

Facebookuck

Online social networking creates opportunities for professionals as well as individuals, as **Daniel Todaro**, managing director of field marketing specialist Gekko, explains...

The rise of online social networking has created both opportunities and challenges for retailers trying to stay at the forefront of consumer demand for technology. Sites such as Facebook and Myspace can serve not only as communications platforms for friends to keep in touch, but also as practical, and efficient

organisational tools. Many users treat their profile pages as central hubs in which they store, organise and share photos and other important information that could otherwise get lost or even filed in the nether regions of a potentially vulnerable hard drive.

Working with technology brands such as Epson, Toshiba and Apple, I am naturally intrigued by the 'Facebook phenomenon' and its impact on consumer behaviour in-store. While the idea of organising more of our lives online appears to be a convenient one for consumers, what challenges does this tendency to store more of our personal data online present for retailers?

The most obvious manifestation of this trend is probably the proliferation of digital cameras.

Thanks largely to convergence with mobile phones, it seems nothing or no one is beyond the range of someone ready to capture the moment. There are more pictures being taken than ever; driven, I would argue, by the opportunity to share this content online with friends or even the wider public. And yet, with a whole range of services available online – including uploading, sharing and ordering prints – we are developing fewer images on the High Street than ever before.

Whether it is through a photo processing service, or even stocking a range of photo home printers to attempt to capture greater revenues from digital imaging, there is an opportunity for retailers to drive a return to print. Although the advent of digital almost rendered obsolete the need to have a film 'developed', consumers still need to be reminded of the satisfaction from having prints framed, sent as gifts or simply put into an album.

By engaging in a thorough, but not necessarily expensive, in-store field marketing and merchandising strategy, brands and retailers can communicate such messages with target consumers face-to-face.

Training retail staff, providing in-store demonstrations, displaying information that is targeted and relevant, and controlling POS usage are all essential elements of the

marketing mix that can be geared to maximising print opportunities. This is, after all, a tried-and-tested method in tackling the challenge of driving sales and it ultimately engages potential customers in-store, offering them direct interaction with the products.

By employing the above techniques, brands and retailers can reach audiences such as the older generation and the passionate amateur photographer, who will have a digital camera but may be less reliant on or interested in online image sharing. Amateur photographers in particular, have contributed to significant sales uplifts in digital SLR cameras and A3 printers, and must remain prime targets for in-store marketing. Retailers must continue to convince both these audiences of the merits of both a high quality processing service and of the convenience of printing their own photos.

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New technologies and trends will always impact consumer purchasing activity, often in unforeseen ways. Photo imaging and printing will also continue to evolve and retailers must prepare to make their offerings and products relevant to keep pace with such change. In an increasingly competitive High Street that must also contend with online services, retailers need to focus on creating and maintaining a more personalised, detailed dialogue with target consumers. This approach, underpinned by field marketing techniques, can deliver a more meaningful relationship with consumers that will ensure they will still want to spend time in stores instead of only sharing their experiences online.