

Managing your brand and reputation online

BBEH. Queen's Suite Monday 15th March 10am

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, are you all feeling wide awake and raring to go this morning - I hope so as we have a bit of ground to cover in the next half hour. First I'm going to give you a short introduction, including some information about us - though I can see several familiar faces out there - then Keren will talk about three aspects of managing your brand and reputation online.

Anyway, I'm Tim and this is Keren and together we founded I Do, I Do, a web design company specialising in the wedding industry. Three years ago we realised that the combination of Keren's great design skills and my corporate background in IT made us a great web team. Keren had enjoyed working with a bridal shop as a freelancer and knowing that women show a preference for web sites designed by women, we set out to bring high quality, competitively priced websites to the wedding industry. We've since been fortunate enough to be featured in industry magazines and we're delighted with our expanding portfolio - you're mostly a great bunch of people to work with.

Well, that's enough about us. Managing your brand and reputation online. This is about presenting your company as effectively as possible online, and increasing your business. The first area to cover is your own website, so Keren will start by addressing ten points to making sure your website is effective. She'll then move on to talk about one of today's hot topics - social media - what it is, and how you can use it to your own advantage in running your business. Finally she'll briefly discuss monitoring social media and responding to criticism. If you've any questions we'll do our best to answer them at the end. So, over to Keren.

I'd like to start this morning by telling you a story about a salesperson called Wendy. Wendy worked for an extremely busy bridal shop owner. The thing about Wendy was that she was a bit eccentric. For starters, she always dressed in outfits that were straight out the 90's. Another strange thing about her was her lack of focus. When a customer walked in the door, and she happened to be in the showroom, she didn't greet them in a normal way; instead she would launch into a strange ramble about her life, leaving the customer looking slightly bemused. And if she was asked about the latest bridal fashions, Wendy would talk about gowns that they'd had years ago that they didn't even stock any more.

But probably Wendy's most annoying trait was her absence. Very often a customer would walk into what turned out to be an empty showroom. Wendy was out the back, lazing about, and couldn't be bothered to go out and talk to the customer. After having awkwardly stood around for several minutes waiting to be served, the customer would huffily walk back out the door, never to be seen again.

So what on earth had possessed the bridal shop owner to employ Wendy in the first place? Well, for starters, she was cheap - Wendy was paid minimum wage. The other thing about her was that in her previous job, she'd been an acrobat in a circus, so she could do the most amazing back flips and cartwheels.

If the bridal shop owner had asked some of her more honest friends and customers what they thought of Wendy, she may well have realised the damage Wendy was doing to her business.

She may have come to understand that though Wendy's acrobatic talents were indeed quite spectacular, they weren't at all helpful to her company. And she may have also found out that Wendy was more often than not conspicuous by her absence.

So, what's the point of my story? You've probably already guessed, but Wendy is a metaphor for your website. Your website is quite literally your online salesperson. It's very often the very first contact potential customers have with your company, and if your website is a bit of a Wendy website, you may not only be not helping your business, you could be harming it.

So, lets look at our Top 10 tips to think about when assessing your website.

1. Keep focused

Probably the very first question to ask yourself is what are your business objectives for the website? Deciding what your website goals are and what you hope to achieve are fundamental aspects to a successful website.

Once you've decided what these goals are, make sure you have an eye-catching call to action. A brilliant salesperson will smooth the way to a sale. Your website should make achieving your end goal the simplest thing in the world.

So if your goal is that you want people to call you, make sure your phone number is visible and obvious on every page. If you want people to buy from your website, make it really easy and obvious where the online shop aspect of your website is, and make it eye-catching.

2. Ask others what they think

You may like your website and think it's wonderful (and it may be!) - but to see what people think who are a little more impartial, canvas some opinions, preferably from people who are in the specific market you're targeting. So you could ask some existing customers their opinion - they'll be flattered, and hopefully you'll get some good feedback. Ask them to be brutally honest, and try not to be offended if the response is bad!

Basically, what you're wanting is a fresh pair of eyes – sometimes when we have something around for a while, we stop seeing it and just operate from a perception in our minds.

