

eMarket Services makes it easier for you to use electronic marketplaces for international business

JOSEP ALBERTI, CREATOR OF GRERA, THE FACEBOOK FOR SMES: "SOCIAL NETWORKING HAS CHANGED THE BUSINESS WORLD"

By Inés Ramírez Nicolás
eMarket Services Spain

www.emarketservices.com

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Josep Alberti is the creator of what is being called the Facebook for businesses, a platform that brings together offer and demand and aims to become a basic, daily use tool for any company that wants to do business online, as it has been programmed to offer business opportunities to registered companies only.

Interview



Photo: Jordi Cabanas of EixProfessional

eMarket Services: How and when did the idea come up to combine an electronic market and a social network?

Josep Alberti: Because of my job as a digital marketing trainer for SMEs, I realized that the big networks were not designed for business relations between companies. Not even networks like LinkedIn, which are designed to connect people within a business context.

Seeing then the market niche and especially the need that SMEs had for their own network, with their own functions and designed to do business, grera.net was created with the primary objective of providing business opportunities (understood as selling more, but also buying better) to all registered companies.

What type of company is this B2B social network designed for?

On grera.net, there is a place for all types of companies, from the largest business to self-employed entrepreneur or professional. Even so, we obviously give value SMEs the most, micro-SMEs and self-employed workers / professionals.

We also have what we call collectives, which are all economic promotion entities, whether public or private (city councils, trade unions, employers' organizations, etc.), that we enable to interact with the associate companies through a specific function such as groups, events or training.

What functionalities are made available to the companies to do business?

The two most important are offers and demands.

The offers functionality enables all registered companies to post an offer free of charge. This provides value to the company that posts it, as it obtains a high position in the search engines. In addition, the company can complete this offer fully segmented to other companies, by e-mail, so that they receive the offer in their inbox. We have quite a few success stories thanks to this functionality from among the over 1,300 offers that have been posted.

The other star function is the ability to request quotes on any product or service, also free of charge, from several companies at the same time. In no more than 1 minute, a company completes the details on the product to be purchased and its description, and the tool automatically searches for companies that can offer that product/service and sends them an e-mail (as an alert), offering them the possibility to contact the interested company. This function also has a number of success stories.

Apart from this, the tool is complemented with many other functionalities that help companies do business.

What would be the main benefits for the purchasing companies? And for the sellers?

We offer buyers a completely free tool that, in just 30 seconds or a maximum of 1 minute, can be used to a demand for a product or service, and then wait for offers to arrive from the registered companies.

As for the sellers, a tool that we could call the modern version of the chamber of commerce databases or similar, which those organizations sell as a list, on its own, without an email (which would be illegal), and that then needs to be filtered, etc. and accompanied by an e-mail from the seller. But in grera, all you need to worry about is writing your offer and selecting companies. The tool takes care of the rest of the process: layout and delivery of the e-mail to the companies with the required segmentation.

And in both cases I would add that being on the portal improves positioning in the search engines, so offers/demands can reach other companies that are not registered on the network.

Another benefit for both is that all the information on the portal can go viral very easily through Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, with very good opportunities for success.

How has the platform grown since it was created?

We believe we are taking giant steps forward each day. On the technical side, I would say that a platform like grera.net requires a great many hours of programming, and we are very proud of having come as far as we have, although we clearly have a long way to go yet.

On the business side, we have managed to create a DB with 4,000 companies in just one year and without much in the way of commercial capacity or resources. This figure should be greatly increased in 2012 with the agreements that we have reached and will be started up early in the year.

I would mention at this point that we prefer quality over quantity. In other words, we would rather have a solid tool, and be less concerned about the number of companies, and verify that they are actually companies, rather than have a high number of firms whose profiles are incomplete or contain false information, as occurs with other directories.

And since September 2011, we are now invoicing through four lines of business, which gives us certain peace of mind in doing things right.

Gradually, grera has made a place for itself on other markets. In what other countries is it present?

Currently, only in Chile, where we have a partner that we are working with to establish an internationalization model that will later enable us to enter new markets more easily. In any case, we have companies from many countries, although only symbolically.

Trying to do things right from the beginning and then grow faster when we select an international market is the way we work. And we do want to be a reference portal not only in Spain.

How is the internationalization process taking place?

It is a slower process than we would have liked, due to the circumstances, and the Latin American market tends to be a bit slower than ours. And here, in the sector in which we work, it is already slow as it is.

We have also seen that things must be done well if you are thinking about a prosperous future, and we may hire a person in 2012 just for these markets, although it will depend on the resources available to us.

Do you plan on translating the platform into other languages?

Yes! The platform has been multilingual from its creation, both because it was our desire and business vision and because it was created in Catalonia, where multilingual platforms are normally programmed, as it is a bilingual region.

In fact, translating the platform by language is a job that takes just a few days and little money, but we need to be aware that if there are more languages, we need to have people who are able to respond in those languages. We are planning to translate into English soon, but we will have to wait awhile for the rest of the languages.

Social networking is currently "in", but what changes to you think it makes in the world of business? Will it change the way we interact permanently, both individuals and companies?

My opinion is that it has already changed the way we do business. It has changed the entire operational marketing part a great deal, as well as how we reach the customer and who the customer demands products and services from. It is also changing the sales representative profession. Nowadays, it is not just anything goes. We need to take into account values such as transparency, honesty, clarity and, above all, customer support. People are exceedingly well informed, and we want something more around the product.

In the world of business, it is clear that it has already brought about changes and there is much more to come.

How do you see the future of social networks?

I am sure that they will grow in volume and they will mature, providing users with increasingly more value. There may be a few large networks that end up dominating each type of use, with their own functionalities and, most likely, there will be other tools coming in for certain market niches, some more generic like grera (for companies of all types) and others more sector oriented or for certain collectives: more vertical.

What plans do you have for Grera in the short and medium term?

We are already programming grera version 3.0, which will provide you with new customers and suppliers in an entirely automatic way, though we cannot reveal much more. ;)

We are also in the midst of improving the current functions, increasing usability and improving functions such as offers.

Commercially, we expect to start attracting a greater number of companies through negotiated agreements and with the new sales and marketing that we will be hiring soon.