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The Business Web 2.0

As CEO of business-based social networking site WeCanDo.BIZ, read my take on the role Web 2.0 technologies can play helping businesses to grow.

Friday 18 July 2008, 11:45 AM

Web 2.0: what is it good for?

Posted by [wecando.biz](#)

Quite a lot actually. Don't dismiss it as a buzzword attached to a fad – Web 2.0 technologies enable you to do many of the things you already in business, but a lot faster.

The phrase "Web 2.0" doesn't signify a significant leap in internet technologies; it's just a tag used to describe websites where the content you read has been put their by website visitors and users, rather than website owners and publishers. It's where you get to achieve your objectives through contact, collaboration and engagement with other website users. You may not know these website users; or they may be customers, suppliers or partners. Social networks, blogs, forums, micro-blogging and more all fall under the Web 2.0 banner. And rather than being the preserve of nerds and teenagers, business people are now using these tools to great effect to help achieve their business goals.

Here is a simple break-down of how some of the most innovative Web 2.0 services can benefit you and your business:

>> Best for seeking advice on general business matters

Online forums are full of normal business people who are experts in their respective fields and who are happy to answer questions posted by others. From accountancy and tax issues, through to IT or internet marketing questions, you'll find forums and experts all over the web. People will value your own opinions too, so they can be

a place where you can show off your skills and win new business as a result. For the most part though, forums are discussion websites where people go for help, advice and feedback.

To find the best forums, type details of your industry along with the word "forums" into Google (<http://www.google.co.uk>). Make sure the forums are relevant to the markets you serve – you may not wish to be on a US based forum if you only sell locally, for example. You may need to register to post on forums – and maybe even to read what others have written – but there is no reason why you should pay; there are plenty of free resources on the web. Also worth a look is BusinessZone's forums at <http://www.ukbusinessforums.co.uk>, which cover a wide variety of disciplines; with 27,000 registered members they are also very well supported.

Blogs from experts in your field may also provide you with valuable information, contacts and a route to other useful resources. Again, search Google for your industry or specialism, plus the word "blog" to find industry luminaries who document their thoughts and findings through their blogs. Also check out the websites for the magazines and journals for your industry to see if they have expert blogs.

Most blogs allow you to comment on what has been said – this is a great way of getting the most from those contacts and also showing your own expertise. Make sure you include a link back to your website in your signature when you leave a comment on a blog, so people can contact you if they wish to. You could find your comments leading to new opportunities for you. Don't put your e-mail address in your signature, however, as spammers will use it!

>> Best for hiring new staff and career advancement

Forums can often be the source of valuable advice on hiring or finding a job, but it is likely you'll want to do engage in doing either with a little more discretion than is available on a public forum!

LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>) is a professional networking site which is heavily skewed towards personal progression and career advancement. You can register to add your own profile, which includes information about the various roles you have had; you can then re-connect with people you worked with in those roles, many of whom may also have their career details on the site too – LinkedIn has 23 million members globally. Former colleagues are often a great place to recruit from, but they can also help you get placed, either directly or through people they are happy to recommend you to.

LinkedIn is a US-based site, although popular in the UK with over 1 million members here. It has a European based competitor in Xing (<http://www.xing.com>), which has strong German and Spanish communities in particular, although it is not so well represented in the UK.

>> Best for sharing ideas with peers and others in my industry

Forums probably provide the best answer here. Search for forums specific to your industry through Google, making sure the forums are well represented in the same geography as you. You may also want to check out the websites of leading magazines or journals for your industry, as these may also have active reader forums where you can mix with others from your industry.

Watch also for blogs from industry commentators. They may be the thoughts of only one person, but can be a useful source of industry information that doesn't make the news websites. You may also build up some useful contacts through the people who comment on these blogs, as well as the bloggers themselves.

Of course, you can always start a blog yourself to get you in front of your industry peers. The best place to start is looking to see if those industry specific news sites offer reader blogs – sign up to one of these and you'll get the benefit of being promoted through the site they run into the market you're in. Otherwise, start a blog at either <http://wordpress.com> or <http://www.blogger.com> and be sure to promote it as much as you can – consider adding a link to it within your e-mail signature or to any social networking or forum profiles you have. WordPress can also be linked to your own company website, which will help drive more traffic to your site. If you go it alone in this way (as opposed to blog pages on a news site), then you'll have the job of promoting it yourself of course – no one will do it for you.

>> Best for meeting new contacts with a view to doing business

One of the issues with forums and blogs is that people often do not like being sold to through them. When you think about it, if every blogger or member of a forum tried to sell their products or services every chance they got, such places would soon become nothing more than bazaars, offering little valuable information. So it's best to tread carefully around them to avoid being lambasted for being overly "salesy". It is possible to get barred from forums if perceived to be using it to serve only your self interests!

That said, it is possible to ultimately win new business from forums and blogs by proving your expertise through the pages and attracting customers passively. This is best done by offering advice to those seeking it, rather than trumpeting your own skills. Over time your reputation will work for you to help you win new business.