3. Good design

On the web, like everywhere else, good design sells. Incredibly researchers have found that the brain makes decisions about a company in just a 20th of a second of viewing a webpage! You have literally milliseconds to convince visitors to stay, and good design helps make a good first impression. If your website hasn't been redesigned recently, chances are that it's a Wendy website – a bit desperate for a facelift. Web design trends change, not as fast as fashion design, but still quite quickly, and you could be losing brides on the first click.

Make that first contact a positive experience. Your website design should create a similar feeling to the one a bride gets when she walks into your showroom. You want to do your best to make your website pleasurable to use.

4. Make it easy to use

Clear intuitive navigation encourages visitors to browse through your whole site. Many users will be on a fact-finding mission. For example, they may simply want to know your contact details. Or they may just want to know what collections you stock. There was a trend a few years ago to make people roll over pictures to find the section of the website they were looking

for – you had to kinda guess where things were. If you make a website experience frustrating, you'll lose people.

The other thing to consider is web content. Web users read web content in a very different way to reading printed material - web content needs to be optimised for skim reading so break up your content, and use lots of headings.

5. Helpful content

Here's some questions for you about your content. Does your website have helpful content that reflects your business? Articles that maybe help your visitors, are readable, and convey some personality? Again, back to our Wendy example, if you think of your website as your online super sales person, you'll get the idea. Seriously great sales people are helpful, warm, friendly, and good company. On the other hand, if you can say what you need to say in one sentence instead of three, then do – basically, long-winded is boring.

6. Up-to-date content

You'll remember that Wendy (when asked about the latest wedding gown fashion) started talking about outdated gowns. When was the last time you updated your pictures to reflect the latest collections out? Again, you may have “news” from 2005, or a sale announcement from 2006.

Make sure your website is telling visitors what your business is doing today. When you get busy, it slips down the priority queue, but do try to keep on top of it – it is important.

7. Appropriate use of technology

Here's a question for you - does your website use appropriate technology that enhances the user experience, rather than irritating the user? It was fashionable in the early 2000's to have something called a splash page – a kind of greeting page with moving images or music. That's a bit like Wendy's acrobatics – not helpful. A piece of advise – DON'T have a splash page - just go straight to your home page. Not only is it more Google friendly, it's more human friendly too – it takes your visitors straight to where they want to be. You also need to make sure your website works in all of the different browsers, not just Internet Explorer.

Technology should improve the user's experience, or help you run your website. For example, having a website you can update yourself means that if inspiration strikes in the shower, you can go and write up a blog post, or change some copy without having to wait on your web designer and be charged for it.

8. Search Engine Optimisation

The biggest problem with Wendy was that very often the customer simply couldn't find her. And yep, that can be the biggest problem for lots of bridal shop websites. Search Engine Optimisation is a topic that would need a whole other seminar to talk about as there are a number of issues to consider when trying to well rank on Google, but there are three things to mention that are important. **1.** Relevant and good content is the most important. **2.** It needs to be easy for Google to find your content, so the way your website is coded does matter. **3.** Get as many quality links back to your website as possible.

BTW, there a lot of dubious companies touting for SEO business – if what they're offering sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

9. Blogging

We'll talk about blogging in more detail later, but basically blogging is a great way of increasing the content on your website which in turn increases the traffic to your website. There are also other benefits, including creating a dialogue with your visitors, and helping create personality. Remember though, it's vital to update your blog regularly.

10. Social Media

This is the subject of the next section of our seminar – but remember to provide links from your website to any social media tools you use, and to include your twitter feeds in your blog.

What is Social Media?

Social Media is a term being bandied around a lot in the media, and probably the simplest explanation is that it's an online conversation. Social Media is just as much about listening to what your customers have to say (and giving them the opportunity to say it) as it is about you marketing to them.

