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Bleeding Edge

Vicon Solutions

Special points of interest:

- Google+ vs. Twitter & Facebook, can it kill two birds with one stone?
- Microsoft Windows XP support to end early 2014
- Why use illegal or pay for expensive software when OpenSource or Cloud apps can provide an alternative?
- Windows 8 will be a modular OS and use the Live Tiles Interface
- There are over 750 million daily active social users on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and the new Google+

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The Major Players are Gearing Up the Big Cloud Push

There's been a lot of industry talk this month about Google+ going into live test mode and the fact that its built up a user base of 20 million+ in less than 3 weeks!

This is just another example of the big players Apple, Google and Microsoft starting to line up their ducks ready for the big showdown.

From Vicon's point-of-view, Google really seems to be coming out the winner at the moment, closely followed by Apple and then Microsoft who are desperately trying to play catch-up after being caught out by the speed that cloud computing has taken off.

Google Apps for Business continues to go from strength-to-strength with it becoming the preferred method of communications for SME's upgrading from POP3 eMail or those wanting to make their office productivity more efficient. It can cost as little as £3.30 per user per month and with a functionality list that really challenges the establishment and in some areas surpasses it.

Microsoft are fighting back with Windows 8 and the recently released Office 365 and Apple with their iPads, iPhones and iCloud. Keep an eye on Apple's IOS5 in Q4 of this year too.

They are all spending some serious money and the battle is only just getting started.

Asus Eee Pad Transformer

I've resisted the urge to buy a tablet for a while now as I'd love to replace my laptop with a device that has better battery life but is fast, allows me to access my email and be able to open and edit documents while on the move but none have filled that requirement... until now!

Asus have just released this, its an Android based tablet with the ability to be attached to a keyboard that also doubles as an additional battery.

Its got fantastic potential and is getting rave reviews, it will link to your Exchange, POP3 or Google email and with the right apps allow you to work on whatever files you want. It's got an 8-16 hours battery life so would be great for long journeys as it can also play video.

See a review here.

Product Pricing - What's best for SME's?

One of my big quandaries this month whilst developing our Flexible Pricing Plans has been how best to entice new business without putting my own business under unnecessary risk.

At Vicon I've always tried to share the risk between both parties, take our monthly web pricing for example, whilst on average it can take 2-3 days to program a website for a client it's difficult for SME's to be able to stump up those costs upfront, then of course there's ongoing SEO services that are required if you really want your website to be a valuable source of income.

So, what is the best way to cost it? from Vicon's point of view it's an upfront time investment, but for the client it's a long term solution.

The way I've decided to do it is to spread the cost over time with no upfront costs, retain IP ownership until a number of payments have been made but only tie the customer into a short contract.

Of course that puts us at risk with the customer being able to walk away before our costs are fully covered but I felt that the underlying principle should be that if we're providing a good service, why would they want to leave? Obviously the end goal is to ensure the client stays with us permanently.

Now I'm no pricing or sales expert but it got me thinking about the way the general IT market seems to be moving and it is indeed towards a subscription model, just look at Google Apps and MS Office 365 pricing models for example.

Are other SME service providers thinking of moving in this direction? What is the general feeling of SME's towards contract length terms, do they prefer longer term but lower monthly financial commitments? Would they prefer no upfront costs? Are SME's bothered about product ownership if they can do it more cost effectively by moving to a subscription based model?

If you got any interesting thoughts on the matter, it would be great to get some feedback and maybe if I get enough it could make for an interesting article in next months newsletter.

"Can Google+ kill off Twitter? If the rate that people are registering is anything to go by, it has a very good chance"

Can Google+ Compete with Facebook, Twitter & Linked-In?

Google this month allowed invite only registrations to its much talked about Google+ Social Platform (I have an account if anyone wants an invite). During the first three weeks of testing its managed to amass 20 million new users which made it the fastest growing application on the Internet ever!

So what is it? Imagine a cross between the Linked-In/Facebook friend approval system and Twitters ability to follow interesting people or companies.

What Google+ have tried to do is resolve some of the spam issues that the other platforms have by introducing a concept of Circles. You basically create any number of Circles with friends or people you want to follow. On your feed page you then have the ability to choose who your posts go to and what Circle(s) feeds you want to see. This turns out to be an incredibly simple and useful way to ensure your posts only reach the people you want it to reach, and that you can filter out what you want to see with the click of a button.

You don't have to befriend someone to be able to follow them just like twitter, but unlike twitter you can embed videos and images into your feeds.

Google+

Google+ is just in the test stages at the moment and they are refusing to let Businesses register as they're still working on the business side of things (2-3 months) but when it's finally released, the rumor is it could end up killing Twitter off and become a serious challenge to the currently established platforms.

