Review

SOSTAC: The guide to the perfect digital marketing plan

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Six-stage marketing framework

PR Smith, self-published e-book available via <http://prsmith.org/books/>

Digital marketers may already be familiar with Paul Smith from previous books such as *eMarketing eXcellence* or *Marketing Communications*. With his latest e-book, Smith discusses in some depth the trademarked communications framework he has developed, called SOSTAC.

This comprises six stages: Situation, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Actions and Control. Developed over a decade, the framework grew out of a meta-analysis of other marketing planning tools, identifying their common elements and synthesizing them into a new, more accessible and flexible approach. Recognizing the current high profile of digital marketing, Smith has written this book to provide channel-specific guidance for both experienced and new practitioners, while ensuring that the framework aligns with the master marketing plan since, as he notes, ‘eventually we won’t have digital marketing plans, it’ll just be integrated marketing plans’.

Start with Situational Analysis

Putting situational analysis at the start of the SOSTAC process actually leverages key strengths of digital marketing, since ‘listening tools’ (social media, etc) now allow marketers to gain unprecedented insight into their customers. Smith argues the importance of understanding the who, why and how before embarking on any plan, making a case for building ‘personas’ for target segments to help bring the data to life in a way marketers can readily grasp.

Providing useful templates

Out of this can emerge scenario plans, taking into account the ways in which customers are choosing to interact or where they talk about the brand. There is a significant nod to competitor analysis, while big data also rears its head. Smith provides useful templates for developing key performance indicators based on this first stage analysis and also for each of the other stages in SOSTAC, giving this the sense of a workbook, which is welcome among the welter of more theoretical titles on this subject.

Numbered lists and questions

Objectives are then considered, with the business setting its goals against what it understands about the market and customer base. Strategy translates these goals into positioning and propositions. The book offers nine components for this under the acronym TOPPP SITE. Throughout, Smith demonstrates a fondness for numbered lists and strings of rhetorical questions that are either a useful way of breaking down a big subject into manageable bite sizes or a hyper-active response to the accelerating pace of

digital marketing (see ‘Content Marketing is Hot’ on p. 87 as an example), depending on your taste. The book provides some useful sample strategy excerpts from a variety of brands (eg Twitter, Facebook, RABO Direct) to illustrate key points.

Useful social media policy notes

More numbered lists and questions follow for Tactics (including a surprise nod to direct mail), while Action considers the challenges of deploying constrained budgets into unlimited media channels, the need for consistency and understanding customers’ ‘digital body language’, and the crucial role played by marketing automation technology in holding all of this together. Smith also offers guidelines on social media policy, an often overlooked dimension for any brand venturing into this space — aligning what gets said in these forums with the brand guidelines is vital, but has to be expressed in ways everyone in the business can understand. Smith offers a ten-point policy to support this. Finally, Controls are looked at, ranging from usability testing to sales KPIs. A suite of appendices provide some additional references and lists for further consideration.

Consistency and results

Taking on digital marketing within the framework of even an e-book is no easy task, and Smith is to be applauded for trying to throw his arms around the Internet (as well as mobile and social) in this way. There are ample anecdotes and short examples to help convince the reader that SOSTAC will deliver more consistency and better results. While the sheer number of external links can get distracting (it would be very time-consuming to follow all of them), they also demonstrate why digital marketing is such a challenge to plan and manage. If you can’t find some actionable guidance among everything Smith has to offer, you really are lost.

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