Down through time, business was generally about the person in the market selling his goods or services directly with customers, face to face. Customers got to know the sellers, and were more likely to purchase from people they liked.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, the advent of telephones, faxes and the internet moved customers one step back – it became more important to be the best business at marketing yourself by looking the most professional – by having the best advertisements, and the nicest website to entice customers into your store, or encourage them to purchase online. One of the greatest advantages of new technologies was the extension of your marketplace – you weren't restricted to just the people in your own town any more – you could suddenly sell much further afield. But the down side was that it removed the people from the process – customer relations became increasingly impersonal.

This lack of a real human connection created an opportunity with the advent of a new type of media – social media, and virtually every internet expert agrees that social media is the future of the internet, and I would suggest, a vital part of any forward thinking business' marketing.

Social media includes a wide variety of technologies, but the three I want to talk about this morning that I think are pertinent to the bridal industry are Facebook, Twitter, and blogging. I'll go into each of those in more detail shortly, but first let me tell you **why** I think social media is so important. Social media allows you to showcase a real, human face behind your business. It shows potential customers that you have nothing to hide, that you're trustworthy – it shows them a glimpse of a fellow human being.

A point to note – shady companies tend to hide things about themselves. They don't put their company number on their website, they don't put up any information about themselves or about who owns the company. And they certainly don't start sharing information about themselves via social media. They work best under cover. Customers know that, and if you display any kind of reluctance to be transparent about yourself and your company, potential clients will be suspicious.

Now you may be thinking, 'well yes, I can see that might be a problem for a proprietor who only trades over the internet, but I see brides daily – they come into my shop'. That's true, but remember, the bridal market is competitive, and if you're not giving brides a reason to come

into your shop in the first place, you won't even get a chance for them to get to know you. What's more, if you're doing a super job leveraging social media, you'll get brides driving from further afield just to come to your shop because you're so obviously the nicest person they've ever seen tweeting!

So on to the three social media platforms that I think bridal shops can most benefit from.

Facebook

I'm not going to explain what Facebook is because I'm sure you're all quite familiar with it. What people are less familiar with is that you can set up your business on Facebook. A Facebook Business Page <http://www.facebook.com/advertising/?pages> is a public profile that enables you to share your business and products, and if people like you enough, they will become your 'fan' on Facebook.

The bonus of having people become your fan is that it's automatically posted in their news feed, which then notifies all of their Facebook friends. You've then automatically been marketed to a whole bunch of people who are probably in a similar age-group to your fan. This is an online version of word-of-mouth marketing, which is brilliant. Make sure you put your company logo, contact details, your website, some product pictures, and if you run events or have a sale on, use your Facebook page to publicise it. You also have a wall that brides can post messages on, so if you get brides who are pleased with your service, make sure they go onto your Facebook page and post a testimonial.

Twitter

Twitter has been getting a LOT of press in the last year. It's basically like a mini update – you send a message of a maximum of 140 characters long to your Twitter account either via your computer or your mobile phone. People can choose to follow you on Twitter so that they get notified of your updates, just as you can choose to follow other people on Twitter.

Twitter is a great way of reminding your followers that you exist.

People follow people on Twitter who they find interesting, or think will be useful. So what do you Tweet about?

- If you come across a good blog post on another website that provides really pertinent information about what dress styles suit what body shapes, Tweet about it and link to it.
- If you come across a saying or quote that you think might connect with brides-to-be, tweet about it. Your goal is to get brides to re-tweet your message, which increases your exposure to their followers.
- Ask open-ended questions. For example you might ask “What is the worst colour to get married in?”, or “If you had an unlimited budget, which wedding dress designer would you go with?” (I'm sure there's quite a few people at the show today who would be interested in the answers to THAT!).
- Hold a contest – for example, if people re-tweet a specific message and follow you on Twitter, they will be entered into the draw to win a piece of bridal jewellery worth £50. A bridal oriented competition encourages brides to participate, rather than just any old person.
- Offer deals or discounts through Twitter – again, you increase your chances of being re-tweeted if brides can see an obvious benefit to their own followers.

- On the other hand, don't go overboard on the human interest stories – what you had for lunch and your current toilet habits (yes, unbelievably there are people who tweet about exactly that) don't make good fodder for Twitter updates.
- Try to update reasonably regularly – once a day would be great, but even around four times a week is fine. But bear in mind that it can be very addictive!

