3 Digital Marketing Must-Haves to Connect With Your Customers

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Today's digital landscape is cluttered; consumers are constantly bombarded by endless newsfeeds, non-stop notifications, promotional offers and emails. Now more than ever, it's critical for digital marketers to preserve the human element that's so often lost behind the screens. To do this, you must develop a human-centred digital marketing strategy that resonates with your customers on a personal level. In essence, your customers need to connect with your message in order to identify its relevance in their own lives. This brief guide details three digital marketing must-haves every business owner can leverage to engage their audience.

01 Personalised Email Campaigns

Despite the growing number of available digital communication channels, email is still a valuable tool for connecting with your customers and prospects. And with a little strategy and a lot of personalisation, you can utilise email to increase your brand awareness, customer retention and conversions.

There are three common types of business emails: marketing, transactional and operational. For the purpose of this guide, we'll focus on how to personalise marketing emails—that is, emails that deliver informational or promotional messages attached to a strong call-to-action.

Before you send a marketing email, always ask yourself who your audience is and what goal you're aiming to accomplish.

Are you targeting inactive customers with the goal of winning them back? If so, send a personalised email offering a special discount. Do you want to increase class attendance at your fitness studio? Offer raffle entries to members who bring a friend.

Once you've defined your goals, it's time to create and personalise your email. There are two common approaches to email personalisation: shortcodes and segmenting. Most email tools—such as Constant Contact, Emma and MailChimp—allow you to enter shortcodes, which are text fields such as a customer's first name or most recent class, that are automatically replaced when the email is sent. Simple personalisation touches such as adding the recipient's first name can increase your click-through rate from about 5.8% to about 7%.[1]

While shortcodes are a great way to personalise individual emails, segmenting ensures your campaigns are reaching the right audience. For example, if you have one group of customers who frequently book spin classes and another group who only book yoga classes, you should send different emails focusing on each group's specific interests to ensure your content is relevant to them. By segmenting your emails, you'll notice higher engagement rates than when sending generic mass emails to your entire subscriber base.

Lastly, every email you send should provide something of value to your customers. Before you click "send," put yourself in the recipient's shoes and consider if the email is educational, inspirational, informational or promotional in a way that will intrigue and entice your customers. In the age of digital clutter, it's not about you—it's about your customer.

02 Engaging Social Media Content

In the not-so-distant past, a business social media presence was nice to have—today, it's a must-have. A recent report revealed that internet users in the UK spend approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes each day managing an average of four social networks. Of these social networks, Facebook remains the largest online community, with 82% of the world's population (excluding China) having an account.[2] It's this consumer behaviour that makes social media an essential business tool for connecting with your customers at the right time, in the right place.

At first glance, social media appears to be the most cluttered digital landscape. Because of the sheer volume of content being shared across numerous social media platforms each day, it's crucial to create and share original content. There's no one right way to do this, but there are some general rules you can follow to set yourself up for success. Social media content can vary from business information (e.g., milestones or new state-of-the-art equipment) to inspirational stories (e.g., a customer accomplishing a personal goal or exciting industry news). The key is to focus on what makes your business unique within your industry.
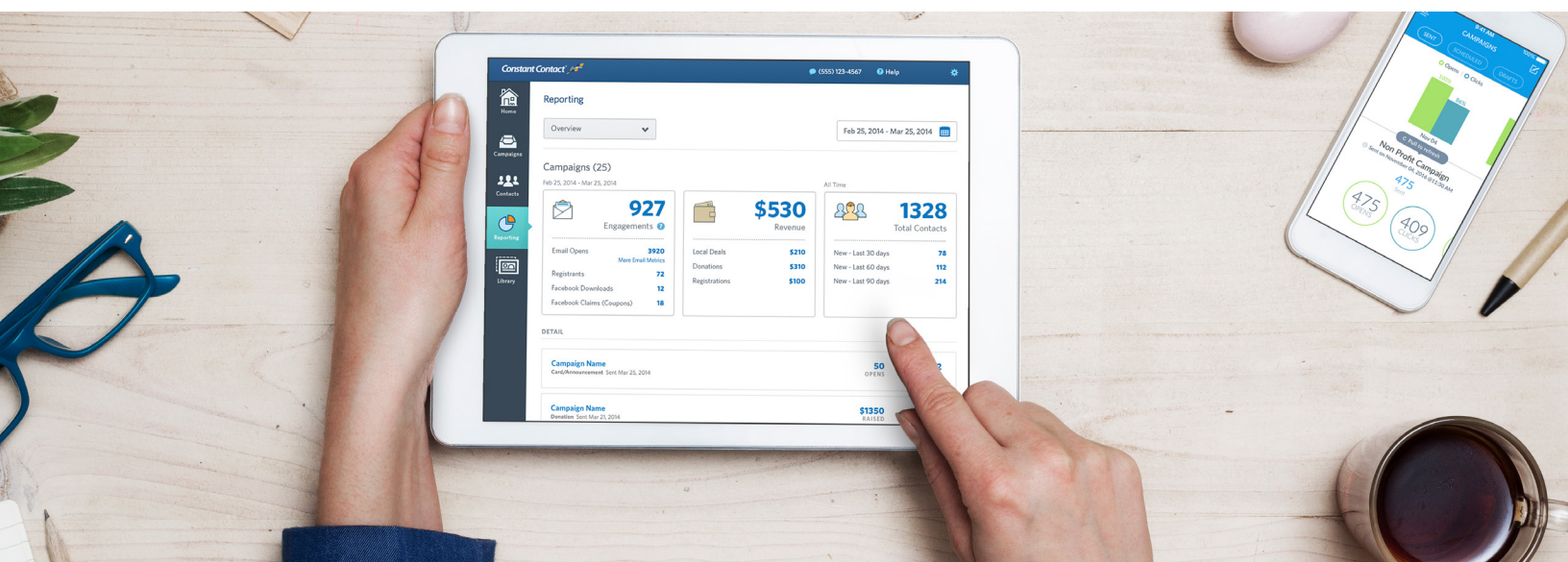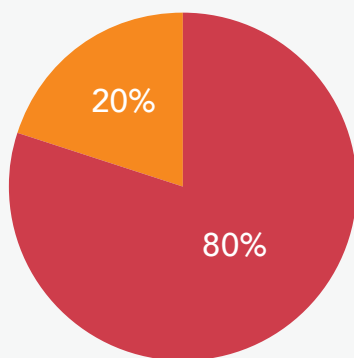
Quick tip:

