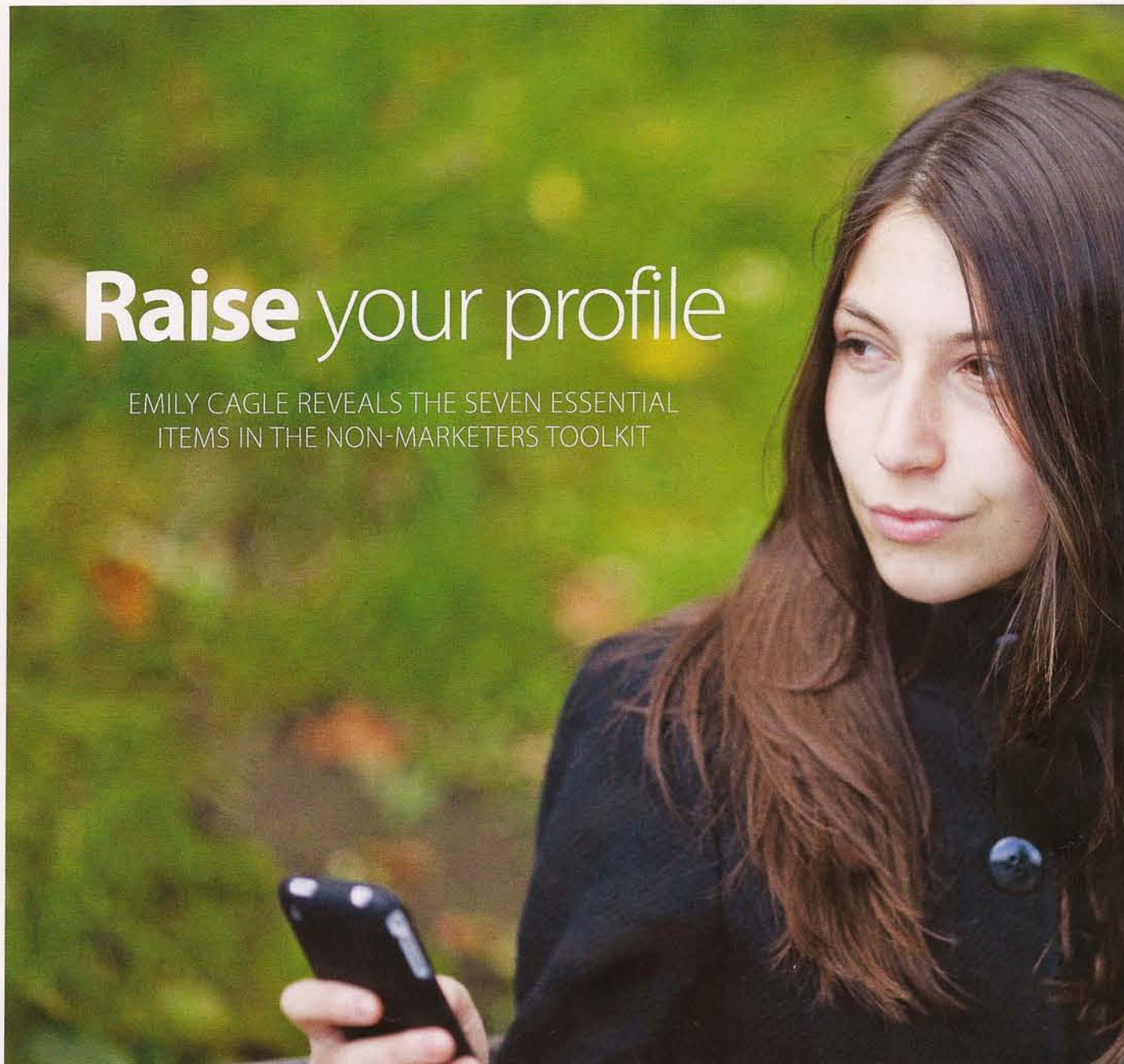


Raise your profile

EMILY CAGLE REVEALS THE SEVEN ESSENTIAL ITEMS IN THE NON-MARKETERS TOOLKIT



Emily Cagle: "Social media is proving an effective way to engage with potential and existing clients"

If you're running a small business, the chances are you don't have the luxury of a big marketing budget or in-house PR team. Instead, you're probably doing what you can to reach your target market under your own steam, often following your gut instinct to get your name in front of the people that matter.

If you're ready to take your marketing efforts up a notch, but don't have much cash to invest, here are seven steps you can take to raise your profile without compromising your cash flow.

DIRECT MARKETING

However little you know about the world of marketing, it's likely that you're familiar with direct marketing: leaflets through doors, telemarketing, sales emails and so on.

