Small businesses and the digital revolution

by Gianni Anchois

It's easier said than done.

Digitalising your business, or at least adopting key technologies to make it more successful, is easier said than done. Many small companies seem to be afraid of using new tools and of entering the digital competitive arena.

FEAR OF CHANGE?

It's not that they fear change (well some do, actually). It's not even the cost - most of the modern digital tools are either free or freemium (i.e. basic full functional features are free, additional ones are not).
It's more likely a broader, agonising sense of dread that can grasp even the most experienced business owner and bring his venture to a standstill: too difficult, too technical, scary.

Sure, nowadays every small business has got an email address, a Facebook page, a Twitter account and even a website, but very few have implemented a holistic approach to use those tools to boost and grow their customer base and ultimately their business.

Truth is, there is help available at every corner, and in fact many consulting firms are thriving in the effort to help small and medium companies digitalise their operations.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Before engaging with these gurus of the digital world, however, business owners need to make a few very important considerations, not really related to technology but rather business-centric decisions.
What are my goals for this initiative?

> *Unless you are clear about your objectives, no degree of technology and digitalisation will help your businesses be more successful.*

Am I looking to acquire new clients or to improve the service I provide to my current ones? What do I stand for in this new, much enlarged competitive scenario brought about by the use of digital technologies? Is it growth and expansion that I put a premium on, or is it controlling cost and improving margins? Do I need to cast a bigger net - i.e. make more people aware of my services/products - to a generic market or is it a niche one I'm after? Do I need more customers or better (e.g. higher paying) ones? What percentage of repetitive business am I expecting to achieve?

The point I'm trying to make is that unless you have clarity on your objectives, no degree of technology adoption and digitalisation will make you more successful.

The most important step is to assess the degree of change readiness for some - or in extreme cases all - of your business processes. Adopting digital practices without revising your current processes is a guaranteed formula for disaster. You simply cannot superimpose an HD picture on an old film strip and expect it to excite modern viewers.

BE PRACTICAL AND BE FOCUSED

Say you are running a restaurant. Do you know which dishes you should keep on your menu and which ones you should retire? Do you know why? Are you positive that your clients are happy with the booking

process, or the parking facilities? Are they talking about you to their friends?

That's obviously an oversimplified and rather crude example, but I hope it serves its purpose in explaining what sort of potential is in discussion when you go digital.

If you are running a business that is customer-centric - and let's face it, who isn't? - you simply cannot overstate the importance of adopting digital technologies and practices.

Being customer-centric is less about what consumers think and more about how they feel. With the right technology, you can pre-empt a number of potential issues with your clients and make sure you cater for their specific needs.

Sticking with the restaurant example, how do you maximise the dinner window - say 7 to 11 pm?
What do you do if a party of 8 wants to dine at your restaurant at 9pm and you have no space for them? How about arranging a special door-to-door delivery for them? Or offer a special meal experience if they come half and hour later? Or provide discounted cinema tickets for the latest blockbuster and welcome them to a customised menu late post-film dinner?

It's fairly impersonal when a customer emails you. It's slightly more personal when they phone, how about making it very personal with a video valeting service?

If your delivering goods, how about delivering them to a mum sitting in her car outside of the football pitch where her 9 year old son is playing the weekly club match?

Technology can enable you to do all of that, quickly and with great economy.
By using the right digital tools to collect real time or historical information about client preferences and tastes, and then deploying rapid on-demand services that use multimedia and location mapping, you can quickly digitalise your business and start engaging with your clients in a new, more efficient and fulfilling way.

Finally, you should realise that it's very often other consumers that have the greatest impact on the customer experience, either way. - positive or negative. Social media is the key tool you should adopt not only to reach your clients, but especially to listen to them, engage them in meaningful exchanges and aim at delighting them every single time.
In the end, that's exactly what every business should do.

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