All of this takes time, however, and it is impossible to say how much you would have to give to these sites in order to get a return. If you are looking for more immediate returns for your business, social networking may provide quicker and more quantifiable results.

If you sell to consumers, make a bee-line to the social networks you think your target customers are more likely to be members of. Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) is the leading mainstream social network and appeals to the young and more mature in equal measure. Facebook offers fan pages for businesses and brands to promote themselves. Sites like YouTube also offer opportunities for promotion through video clips – the more fun ones can spread like wildfire; so called “viral marketing”. If you have something funky to sell and can produce simple videos to promote it, this could be a great way of reaching consumers.

If you operate in the somewhat more staid business to business arena, however, my own business focused social network at <http://www.wecando.biz> may provide you an easy route to new customers. It is an online lead and referral network, enabling you to list yourself and your business; collect endorsements from customers which, in turn, get you better promoted on the site; and make connections with other business people who you may be able to assist or who may be able to assist you. As with almost all Web 2.0 resources, it is free to join.

>> Best for getting back in touch with former colleagues

This task is most easily performed where most of your colleagues are likely to be found -- and for most, this will be LinkedIn. As it stores a list of companies you have worked for, requested when you signed up or which you can update at any time as you move jobs, it offers easy methods of searching for people who worked at the same companies as you. Connections are made either directly or through mutual acquaintances on the site.

Facebook also offers a similar feature, enabling you to enter details of previous work places, although not many of the significantly higher overall number of site members (120 million worldwide at last count) use this feature. You can still search for former colleagues by name through the site’s search facility, however.

Spock (<http://www.spock.com>) isn’t a site for Star Trek fans, but a Web 2.0 site that aims to help you find anyone on the web, no matter where they are located. It primarily looks for people across other social networks, LinkedIn and Facebook included, attempting to show you all results it finds for the individual you are searching for. It goes without saying it doesn’t work so well if you are looking for a former work friend with a common name, or if they share their moniker with a well known celebrity, as you’ll have to sift through all references to their namesakes first. It is interesting to trawl through, however, and you’ll soon find yourself looking up your own name up to see what or who else exists across the far reaches of the web with your name on it! You’ll need an account on the social networks it finds your colleagues on to be able to connect to them.

>> Best for keeping in touch with existing customers

E-mails and newsletters are the most common ways of keeping in touch with your whole customer base using electronic means, but the communication tends to be all one way – unless they mail you back, you don’t get to hear about what they are doing or what they need. And why should they mail you back? There are probably many other suppliers managing a more personal touch to those contacts and winning business as a consequence.

Think also about all the business cards you have picked up over the years and what you are actively doing to see if you might still be able to do business with those people. And what about everyone listed in your various e-mail address books or your mobile phone contacts list? Remember that partners, suppliers and even friends can also be customers.

Web 2.0 offers some great ways of maintaining contact with ALL of those contacts, encouraging a two-way flow of information on needs, as well as offers. We have made it a key part of our WeCanDo.BIZ website: you can invite all your e-mail contacts to connect with you on the site (sync your phone with your e-mail to ensure you address those contacts too) and then you’ll get to read their most urgent business needs as they post them, looking for assistance. You can message all those contacts, or broadcast your urgent business needs to them also – they may be able to help or have close contacts that may be able to assist. It all helps to encourage contact and trade within the network you already have. Maximising the return from known contacts is much easier and cheaper than approaching and trying to win new customers from scratch, although WeCanDo.BIZ makes it easy for you to reach new contacts through its business focused network too.

How do I co-ordinate all these?

The number of Web 2.0 sites is mind-boggling and it grows longer every day. Luckily, in a business context there are only a few you need to concern yourself with and those are mentioned above. However, it could still become a big part of your day flying from one to the other if there wasn’t an easier way of keeping on top of them all.

I am a member of many sites and, of course, need to keep a constant eye on my own. To do this easily, I use a

"dashboard" from Google, called iGoogle (<http://www.google.com/ig>). If you already have a Google account for Google Adwords, it will be easy to set up; otherwise, you just register a new account. iGoogle allows you to build your own web homepage with various components on it, all reporting activity from other sources across the web. Clicking the "Add stuff" link allows you to do a search on the sites you'd like to collect information from; if they are listed, you click Add to include it on your dashboard. For sites where you can't find a so-called "widget" to keep you updated, you might be able to add a RSS feed.

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and is a stream of news or events from a website that you can display through an RSS reader, which iGoogle has one of (look for it on the "Add stuff" page down towards the bottom on the left). If a site you know has an RSS feed, normally indicated by an orange RSS button either in your web browser or on the website itself when you visit it, click it to get the address of the RSS feed page, before you copy the URL (web address) for that page into the RSS reader on iGoogle. It is a lot simpler than it sounds.

You can find the RSS feed for our site at <http://www.wecando.biz/rss/bizneeds.php>.

