



Making The Internet Pay

A case study of how a local SME has used its website and a variety of social media to build a network of distributors and customers in seven Asian markets, win multi-million RMB orders in China, and stock its products in the largest department stores in Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok.

Tom Muldowney is a car enthusiast and entrepreneur who has been in Hong Kong for eighteen years. For ten years, he ran a business he had started, representing the leading American brand of car care products. Tom built up an international network of distributors across Asia, Europe, the Middle East and South America. In 2009, Tom sold the company and started a new company manufacturing car mats.

Tom saw the car mat market dominated by ill-fitting and low quality mats; even OEM mats were by and large of poor quality. He saw an opportunity for an up-market yet inexpensive car mat. He called the company "Posh Pile".

Right away Tom knew he needed a website. The website was to have three functions:

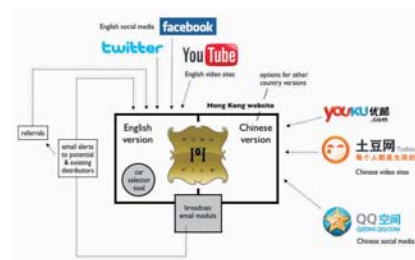
1. to educate distributors, stockists and the car caring public on why Posh Pile mats were superior;
2. to show how easy it is to fit the mat in your car; and
3. where to buy them.

The Posh Pile site was built to have country specific content, so if you go to www.poshpile.com.hk, the default language is Traditional Chinese (with English as the alternate language), and the currency is HK\$. The '.com.cn' site is China focused, and the '.com' site is US focused.

These different versions naturally cater to different markets, and a new country can easily be added to the content management system (CMS) by uploading the relevant translations and local pricing. Tom plans to add other country versions in time. Previously, he managed 37 local language sites for the car care brand. His strategy with the car mats is to become the local online seller of premium car mats – and the vehicle is the Posh Pile website.

The Posh Pile website uses photos and video extensively, telling the story with images rather than words. The site also has a basic car selector. By entering your make, year and model, it will tell you whether you need a custom fit mat, or can use a universal fit mat (which actually fits 70% of cars). To get this information, Tom and his team went to new and second hand dealers and gave away a few mats in order to test (and photograph) the mats in different cars – in this way, they steadily built up his database.

To get initial traffic to the site, Tom started a search engine marketing campaign using Google Adwords and the Facebook advertising service. In doing so, ads for his mats immediately appeared in searches relating to car care and second hand cars in Hong Kong. The keywords used were both English and Traditional Chinese. However, Tom only planned to run the SEM campaigns in Hong Kong for six weeks as there is a cost for each click, and the Hong Kong market is generally reluctant to purchase online. So while online sales were slow, the ROI came from brick and mortar sales at various stockists across Hong Kong.



Supporting his marketing drive, Tom wrote press releases to local car magazines, and rather than pay for an ad in Car Plus, did a subscription giveaway with the magazine. Every subscriber who signed up for two years got a free set of mats. Lady luck also came calling when on August 17, the Hong Kong Express magazine ran a series of photos of movie star Chow Yun Fat buying Posh Pile mats for his new Audi!

Tom also has used social media extensively. Posh Pile has a corporate Facebook page which predominantly acts as an FAQ, or customer care site for the company (www.facebook.com/poshpile). Importantly, Tom and his team are committed to updating the Facebook page everyday and immediately answering questions or comments from visitors.

Posh Pile has put copies of all their videos on YouTube as well as set up their own YouTube "Channel" – much like a Facebook page on YouTube (www.youtube.com/luxuryposhpile). Recognising that a large percentage of his customers will be Chinese speaking, he is also using the China-based video sites YouKu and Tudou, and the Chinese social media site QQ. On these sites are Chinese language videos, pictures of the Posh Pile team at trade fairs in China, and Chinese stockists proudly holding up their new stock. The text content is rich with Chinese car care keywords and links to the Posh Pile website.

In the same way, the main Posh Pile site is optimised for search engines. Tom put together a target list of keywords in English and Chinese. The relevant keywords were used consistently throughout the site in the related language to ensure high keyword density. As such, Posh Pile is well ranked in English language search engines, and even more so in Chinese language search engines. Currently the site is getting over 1,000 visitors a week, and its YouTube videos have been watched over 2,500 times.

The Posh Pile team has been to six auto accessory tradeshows in China, and with growing confidence in the brand, has been able to sign up over 20 regional distributors and secure several multi-million RMB orders.

As sales continue to mount, the team is looking to other markets. So far Tom has secured distributors in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and New Zealand. He keeps existing and potential distributors motivated and interested with a steady stream of broadcast email alerts with details of the latest sales deals, containers shipped, visitors to the website, clicks through from the Facebook and YouTube pages, etc.

In Hong Kong, the first mats went on sale in Caltex at 45 of its stores across the city. Now the mats are available at Exxon Mobil, over 100 automotive parts stores, and at Wing On. In Singapore the mats are available at both Carrefour and Giant Hypermarkets; and in Bangkok at the Central Department Store. Not bad for a company that is not even 12 months old.

Tim Hay-Edie runs the web development consultancy Pilot Simple Software, and has worked with Tom Muldowney since 2006. Tom is also president of TEN (The Entrepreneurs Network) and likes to give back as much as he can to other entrepreneurs.