

COLLABORATING WITH BUSINESS

by academics in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

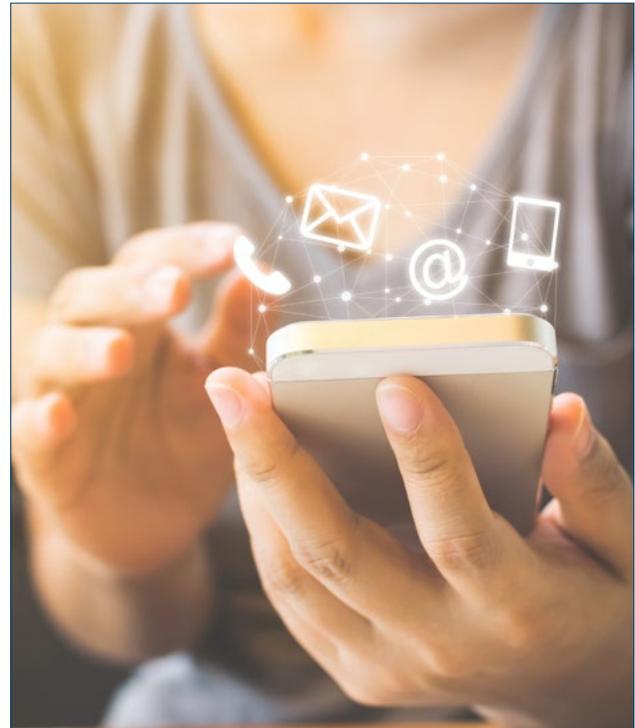
The TV researchers sharing lessons from the small screen with Midlands SMEs

Professors Paul Grainge and Cathy Johnson are on a mission to help Nottingham's small businesses community reach new audiences.

Today's fragmented media landscape gives consumers a seemingly endless choice about what, when, and how they watch, read and listen to content. Reaching potential customers in this noisy environment can be difficult for smaller companies with limited digital expertise and financial resources.

The University of Nottingham's Professor Paul Grainge believes the answer lies in 'Spreadable Marketing'. The concept comes from his work with former Nottingham colleague, The University of Huddersfield's Professor Cathy Johnson. "The media and marketing industries are embracing the idea of promotion as content. Rather than interrupt audiences with sales messages, agencies are seeking to produce forms of promotion like videos, blogs and memes that people are motivated to seek out and share", he explains. "Small businesses can also use the same methods to connect with their audiences without spending a lot of money. All they need is a good digital content strategy."

The researchers were keen to share their 'Six Principles of Spreadable Marketing' with



Nottingham's SME community, but neither had worked with small companies before. The team at The University of Nottingham's local business network, Ingenuity, suggested Paul and Cathy host a series of SME workshops. They also helped the researchers secure funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)-backed Enabling Innovation programme. "They believed in the idea and reassured us we could make a meaningful contribution to the business community", Cathy says. "The funding allowed us to take time away from other activities to focus on making an impact."

More than 60 local SMEs attended the three workshops delivered between 2017 and 2019. Among the participants at the first event was Lorraine Young. Once part of the team that cloned Dolly the Sheep, the former research scientist was now embarking on a new career in horticulture with her business Verve Garden Design. "Lorraine was very passionate about the business, but she needed support to build an audience in a very competitive market", recalls Cathy. "It seemed like the perfect opportunity to collaborate, so we offered our expertise to develop her digital content strategy."



Together with PhD Research Assistant Claire Burdfield, Paul and Cathy spent the next seven months analysing competitors' social media presence and building a picture of the channels and content Verve's target customers would engage with and share. The experience transformed Lorraine's company: "Working with Paul and Cathy gave me the confidence I needed to change my business model", she says. "Their support helped me pursue my vision to develop online courses to guide people through the process of garden design."

Following the success of the collaboration with Lorraine, the researchers wanted to find a new context to apply the model. After the second workshop, Nottingham Credit Union Chief Executive, Ella Ferris, asked them to create a new digital approach to encourage local people to switch from potentially damaging high-interest credit providers to the ethical lending co-operative. "Spiralling debt is an issue that affects many people in Nottingham, particularly those on low incomes. Credit unions provide a valuable service, but they can struggle to compete with the advertising resources of other lenders", Paul notes. "We saw a chance to make an impact on the local community."

With PhD Research Assistant Tatiana Styliari, Paul and Cathy planned a series of focus groups to understand how members perceived the credit union. However, reaching people to participate proved challenging. "Because the target audience tends to come from lower-income backgrounds, few had experience engaging with a university and were reluctant to participate in the focus groups", Paul explains. Despite the challenges, the project was still able to make a positive impact: "We conducted a comprehensive review of the credit union's online presence and shared some best practice guidance on conducting focus groups they can use in future", he says.

The projects have given the researchers a new perspective on marketing and content production for smaller companies, sharpened their interest in working with SMEs and have led to the application of spreadable marketing in research with universities, charities and social enterprises. The experience has also informed their teaching. Paul now shares the knowledge with the next generation of media practitioners on the University of Nottingham's MA in Film, Television and Screen Industries.

Paul feels the experience has given them a new understanding of academic collaboration with industry. "Both of our partnerships ended up in outcomes we didn't expect. Each company had particularities, so being flexible was vital. The more collaboration you do as an academic, the better you become in reading these characteristics and responding to them", he reflects. "Businesses don't always speak the language of 'impact'. However, by building shared understanding and trust, academics can help translate knowledge and experience to projects that add value to everyone involved."



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