

Social engineering

Effective online networking requires you to do more than simply collect contacts. **CHRIS BUTLER** describes its true potential

Networking is the lifeblood of the sales process. Sales professionals collect contacts and use them to sell their wares or services.

The birth of online social networking has made the capturing of contacts simple. Ecademy, LinkedIn, Xing, Facebook, Twitter and my own company, WeCanDo.Biz, are among a host of networks that mean many of us now have countless lists of contacts — some exclusively business, some exclusively social, and some that blend the two.

But social networking is neither a sport nor a collector's pastime. It is not an end in itself and these contacts are of no use to you if you do nothing with them. So what can you do with them?

We have always used lists of contacts as part of selling. In reality, customer relationship management (CRM) has always been there, but the last 10 years have seen a burgeoning of CRM systems using technology to help the process. As with the traditional filing cabinet or Rolodex, CRM is only as good as the last time it was updated and we all know how painful that process can be. It's easy enough if you have five prospects or clients. Impossible if you have 5,000.

An answer to this problem is social CRM, a subject that has sparked many different views and ideas about what it really is. (See also the CRM special in the last issue of *Winning Edge*.) Social CRM extends the traditional CRM concept to include interaction through social networks. As more and more people sign up to social networks, so they share more information about themselves: updated contact information, details of their likes and dislikes, and a host of useful information for the hungry sales professional. It forges a connection between the proprietary data you hold on customers in your CRM database and their public profiles on social networking sites which, of course, they maintain themselves.

A truly useful social CRM system allows you to use the contacts you have wherever they are, to view them in one place, to have them update their own details and to be able to 'slice and dice', campaign-market and track and manage opportunities, sales and invoicing.

That sentence sounds like marketing nirvana, but it is now achievable. Users of social networks take good care to make sure their data is current. Just imagine the benefits of looking up someone you haven't called for a couple of years in your CRM system and knowing their phone number, company and email address are right. Imagine also the benefits of being able to create a marketing campaign for 'all my gas and electrical contractor contacts in West Yorkshire' and knowing that you have that information at your fingertips.

All of the contacts that you've collected, from the earliest



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days of social and business networking up to today and into the future, can have real value. They have become something you can use to help you market your products and services.

Social CRM systems also exceed what has gone before in helping you to engage with your existing customers. In addition to post, telephone and email, which traditional CRM systems log, is the interaction you have on social networks. If you track people talking about your company across the

social web then you may discover customers you didn't know you had — or find another way of engaging with those you knew about, adding your online dialogue to your 'offline' communication such as emails or phone conversations. Many larger companies are already using elements of social CRM systems to help them to manage customer service queries, such as people posting complaints and praise on Twitter! Corporates such as BT already monitor and respond to points raised in this way. Imagine being able to capture potential endorsements as they happen, or trap potential complaints and deal with them, even if your customers never bother to call you.

Imagine a company that you don't already know posting a requirement somewhere on the web that matches the services you provide and that potential customer now appears in your social CRM system as a prospect. The future of social CRM is fascinating and exciting.

But social CRM needs managing just as much as other sales and marketing tools. You need to know what you are marketing, and to whom, and to build sound social CRM strategies. Use the tools wisely and carefully — but use them right now to stay ahead of the pack. ■

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