There's also several other great ideas built in, Hangouts and Sparks for example.

Hangouts

Hangouts are where you can setup impromptu meetings or discussions, you can invite whoever you wan and use Google Talk or Video. Imagine a cross between a Video or Voice conferencing call, NetMeeting and an online forum. I suspect that at some point it will integrate directly with Google Docs and that would be a powerful collaboration tool.

Sparks

Sparks is a system that provides you with news feeds on subjects that you're interested in. Imagine it as a news consolidator.

Business Benefits

If it can get the momentum it needs, it consolidates several other platforms into one whilst providing a very easy-to-use interface. It's also been noticed that websites linked too from Google+ are already getting a better PageRank!

If you think about Google's other projects - Chrome OS, Android, Apps & YouTube for example along with their massive cash reserves they seem to be gearing up to start another revolution.

Microsoft Windows 8

Microsoft have started to give us their vision on Windows 8 (it's development name). Don't worry about timing yet though, we're talking 2012/13.

Windows 7 has been a great success over the disaster that was Vista. There are still a significant number of Windows XP machines out there and Microsoft are pushing for users to move across before Windows XP goes end-of-life in early 2014.

Windows 7 has been so successful because Microsoft actually bothered to listen to users during its development unlike with Vista, hopefully they'll do the same with Windows 8.

Windows 8 will be a total rewrite and is rumoured to be modular in design. The idea is to produce a single operating system that can be loaded on any device including the Xbox and Tablets.

There will basically be a core operating system and then additional modules that you turn on and off as desired. This should make it even more efficient than Windows 7 and allow it to run on even older hardware as well as the new highly efficient mobile chips.

Windows 7 doesn't work well on Tablets as its buttons are designed to be clicked on with a mouse not a finger and there are endless complaints regarding miss-clicks.

It will be designed to be scalable for different types of input devices including touch and will use the Windows Mobile Live Tile interface as well as the traditional Windows 7 style interface if you prefer.

There's also a rumour that Microsoft will also be launching their own Apps store like Apple and Google already have.

Microsoft says the new OS will support "web-connected and Web-powered apps built using HTML5 and JavaScript that have access to the full power of the PC."

This is another Microsoft's attempt to get itself back into the Cloud race by getting developers to build applications that can follow you about no matter which device you're using.

Microsoft has a massive user base with Windows and Office around the world, if they can get this OS right and get developers interested in producing cloud based apps for it, then it could prove to be a valuable upgrade for businesses who want to operate on the move as well as they do in the office.

"Microsoft will use the Windows Mobile Live Tile Interface in windows 8"

OpenSource and Cloud Applications

There's been a revolution in the applications industry over the past few years, OpenSource and Cloud based applications are providing viable alternatives to established commercial software. One of the main reasons why so many people are still use commercial software such as Microsoft Office, is that they believe the only way to open a word doc for example is to use Office. Schools are also heavily marketed by the big providers and usually given software for free so children grow up on it without anyone else getting a look-in. Some tech savvy schools are starting to break the mould by providing their students with a more unbiased view on the software industry.

There is also a misconception that OpenSource and free software are substandard to commercial applications. That's not been true for a long time, the problem with market leading commercial software is that in order to retain its leading position it has to be all things to all men whilst at the same time having enormous amounts of marketing money thrown at it, and of course, guess who's paying for that?

The fact is that the majority of users will only use 5-10% of the functionality built into an application, would you be happy if your other assets only gave you a 5-10% return on investment? Alternative software platforms tend to be more efficient as the developers concentrate on the 80/20 rule by providing the majority of features used by the majority of people and not the advanced features used by a few. As the OpenSource community is not tied to a particular operating system, you'll also find that most software is consistent across platforms.

The are some fantastic pieces of software out there that do the same job as commercial software but are either free or on a low monthly subscription plans.

Take a look at LibreOffice, Google Apps for Business, Office 365, MailChimp, Insightly CRM, GIMP & DropBox to name but a few.

Click here to view the full blog post.

Domains, Websites, SEO and Social Networking – How does it help your business?

I've been asked this question many times now, I'll go through the usual culprits and misconceptions and try to explain them in relation to improving customer acquisition.

I don't need a domain name

Whether you're a limited company or not, your company name is important. It's your brand and how people recognise you when talking about you to others. A domain name is just as important when communicating electronically, there is nothing worse than receiving an email from a business with a generic email address such as company-name@hotmail.com or company-name@btconnect.com, it looks unprofessional and doesn't inspire confidence. A domain name such as a .co.uk can be purchased for as little as £3.75 per year.

