

INSIDE VIEW

PENNY POWER

Founder Ecademy, the UK's first social network for business

Power to the people...

In 1998 I read two books - one was *Celestine Prophecy*, a spiritual book that was an unusual read for me and the second, more 'up my street', was *Permission Marketing* by Seth Godin.

Celestine Prophecy touched me by stating that the world is moving in a direction that I liked. I could feel it but could not articulate it so well. I liked the idea that we were all going to move forward in a much more collaborative and less competitive way, enabling people to improve their lives without damaging others; in fact, by improving the other person's too.

Permission Marketing communicated the world of marketing in a very different way – turning strangers into friends, and friends into customers.

At this time my husband, Thomas Power, had his own business - just two people, himself and a PA. I observed the stresses as his business grew. In a small business tasks could not be delegated to others. This meant that sometimes things weren't done well or quickly. Ultimately, if this continued, he would have had less time to spend with his clients, thus reducing his income - a common problem for small business.

I then considered the Internet. I could see that it was not just about tools and technology, it was actually about people. It was a way of connecting people, enabling them to share, teach, and conduct all kinds of peer-to-peer activities. By enabling communication and creating an ethos of 'we are all here to help one another, emotionally and financially' we could actually achieve many of the insights that had inspired me, not only through reading *Celestine Prophecy*, but also through the values that I had developed in my own working life.

In 2009, we celebrate our 11th year of Ecademy and I can see that social networks are springing up as fast as I can blink. This is creating a new form of marketing communication for businesses - conversation marketing. It is also enabling collaboration to take place across geographical borders and time.

Conversation marketing replaces the 20th Century 'broadcast marketing' techniques and brings the brands and the consumers together in discussions. This is a huge leap forward in business. It will be

achieved by some immediately and will create huge stress for others. My experience is that the small businesses are embracing this far better than the larger ones.

To explain, let's take the 'tools' available on social networks - blogging and private messaging - plus discussions in clubs/groups. What happens when people share opinions, ask for help and provide advice? They are often discussing products and services available as ways of creating a solution, or occasionally they are discussing their unhappiness over a service they received. These conversations influence thousands, those that are taking part as well as the casual reader.

This is the opportunity for business people to share their talents, give advice, apologise for failings (if needed) and promote, with subtle means, their solutions. This is the power that lies within social networks and to ignore it is dangerous.

I have experienced many brands insisting on blogs being taken down due to defamatory conversations, even if factual. This is dangerous as businesses fail to see the opportunity of the conversation to repair their reputation and, worse still, they infuriate the people further with the removal of the content. I have also witnessed highly-regarded holiday companies losing their online reputations due to a social network that encourages 'holiday horror stories'. The brands have to adapt to this new world fast.

It is all too easy to think that understanding the tools of social networks is enough. Using them to create visibility will not achieve the powerful results possible unless also considering the people part of the social network. This is where the power of the community comes in.

Community is about being part of a group and establishing a reputation as a good, helpful person; as someone who has the interest of others at your core. Accepting random messages, commenting on other people's blogs, contributing to club discussions and connecting people to one another will establish you as a brand inside a network. Once your brand is established, others will advocate you, help you, inspire you and the rewards will be greater than purely another name in your contact list.

Being in this market for 11 years with Ecademy and having focused on the people side, I can honestly say that the depth of the relationships held is far more powerful than the number of people you have collected in your contact list.

Who you are is your power, not what you do to earn your living.

