A look at Your Business in 2017

The 2016 countdown is quickly reaching the end. What will your small business look like in 2017? Will you grow? Have you thought about what you will need to change? Maybe nothing needs to change? Will “same old”, “same old” give your business the kind of leadership that it needs for the new year? That is how I started a CEO discussion a couple of days ago.

I urged CEOs to take time this week to think about these things for your company’s 2017 operation. This is a perfect time for entrepreneurs to reflect on the past year and plan for the next one. As business owners take stock of what worked and didn't in 2016, it can also help to consult predictions for 2017. What marketing tactics should business owners prepare to implement? How will technology change in relation to their companies and what should they add? Are there considerations to be made in terms of talent management that weren't as pressing over the past 12 months?

What do the business trends hold for your company in the new year? Some of them have the potential to shape your 2017 experience. Here's what just might be in store for technology and marketing and how it may affect your business.

First, let’s look at an example in technology. Businesses are entering the app space in a big way, according to Abs Girdhar, CEO of Appy Pie, a DIY (Do It Yourself) app-building platform with more than 7 million users worldwide. "We have vets and doctors make apps to help their patients schedule appointments, salons that allow you to make reservations on their apps, restaurants that allow order-taking and GPS locations so you can see where your delivery person is," he says. "I only see that growing in 2017."

Apps for businesses don't need to be complicated. While the technology can assist with e-commerce transactions for product-based companies, even the corner mom-and-pop shop can benefit from having an app, if only for turn-by-turn directions or as a one-touch call button. "Next year, apps will be the new business card," says Girdhar.

Chatbots (pop-up boxes that appear on company home pages that allow customers to ask questions) may also be bigger in 2017. There are multiple DIY chatbot companies (Pandorabots, BOT Libre and Api.ai are a few). These, says Girdhar, can help with a company's customer service without too much employee time, adding that Appy Pie will also provide chatbot options next year.

"It can help you get new business and it is nice because you don't need a physical person waiting to answer questions," he says. "When someone asks something and there is a 70 to 80 percent match, it sends back the best response. We are seeing a lot of these—like Amazon's Alexa product—and I think bots are only going to become more popular."
Next, let’s look at Marketing in 2017. My observation is that now will be the time to start using video and working with influencers. Forget your lengthy blog and Facebook posts; try shooting a short video in 2017 instead—your engagement numbers may skyrocket, says Samantha R. Strazanac, CEO and founder of Strazanac Solutions, a marketing consulting firm in Raleigh, N.C. You don't need expensive video equipment or an on-staff video production to help produce high-quality clips that customers will love. Just use your smartphone or camera.

"I love to use the iWatermark+ app because it allows you to put your watermark on a video or image," says Strazanac. “That way, you can have your company logo in the video, visible to everyone who shares and watches the video."

The destination of your video (Facebook Live, YouTube or on your website) depends on its content. Facebook Live is best for short (five minutes or less) videos that are one-offs. "If you own a boutique clothing store, you could do a Facebook Live of one of your employees opening a new shipment of products," she says. "The big thing with this platform is that you don't want to ramble because you will lose people. Have an agenda and stick to it."

YouTube is best suited for videos your customers may return to again and again, like how-tos. Anything you put on your website, she says, should be edited and look professional. You can always link out to your Facebook Live feed and YouTube channel for additional content.

Companies that partner with influencers (social media users with large followings) will also do well in 2017, predicts Strazanac. "You'd be surprised how much clout these influencers have with their followers," she says. "These aren't traditionally famous people, but they may still have 100,000 people following their Instagram page and if they post about your product or service, you could benefit from a ton of new customers."

How do you find an influencer with which to partner? Strazanac recommends checking out sites like Bloggers Required, a community of influencers who you can filter based on interest. Group High is another similar community. "Every blogger and influencer is different," she says. "Some will charge for a sponsored post and others you can give a discount to your salon in exchange for photos on their page."

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