Do this for each site and you can have a stream of news, features and more all coming straight into their own panels on your dashboard. Combined with the specific social networking widgets available, you can get a single view of what is happening on each of your social networks and forums on one page. Clicking the "story" in each panel will take you to the source site if you need to go there to answer a query or pick up a lead.

Most internet browsers also have RSS readers and you may consider it easier just to list the feeds in your browser rather than use iGoogle. Again, look for the orange RSS button on websites or in your browser address bar to subscribe to the feed and get updates whenever it is added to. I find the best RSS reader in the Opera browser (<http://www.opera.com>), which is also available for internet connected mobile phones and PDAs. There are also RSS readers in Internet Explorer and Firefox.

Web 2.0 offers a lot of useful resources to help your business. Not all of the above will suit every individual or company, but it is worth experimenting with each to see which brings the greatest return. Also very important is which method you find easiest to spend time on cultivating those benefits. Technology should assist you to achieve, not trip you up; that applies with Web 2.0 technologies as much as any other.

Ian Hendry
CEO, WeCanDo.BIZ
<http://www.wecando.biz>

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Hi Ian, great article, and it just goes to show that there's a wealth of support out there, right at people's fingertips.

I'm Chairman of UK Business Forums, and we see small business owners and managers use our site in so many different ways - I just wanted to share a few thoughts here.

90% of the time, our visitors are simply reading what's there - with over half a million posts, this 'archive' of business discussion is such an important part of the brand and purpose of our site.

The other 10% of the time, visitors are actively engaged with the site, offering valuable support and advice, welcoming new members, weeding out any spam and reporting malicious postings. And all of this to help out other business owners that they've never even met before.

The key benefit to those active, prolific forum posters is that they receive a huge amount of recognition within the community, without ever having to be 'in-yer-face', and even amongst those people that (90% of the time) aren't actively posting. They're building their brand on the foundations of knowledge-sharing and helping other people out, which can only be a Good Thing.

The cost of effective social networking is an investment of time - and plenty of it. As you rightly say, some things won't suit everyone - some people won't enjoy the experience of 'going public' on a busy forum - but it's always worth a go!

And let's not forget that forums - even those focused on business - are a great social outlet: relieving a bit of 'work at home' boredom; discussing current affairs; hobbies; or even a place for a pick-me-up when things get tough.

Good luck with the site Ian - I'll be visiting very soon!

Regards,
Darren Falkingham

Updated by [dfalkingham](#) on Jul 18, 2008 3:14 PM



Thanks for the post Darren - I could not agree more. As a prolific online networker I am active on about 4 forums and my fairly modest posting history on each drives about 10% of the traffic to our website. I can consider that a very worthwhile investment, although I think that my "public persona" is a double edged sword -- not all of those people who follow me feel they can make an approach. Luckily, there are as many people who just know me as a contact on a business network too and don't find contacting me so daunting!

As you say, different strokes for different folks and the key to making a success of online networking is to find a method that fits with the time you can give it and your desire to actually want to be seen.

Ian Hendry
WeCanDo.BIZ
<http://www.wecando.biz>

Posted by [wecando.biz](#) on Jul 18, 2008 3:47 PM



I have spent a lot of time researching companies, specifically marketing companies, linking strategies and the tactics they use to get moved up in the ranks on search engines. This was a great article that confirmed what I have found through my research. Several companies have started using these very tactics that you mentioned, such as blogging and forums. This article also provided some additional information.

EH
I.R. Gilyeat & Company
www.iangilyeat.com

Posted by [ehunt86](#) on Jul 18, 2008 6:22 PM



Hi EH,

Yep, the guys who have got themselves into the SEO business will be making hay for a good while yet. Every time a search engine changes its algorithm, the SEO people get another cherry to bite at.

What's a pity is that some fledgling online businesses rely on traffic from search engines to survive. But search engines don't really give you any advance warning (or explanation) when that flow of traffic gets cut off - because you've unwittingly broken some unwritten rule in an unseen algorithm? A big 'ouch' for those businesses needing that traffic.

On Journalism.co.uk last week, senior guys at The Telegraph pointed to their site redesign being more about engagement than traffic. This is a smart move, and one that I'd back wholeheartedly.

1,000 engaged and interested visitors is better than 5,000 who've stumbled across you from a search engine. But how do you get to those 1,000 readers in the first place?

The answer should be "relevant content", but unfortunately search engines don't understand a word of that...only links...and SEO firms know about links...another cherry anyone...?

Regards,



Darren

Some really interesting points in your post.

You'll see one of my other blog articles raised the question as to whether social networks will kill search engines - this article was ripped apart on various forums by those who earn their money from SEO, because they hate the thought that popularity as defined by references in social media could be driving traffic to sites. But that very medium, to me thinking, provides better context than clever algorithm use. If real people are happy to point to it with some reasons why (an endorsement), then that information available to me from a friend I know is worth much more than a top listing on Google.

Too many people see social media and social networking purely in the context of it providing backlinks. But, in fact, the context in which your site is mentioned will pass people to your site with a much greater view of your company -- it's the difference between word of mouth and looking up a company in a directory (which is all Google is).

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