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Friday 18th September, 2009

Digital Futures event encourage entrepreneurs to get online

Social media or Web 2.0 is not a fad, nor something businesses could afford not to be a part of if they want to survive and grow.

That was the message delivered to participants at the second annual one-day intensive Digital Futures seminar at the University of the Sunshine Coast's Innovation Centre in September.

The seminar saw experts including Russell Bullen, director of Online Marketing Collective; Steve Huff, from Sixty Second Parent; Matt Forman, Managing Director of Traffika; Yean Cheong, Digital Strategy Director at Mitchell Communications Group; and Edmund Pelgen, founder of Market Reach SEO, presented real case studies to demonstrate how the online world is rapidly changing and how entrepreneurs could take advantage of that.

Online Marketing Collective director Russell Bullen said while web 2.0 and social media may seem daunting, the messages we were sending people hadn't changed, just the way it was delivered.

"People don't change so the messages we communicate don't need to change either. Social networking just offers us a new way to reach people," Mr Bullen said.

"Technology has been rapidly developing so now it is time to put all that technology to work – it is not a case of build it and they will come, you need to develop an effective online business model that can be tested and measured to ensure it works," he said.

"The power online is in the conversation – do you know what people are saying about you online?"

Successful serial entrepreneur Steve Huff said visiting most websites was like visiting a bad party. "You need to give people a clear direction about what they can do and how to get to the information they want so they don't just leave at the first opportunity."

Mr Huff said being successful online meant using the instant feedback available to ensure you were giving customers what they wanted. "Think about what you are offering and why they are there."

Mr Huff also advised people seeking assistance with website and online strategy development to get clear service agreements with their providers that included ongoing check ups and

maintenance.

He said when choosing a platform, you should list your requirements first and then find a platform that will suit. “If you do it the other way around it can be very expensive to try to adapt that platform to suit,” he said.

Yean Cheong, Digital Strategy Director at Mitchell Communications Group agreed saying that taking a strategic approach as you would in other aspects of business was vital.

“You need to understand what your website’s role is – is it a shopfront where can purchase without speaking to anyone or is it that you want your website to convert enquires into quality leads?” she said.

Ms Cheong said using social networking could be very time consuming so it was important to have a clear purpose. “Start by listening on social media – don’t rush in. Get a really good sense of what people are saying and the context they are saying it within, then only when you are ready and have a clear plan join the conversation.”

Traffika Managing Director, Matt Forman, said the good news was that there were very real opportunities for SMEs online. “Consumer trends have shifted with people spending a much higher percentage of their time online, however large organisations were still spending their money on more traditional media like print, radio and television,” he said.

“Using online tools and social media you can target these people without the overheads and structure of more traditional businesses.

“Trust and authenticity are also key when using social media,” he said.

Mr Bullen said for businesses not yet online a good way to get started was to subscribe to the blogs of people in your industry or space. “Find out what they are doing, how they are doing it, what has worked and what didn’t.” He said the beauty of the online world was that this type of information was readily available.

Other top tips from the presenters included:

- Content is key – it is a constant and must provide value to your visitors.
- Trust and authenticity are key with social media.
- Remember the three Es of social media – educate, engage, entertain - and offer as many of them as you can.
- Good quality link backs to your site can increase traffic to your site and your Google rankings.
- Keep in mind your point/s of difference – concentrate on what makes you stand out from your competitors.

The University of the Sunshine Coast’s Innovation Centre runs regular events for entrepreneurs. To get more information on upcoming events or to check out the free “Zero to Hero” business develop program visit www.innovation-centre.com.au.

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