production support you need now and in the future. Your chosen agency should be able to give advice on your selection, offer additional expertise as it's needed, and provide products and services that allow you to help yourself.

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