For many businesses, a low-cost first marketing step is to opt for a sales letter or email campaign.

This is typically a one-page letter, addressed to the relevant contact in which you briefly explain your services and ask them to get in contact. If you're opting for a postal campaign, handwriting the addresses has been proven to increase the number of reads by up to 300 per cent.

The headline of your letter will need to be snappy, to the point and engaging. One technique is to pick a surprising statistic that engages the reader and then ask a question. For example, a call answering service might lead with: '40 per cent of callers hang up when they hear an answerphone. How much business are you missing out on?'

There isn't room to go into every element here, but it's worth remembering to close with a call to action such as: 'Call now on...' and, where possible, follow up with each recipient a day or two later by phone to gather their feedback.

WEBSITE AND BLOG

While some company websites can do all manner of things, from taking orders to streaming video demonstrations, at its most basic level a website is like a business card or brochure that potential clients can access from anywhere in the world.

But, of course, potential clients won't find you by magic. To ensure that you reach people, you need to find ways to make yourself visible on search engines like Google for the keywords associated with your business. This is where blogging comes in.

A blog is a simple way of posting content onto the web. With company blogs, this is an opportunity to demonstrate field expertise by publishing company news, advice articles and other industry-specific content. This populates your website with an ever-growing number of industry-related keywords, which will begin to show up in search engines, bringing in potential customers who have searched



for those terms. Blogging in this way also adds credibility to your company image and makes the site more 'sticky', in that visitors are more likely to stay and browse.

NETWORKING

No matter how polished your presence in the online world is, sometimes nothing beats getting out and meeting people in person. While phoning round and trying to arrange meetings works for some people, an easy way to meet dozens of prospective clients in one room is to attend networking events.

Rather than being a direct sales tool, networking is a means of raising your profile and making people aware of what you do. The more people who know and like you, the more likely you are to receive a referral. So rather than attending networking meetings to push for sales, successful networkers do it to build relationships.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Free-to-use social media such as Twitter and Facebook allow people to connect with friends, but also to find people with similar interests who they may never have met in the real world.

For businesses, social media is proving an effective way to engage with potential and existing clients. Just as it pays to have a website, having a social media profile for your business offers another way for clients to find you.

The key to social media is to engage and reciprocate, so the aim is to provide useful content and support and reshare the work of others as well as your own. Essentially, the rules are very similar to networking in the real world.

NEWSLETTERS

Marketing isn't just about reaching brand-new ears and eyes, it's also about keeping existing customers informed, happy and coming back for more, as well as connecting with those you've already met, but haven't yet sold to. Newsletters can offer a platform to do just that.

Unlike a mailshot, which is sales led by its very nature, the key remit of a newsletter is to be useful. For a company already engaged in blogging, a newsletter might include a company news update, plus a recap of the most popular posts of the week or month. If sent by email (as opposed to by post), links to further information can be included, thereby encouraging further visits to the website.

SPONSORSHIPS

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to have a large amount of cash to donate in order to benefit from sponsoring a good cause. In fact, sometimes your time or expertise can be just as valuable to an initiative as an equivalent amount of cash.

If you're a locally focused business, investing your time in a local cause can pay dividends. As well as the reward of knowing you are using your company for the benefit of the community, you may also attract attention from potential customers.

For example, if you're sponsoring a fundraising event, you could expect to get a mention on banners, adverts and even press releases. If you select a worthwhile cause, this will not only raise awareness of your brand, but also improve your standing as a responsible trader that values the principles represented by the charity or initiative.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

As a PR professional, you might expect me to advise small businesses to stay away from attempting their own media relations, but in fact, if you're a small business operating in a defined community or niche, there are often opportunities for coverage that you can manage yourself, with great results.

However, if you're to be successful, there are a few dos and don'ts. First, do your research. If you're planning on contacting your local newspapers, for example, go to their online equivalent or get hold of some recent issues and try to figure out the name of the person or persons who usually cover your subject. It's much better to be able to ask for Sandra on the business desk than pestering the main editor or leaving it to reception to work out where to route your call.

Second, hold off until you have a story worth telling. If you launch a new range at your used and new clothes shop, it might be thrilling for you and your friends, but the press simply won't have the capacity to cover every launch for its own sake. But if you notice a significant increase in sales at the start of the recession, and are among the first to observe this, with turnover figures to back you up, this could represent an interesting angle that would broadly interest readers, and win you attention in the process.

The above list of tools is not exhaustive, and the approach you take will likely depend on a range of factors, such as your business, location and target market. But if you're creative in your approach, it's quite possible to give your marketing efforts a boost without breaking the bank. **MM**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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