

SMEs Must Utilise the Online Environment or be at a Disadvantage

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According to the [October 2011 Sensis e-Business Report](#), SMEs are responding slowly to the online environment. Although 67% of SMEs have a website, a staggering 81% lack a digital strategy despite the increasing number of Australians under the age of 40 who buy goods online.

As technology improves, it is not only the Internet that businesses must contend with. Increasingly, it is mobile technologies and social media platforms that must be integrated into an online strategy. Thus, businesses must become savvier and incorporate all online aspects into an approach to capture the market effectively. Those who don't will be left behind.

Most SMEs have failed to grasp that modern technologies don't just represent new ways to attract new customers; they are part of a much larger cultural change. By failing to recognise that a cultural as well as an economic and technological shift is occurring, SMEs are failing to appreciate the transformation in the mindset of the consumer. The consumer today is so much more different than ten years ago.

The retail industry and their battle to have GST apply to imported goods under \$1,000 is a prime example. Although the retail industry has legitimate issues in their industry, by making GST the issue, they miss entirely the cultural change that is occurring. We now live a globalised economy where consumers have more choice about when, what and how they buy. Businesses have been slow to recognise this and still struggle to acknowledge this key point.

There is no doubt that keeping up with modern technology can be confusing. Trying to figure out what best suits your business can be overwhelming considering the number of issues SMEs already have to deal with. However, it is

the current reality of the modern world and SMEs must adapt. Moving forward, businesses must accept that things are moving at an incredibly fast pace and it is essential to be proactive.

Business needs to be active in the online environment to utilise the space more productively. Here are some key points to take into account:

- Have an online strategy that includes social media and mobile technologies. Implementation does not need to occur immediately but it must be included in your long-term strategy.
- Having a website is no longer an online brochure; it must be managed to engage in a two-way conversation.
- The content of your website is more important than the design. Focus on this by providing information for potential customers.
- Social Media is developing faster than other online tools. Experiment with this. There is no right or wrong, just find what suits your business.
- Having a blog can enhance traffic to your website as well as provide valuable information to potential customers and promote your expertise.
- It still surprises me how many businesses use their personal email accounts to conduct business. This is unprofessional and sloppy. If you have registered your URL, then use the email address for that domain for all business correspondence.
- Stop “outbound marketing” – it is old marketing and very disrupting. The key is to engage, not to sell.

The online environment will only develop and strengthen. Businesses, who are not proactive and fail to engage customers, will miss out on opportunities as they are neglecting the seismic shift that is taking place. SMEs, despite their workload, must see the online environment as a positive that can actually support and benefit their business. Those that fail to grasp this will struggle to adapt to all that is occurring in the online space.