When posting social media content, the current best practice is to adhere to the 80/20 rule. Simply put, use 20% of your content to promote your brand, and 80% to engage your audience's interests. For the 20% of content that focuses on your brand, include persuasive calls-to-action. For the 80% dedicated to interesting content, make it relevant and shareable.[3]

At the end of the day, an effective social media presence boils down to this: your business needs to be human in order to connect, to inspire and to help people achieve their goals. To get started, there are several overarching social media best practices to follow:

Include Enticing Visuals

Images are a powerful tool for boosting audience engagement. When people hear information alone, they typically remember only 10% of it three days later. However, studies have found that if they are shown a relevant image paired with that same information, they retain roughly 65% after three days.[4]

Now, apply that to social media. Many social platforms are highly image-focused—and posting a variety of visual content will result in increased engagement and retention. For example, social media content paired with relevant images gets 94% more views than its imageless counterparts. On Facebook specifically, posts with an image receive a 37% higher level of engagement than those without.[5] The trend continues on Twitter, where tweets with images receive 150% more retweets than text-only tweets.[6]

When incorporating visuals, keep your business goals and brand in mind. For example, if you own a yoga studio, you might choose peaceful, soothing and inspiring visuals. If you manage a salon, you might opt for stylish, bright and colourful images. Or if you run a fitness studio, you might focus on motivational, powerful and progressive pictures.
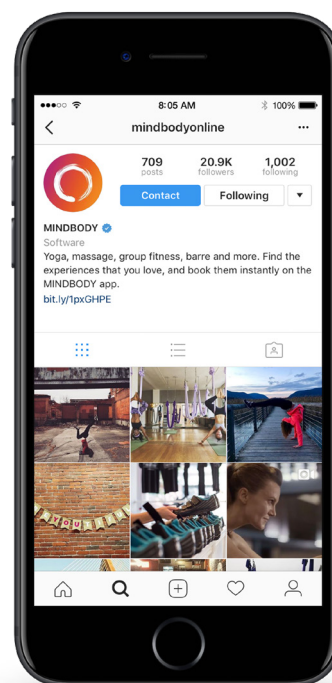
Keep Content Bite-Sized

With more than two billion active users worldwide, social media platforms can become especially congested with content—which can overwhelm and distract users. This phenomenon, known as "content shock," occurs when exponentially increasing volumes of content intersect people's limited human capacity to consume it.[7] The best way to combat content shock and keep your customers' attention is by sharing consumer-focused bite-sized content. In other words, keep your social media posts short, to the point and highly relevant. Have you ever encountered an initially intriguing, but far-too-lengthy Facebook post? Chances are, before you reached the end, your attention wandered to the next post on your feed. If your business is generating long-form content, host it on your website or blog and link to it from your social media platforms—providing only a short, attention-grabbing snippet on social media.

Tell a Story

Think of your business as the protagonist of your social media strategy. Ask yourself: *What's important to my business, and what's the ideal outcome of my story? Who are my supporting characters, and what's important to them? What's unique about my business, and why do these characteristics matter to my audience?* By asking these types of questions, you'll gain a better understanding of your business's persona, and can use that persona to develop meaningful social media content that tells a compelling story.

