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“Holding back cuts will only hurt the big four.”
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WA News

Perth businesses using Facebook to find friends

Rania Spooner
 June 6, 2012

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One in 11 WA consumers accessed social media more than five times each day.

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As a growing body of research tells a tale of Australian consumers who increasingly rely on the internet to inform them what's on offer in their area, not all of Perth's small to medium-sized businesses have been able to log on.

But Facebook may be changing that by creating an "even playing field" – even if it's not a cure-all and is still not fully understood by some business owners.

Jacky Finlayson, the Small Business Development Centre's businesses services director, said many small to medium-sized businesses had been blind-sided by the sheer speed with which social media had risen to prominence.

"Social media really has just taken some businesses by storm and in a lot of cases some small business owners are so busy running their businesses they can't invest the time necessary to make it effective," she said.

"Others have really embraced it and they're doing brilliantly on it."

Yellow Pages Sensis data released last week revealed one in 11 WA consumers accessed social media more than five times each day, with the average person spending up to six hours on Facebook each week.

"It's clear that the rapid growth and power of social media is changing the way we live our lives," Sensis Group's manager of emerging business and innovation Simon Betschel said.

One in five of the national pool surveyed by Sensis reported using social media for commercial purposes, to find out about businesses and brands.

More recently, small businesses reluctant to spend the money and time to establish their own websites have moved to set up Facebook pages to connect with customers.

Ms Finlayson said Facebook was a good stop-gap for businesses to let consumers know they existed and was attractive to time and cash-strapped small operators.

"It's something that they can do fairly quickly without a lot of skill and without having to pay people to do it for them," she said.

"The modern consumer rarely uses printed directories, they use their smart phone to search for the type of business they are seeking and without some form of web presence a business can be invisible to online customers."

Sherryn McBride, the owner of her own small business, Marketing Talk, also works with businesses looking to make the move online.

Ms McBride said Facebook was a useful tool, but should not be considered an alternative to a website.

"There's not enough exposure through Facebook - you can't create your own database through Facebook and you're limited to the functions available through a Facebook page," she said.

"The database that you build on Facebook doesn't belong to you."

"You've got to think like Google these days."

Ms McBride said some of her clients had Facebook pages taken down after running competitions on them, without being aware of rules that prevented them using the social networking tool for this purpose.

"You feel like you're a little bit in the dark and we haven't got a great deal of money to go spending on websites," he said.

"Most places that you come across have lots of signs saying 'follow us on Twitter' or 'follow us on Facebook' and I've tried to do that.

"I'm not anti-technology but I find I spend quite a lot of time on it without feeling like I'm getting anywhere."

However, Mr Wilson said he believed it would be "arrogant" to ignore Facebook as a small business.

"I think the days when you just kind of met up with people on the street aren't necessarily gone," he said.

"But people communicate more online nowadays."

The SBDC has started running "Succeeding Online" forums in WA to help local businesses learn to develop an online presence.

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