



Reaching trade end-users

Trade end-users are specialists – demanding specialist communications.

Getting through to trade end-users is a specialist task, but it is not simply a job for a sector specialist. Rather, it is a job for an integrated grouping of communications experts in different disciplines. Knowing the construction sector, or having a long track record in building products, is undeniably essential – but it is not enough. New and evolving skills are also needed alongside traditional areas of expertise.

It is not simply a question of knowing all about the proverbial tabloid-reading white van man – apart from anything else, most of their vans are not white and increasing numbers of them are women. And, the tabloids are the least cost-efficient way of reaching this audience.

Trade end-users do have one common characteristic: when it comes to products and services, they know what they like and are conservative by nature. This is good news if they like your particular offering; otherwise, your challenge is to persuade them into the Trial-Switch-Loyalty process. You need to understand in detail what their needs are, how these are currently met and, above all, how to engender a desire for change.

With trade end-users being human beings first and professionals second, factual product information will be important, but emotional triggers will invariably be key. Arousing peer empathy, via case studies, may be an option. Playing upon doubts, with ‘horror stories’ of poorly completed projects, may be more appropriate in some sectors. Only once the correct triggers are identified, can you start to communicate with your audience.

Trade end-users are unlike anyone else and demand highly customised communications. The messaging style is not the same, the content has to be notably different and, above all, communications techniques have to be used in very specific ways. It is only the beginning to know who they are, how they think, what gets their attention and, just as importantly, what turns them off.

Yes, traditional print advertising can still deliver results – in the right places, at the right times, saying the right things. These days, though, the trade end-user has a computer. And, they use it for work-related purposes.

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Fully 85 per cent of the UK's 70,000 plumbers already use their computers for work (source: Professional Heating & Plumbing Installer). There are equally significant statistics concerning how they use their mobile phones. The UK's 10,000 tilers increasingly use online resources for everything from product sourcing to generating customer quotes. There are at least three online forums regularly used by a growing proportion of the UK's 40,000 electricians. A smart phone app provided by the National Merchant Buying Society is increasingly used by both builders' merchants and their customers, the trade end-users. And so on...

Whichever type of trade end-user you target, you can take nothing for granted. You need to know which web sites they use occasionally, frequently or all the time. You also have to realise that some sites which may look relevant do not receive traffic; site traffic analysis will be essential.

Identifying and prioritising the relevant digital media – because, unless budgets are infinite, they do need to be prioritised – and ensuring a presence, is just the first step. Trade end-users visit sites for different purposes, so messages have to be tailored to suit both the individual media and the reason that each is used. What works on one site may not work on another, even if the same people visit them both. Again, analytics will be key in highlighting the best areas of a site to inhabit, and with what types of messaging.

Some traditional media truths continue to apply in the digital arena. Advertising still carries less credibility than editorial matter. So, public relations is more vital than ever, to feed both print and online editors' voracious appetites with the right sort of material. Note: creating the 'right sort of material' means rather more than simply remembering to include click-through hyperlinks. A book could be written about Search Engine Optimisation in the construction sector, for example.

Marketers know about the importance of recycling content, to make the most of every written resource and to ensure message continuity. When addressing trade end-users with repeated messaging through a variety of channels, timing becomes crucial. Are some days better than others for targeting trade end-users with EDM? Of course. What's more, there are even good and bad times of day for trying to get their attention.

A trade end-user who receives an email with a scientifically crafted subject line – and subject lines are another book-worthy topic – may ignore it, simply because they think that they have already seen this somewhere else. If the timing is off, they will be right and an opportunity will have been missed. With the right EDM analytics, deployment times can be refined to optimise open rates and click-throughs.

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So. The channels have to be used properly – and we have only scratched the surface. We have not mentioned, for example: texting, blogging, social media, spam filter bypass, tweeting and re-tweeting, virtual stores... Each of these is a specialisation in its own right.

We have also not mentioned distribution channels: the trade counters, the builders' merchants, the specialists, sometimes even the DIY sheds. Each of these may have a role to play in the communications process, varying according to the purchase decision point for a given product. It may be informative or consultative and could involve anything from point-of-sale display to partnership promotions to co-operative EDM. The channels could be a source of individual customer data and should certainly be a source of general customer feedback. The role of the distributor means that, typically, they will be as important an audience as the trade end-users themselves and require equally thorough understanding.

Once you know everything there is to know about trade end-users and their influencers, you can develop a strategy with confidence in the chosen communications channels. Now, though, you have to consider what to say and how to say it. If the communications channels are the weapons, content is the ammunition. And, that's another story – a big one.

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