I don't need a website

To get new and retain customers you need to be professional, competent and cost effective. When you visit a potential client for the first time, the majority will check you out on the Internet either before or after you visit. All you need to start off with is splash page giving an overview of your company, your contact details and where you are.

That's just part the story though. How much do you spend on sales? Your website, if designed with appropriate content and advertised correctly is a salesperson that sells your company electronically for you 24 hours a day! They don't need a car, a salary and never stop for coffee breaks or sleep.

It should obviously never be your only sales channel (unless you're a web only business) and cannot replace a face-to-face salesperson, it can though provide an important stream of business.

I won't be able to handle the incoming surge of potential clients

Unfortunately this won't happen, there's a lot of competition on the Internet and unless you're lucky enough to be in a sparsely populated, high demand marketplace you'll need to put some effort into marketing your business online. Just because you have a website doesn't mean you'll suddenly be deluged with new customers, you won't. You'll be lucky to get 2-3 visitors a day unless you've marketed it.

Internet marketing is also called Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). Good web developers and marketing companies can help you put a strategy together and price it to fit most budgets. The fact is, unless you market your business somehow, no one will know it even exists.

I don't need Search Engine Optimisation

We need to market our services and tell people we exist and what we can do for them.

A good SEO campaign will target the correct audience and drive new customers to your business, a bad one will consume your budget without providing any new sales. Without SEO though it's like having a website and not telling anyone it exists, people will only be able to find you if they know your website address.

SEO campaigns can be run in many different ways, from basic search engine submission to dynamic content on your website (such as newsletters) to monthly targeted campaigns. Either way it's important to consider SEO and put some money aside for it as part of your normal marketing budget.

I don't update my website on a regular basis

Static websites will be devalued by most search engines overtime as their data goes out-of-date and competitors put more appropriate data on their sites. You should consider how you intend to keep customers involved and knowledgeable of your business so they don't forget you.

An easy way to do this is to add some sort of dynamic content to your site such as a news section, a blog area or by publishing newsletters. The fact is that unless you continue to tell your customers that you still exist and that you're still there to service their needs, they are fickle and will move on to try someone else. This is especially relevant if you are in a business where you sell irregularly to your customers.

Adding some type of dynamic content to your website is very easy and quick if you have a Content Management System (CMS) based website (all our websites are CMS based), it's as simple as typing the content into what looks like a word processor and publishing it. If the content is relevant, your customers will continue to keep reading it and won't forget about you.

Social networking isn't for my business

750+ million people say you're wrong!

With those numbers (they're daily active by the way!) and the fact that with a well-built website, it is extremely easy to interact with these potential customers, you simply need something to tell them! Social networking is a very hot topic at the moment, it's so hot that Google has decided it can't miss out on it anymore and is developing its own social and business specific platforms.

If you do nothing more than advertise yourself (for free) with maybe a newsletter each month, you will see a dramatic increase in your traffic and therefore potential new customers.

But which ones should you use? There's no hard and fast rule for this but in general, Facebook is for best for consumer bases businesses and Linked-in for B2B. Twitter is useful for quick updates to both marketplaces and Google+ is definitely something to watch out for this year.

As a final note, don't think that any of the networks aren't relevant to you though. Even if you're B2B, you can still use Facebook for example to drive users to your site which will intern increase your generic search engine rankings.

Conclusion

All the above can be setup and run very cost effectively, why would you not want to do it? Especially as you can put as much effort and budget into it as you see fit – the more you put in, the more you get out is the moral here.

Facebook has over 750 million active users

Linked-in has over 100 million active users

Twitter has over 200 million active users

Google+ was new in July 2011 but is growing at a rate of approx. 5 million users per week

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Efficient Computing Solutions

Vicon Solutions provides an innovative approach to your technology needs, at Vicon we are experienced business and IT people so can provide a different viewpoint to many other IT providers. We focus on what is the most efficient and appropriate use of technology for your company or particular problem.

In today's competitive markets you need to stand out from the crowd, this usually means having unique selling points to offer. What you also need is an independent technology partner that wants to understand your business goals, what's preventing you from achieving them and what the possible solutions might be. The fact is, one solution does not fit all and never has, Vicon's friendly consultants will help you clearly understand the options and help you find the right one.

"At Vicon we will cost effectively provide you with the most efficient solution for any businesses technology requirements no matter how big or small. We also offer flexible payment plans tailored to your needs."

If you're a new start-up, talk to us for free before you do anything. We will help you understand all the options available and ensure you avoid early and sometimes costly mistakes.

Simon Fice, Owner.

We're also on the web, Linked-in, Twitter and Facebook.