Blogging

When I suggest to our customers that they should be blogging, I often get asked 'What exactly IS blogging?' Blog is short for web log, and a blog can be a lot of different things depending on who is blogging. To quote a website called Blogger.com:

"A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world."

So what does that have to do with business? Well, there are two hugely powerful things about blogs.

The power of content

Google loves content. There is a saying in the Search Engine Optimisation world - "Content is King". I have personal experience in this. I started a blog in 2008, which I have around 50 posts on now, and I am currently getting around 35,000 hits a month. To put that in context, the average bridal shop website is probably getting about 500 hits a month. I didn't do anything else apart from blog. If I keep blogging, I know that I can keep increasing the traffic to my website. Blogging is the single most powerful way of increasing visitors to your website. Google will rank websites that have more content above websites that have less content.

Increased transparency

The other thing blogging does is give visitors to your website a feeling for who you are – they get a chance to make a decision about whether they like you, and want to come into your shop. Essentially, blogging builds trust.

Things to remember:

Update regularly. If you don't, it will become obvious that your blog is neglected and people will wonder why you even bothered.

You can connect up your blog with Twitter and Facebook – by encouraging visitors to your blog to follow you on Twitter and become your fan on Facebook, you are creating more opportunities to keep in touch with them and remind them of your existence.

How to monitor Social Media

One concern of many bridal shops is what is being said about their business on the internet, and how they can both monitor it and respond to it.

There are now many web site forums for people with common interests to come together to talk about their interests, opinions, and experiences. As we all know, in the bridal industry, there are many bridal forums. Having bad feedback about your brand can be really damaging, so what can you do about it?

One of the simplest and best tools to use to monitor your brand is actually Google. Google spiders billions of pages throughout the internet, and doing a simple search on your company name can bear quite a lot of fruit. If you have a company name with more than one word, put speech marks around it so that Google knows you are searching for a specific phrase.

If you decide you'd like to search a specific website to see what's been said about you, e.g. You and Your Wedding, put in site:youandyourwedding.com "Company Name" into Google. This tells Google to restrict its results to a specific website. You can also do this to search on Twitter.

So, what do you do when you search on Google, and stumble across somebody bad-mouthing your company? In the spirit of what was said earlier, transparency is the key in dealing with this type of situation. One of the worst things you can do is sign in as a pretend bride, and do one post on how wonderful your company is and what a great experience you had with your company (it's been done!). Brides can smell out deceit from a mile away, and a one-hit wonder poster is going to automatically look suspicious. If they do sniff you out, you've only compounded your problem – not only did you not help, you've actually made yourself look sneaky and shifty.

So, what **do** you do in that situation? The very best thing you can do is respond as a representative of your company. If the person griping about your company has a genuine reason to gripe, acknowledge it and apologise. If they're talking nonsense, say something along the lines of feeling sorry that they felt they had a bad experience but that you dealt with the situation as best as you could. Basically, you need to man up. By being mature and reasonable in your response, you are showing to the rest of the brides on the forum (and to anyone who searches your company name to find reviews about you) that you are a reasonable and nice person, and that you deal with difficult situations in a mature way. Don't be tempted into a heated response – you are participating in an exchange of views that has an audience of thousands of potential customers, so bear that in mind when you respond.

Thank you Keren. So, just a quick recap before we take questions. Keren started by talking about making the most from your own website, and how you should think of it as being your online salesperson . If it's well focused with good design, relevant content and search engine friendly you'll be on the right lines.

She then discussed social media, explaining how you can use it to help personalise your business online. Sites like Facebook and Twitter can be used to help market your business and put a human face online. Blogging provides an opportunity to deliver relevant content to your customers and can really help your search engine rankings.

Keren finished by talking about how to monitor what's being said about your company and how to respond positively even if you're being criticised.

You can find a copy of the transcript of this seminar on our website (www.idoido.co.uk). Just follow the links on the home page.

Feel free to have a chat with us afterwards and we'll be around for a while during the day so don't be shy about picking our brains. We're happy to take questions now – does anybody have anything they'd like to ask?