For example, imagine you own a group fitness and nutrition coaching business. The most important aspect of your business is your clients' wellness, and the ideal outcome is to see every one of your clients achieve their health goals. You might craft a social media campaign around your client success stories, highlighting your clients as your starring characters. This will not only engage your featured audience, but it will encourage others to work toward their goals, too.
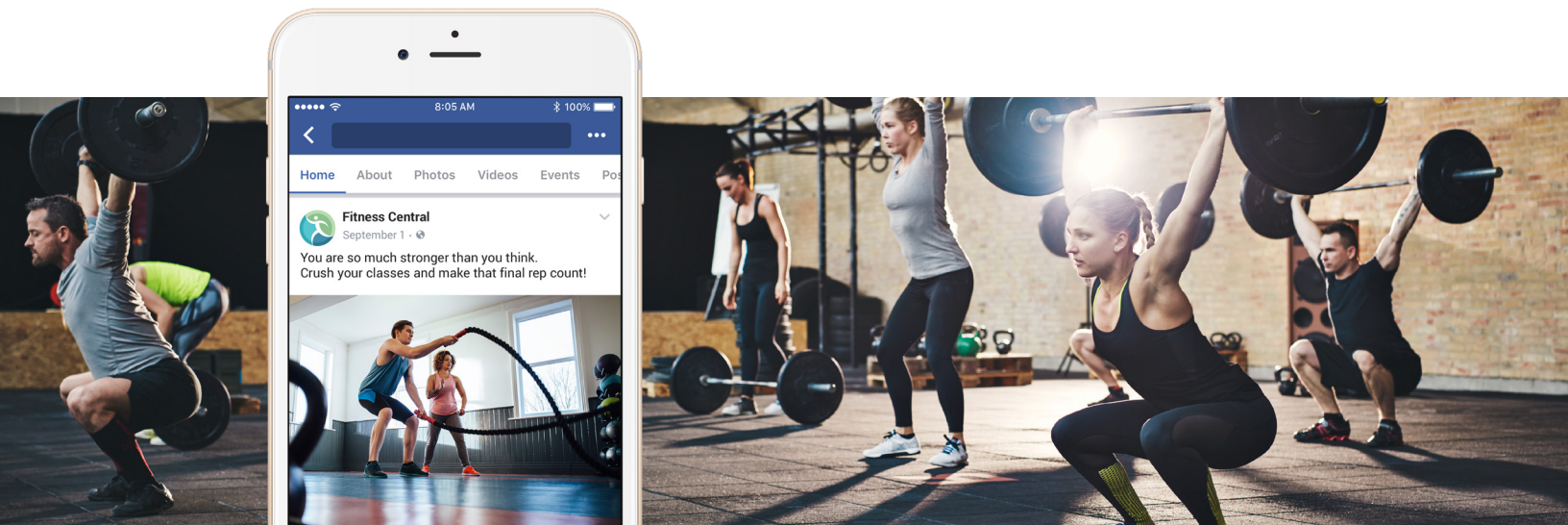
Start a Conversation

Social platforms operate primarily around one simple function: conversation. This provides an excellent opportunity for your business to show off its unique personality and organically engage with customers and prospects. For example, featuring your customers (with their permission) puts the human element into your content, and will likely result in the featured customer sharing your content with their network of followers. Keep the conversation going by asking engaging questions and encouraging your followers to participate—you'll be surprised what you can learn about their goals and wishes, and you may even receive valuable feedback to improve their customer experience (in turn increasing loyalty and retention).

You can also use social media to engage with relevant industry influencers. To begin, identify reputable influencers in your industry. You can use social influence metric sites such as Klout, Kred and PeerIndex to qualify influencers with the best online reputation. Before engaging with them, make sure they are—in fact—engage-able: Are they socially active? Do they share a variety of content, or just their own? Do you share common followers? Are your competitors following them? Once you've qualified your influencers, it's time to engage. Follow and comment on their blog, share their content across your social platforms and offer to contribute to their blog. Once you've had several engagements with an influencer, propose an interview or Q&A.[7] You can later leverage these consumer and influencer engagements to, essentially, crowdsource your own marketing efforts by promoting two-way social content sharing.

> *Regardless of whom you're conversing with, the main goal is to spread the word about your business. To measure your success, track how many people are engaging with and sharing your content.*

If you're not receiving a high volume of shares, test different content combinations across different social platforms—including various types of visuals and content lengths—to see which posts garner the most engagement.
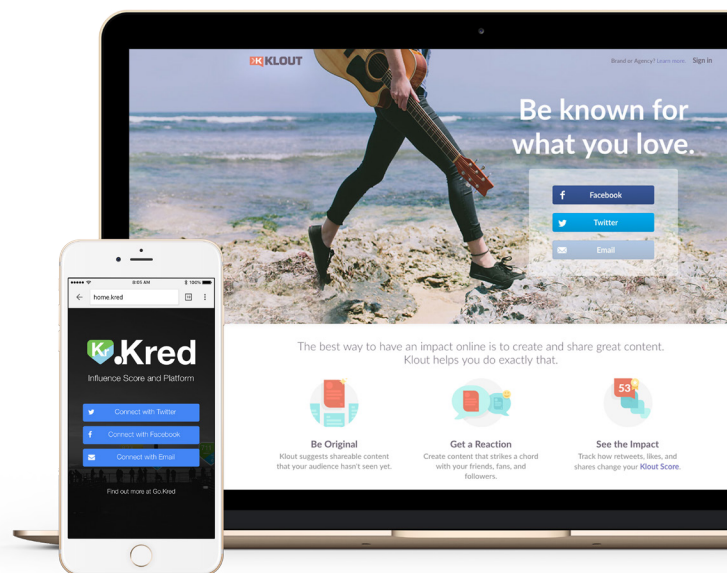
03 Targeted Referrals and Rewards

While social media is a great way to increase brand awareness and engage with your audience day-to-day, referrals and rewards work to increase trust and loyalty over time.

When it comes to creating a referral program, keep in mind you've already won your current clients over—and their trust and loyalty can be spread among their network of friends and family. Connecting with prospects through your network of loyal customers will often result in more success than casting a large net and trying to reel in as many new customers as possible through costly paid marketing efforts. Contrarily, referrals are a great way to attract new customers at little to no cost to your business. And referred customers are 18% more likely to stay with a business over time than off-the-street customers.[8] People trust recommendations from people they know.

There are five simple steps to setting up and maintaining a referral program:

1. **Timing is everything:** Referrals are like dating. Before asking an existing customer for a referral, you need to take time to get to know them and win their trust. Also be mindful not to pester your customers—requesting referrals every few months (or longer) is typically sufficient.

2. **Benefits for everyone:** The most successful referral programs benefit the referrer and the referee, as they give your customers leverage to entice their friends and family with two-way benefits. For example, offer free guest passes to new customers and reward your existing customers who bring a guest with a membership discount.

3. **Increase value, increase interest:** Referral rewards with higher value are more likely to achieve desired results. Try offering a variety of rewards such as discounts, gift cards and relevant products to see what works best.

4. **Track your referrals:** Always make sure you deliver on your promises. Once you've started asking for referrals, have a plan in place to track them. You can do this by asking each new customer how they heard about your business and then following up with the referrer to reward them.

5. **Share your gratitude:** Don't forget to thank your existing customers for each new referral they successfully complete. Having a close relationship with your new and existing customers may lead to more referrals.[8]

Similar to referrals, rewards programs promote loyalty by acknowledging your customers who keep coming back. While rewards carry a varying spectrum of upfront costs depending on what you offer, the savings of customer retention will pay off over time. In fact, it costs a business roughly five to ten times more to acquire a new customer than it does to maintain an existing one—and on average, existing customers spend 67% more.[9]

There are a number of different types of loyalty programs to choose from. But before you decide on one, consider: your customers (and what they value), your pricing structure and how frequently your customers make purchases from your business. Keep these considerations in mind as you evaluate these three common loyalty and reward program options:

1. **The classic point system:** This is the most common reward program system, in which frequent customers earn points that translate into rewards. For example, you might offer customers a point for each spa service they book, which they can later redeem in a lump sum for a free service or discount.

2. **The VIP fee system:** VIP benefits work by charging an upfront fee (typically one-time or annually) that allows customers to bypass barriers. Amazon Prime, where users pay $99 a year for free two-day shipping and other benefits, is a well-known example of the VIP fee system. While Amazon has mastered this system for e-commerce, it's useful for any businesses that rely on frequent, repeat purchases (e.g., fitness studios, gyms, spas and salons).

3. **The all-inclusive partner system:** Strategic customer loyalty partnerships can be highly effective for retaining customers and growing your business, while also offering additional consumer benefits. For example, if you own an indoor cycling studio, you might partner with a nearby yoga studio to offer co-branded deals that are mutually beneficial for both businesses and their customers who want a fitness routine beyond what your business alone offers. Plus, this system helps you grow your network and reach your partners' customers, too.

To excel in today's fast moving digital environment, you must push beyond the norm. Digital content that adds genuine value to consumers' lives will outshine content that bombards and begs for attention. Think of your business as a unique persona with human characteristics, and keep in mind that the content you share is being delivered to real people with real interests, passions and goals—discover and delight your customers with content that speaks to them.

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