

Are UK Accountancy Firms Embracing Digital Customer Service?

A research study commissioned
by Verbatim Call Answering



As a sector, how well are accountancy companies coping with delivering good customer service in a digital world? Are they embracing social media, are they 'omni-channel' and technology savvy or are they being left behind in a world where customer's expectations of customer service have been dramatically transformed? This original research study paints a picture of an industry slow to adjust, but concludes with some examples of best practice and companies leading the way in the world of digital customer service.

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Summary

Verbatim Virtual Receptionists, a leading webchat and telephone answering service have commissioned a major piece of research into how well accountancy companies in the UK are embracing digital channels as a means of reaching and engaging with customers.

Our research asked three key questions:

- How easy is it to find the typical accountancy firm online?
- How easy is it to engage with them through digital channels once you've found them?
- How well are accountancy companies communicating with their audiences?

Some key findings:

- Despite over 95% of digital users regularly using social media, three quarters of the accountancy companies we reviewed either didn't have a presence on LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter, or didn't promote it. In most cases we found that those who did have a presence on one of the major channels would have a presence on all.
- 1 in 3 accountancy companies have websites which are virtually invisible in search results severely limiting their ability to be found by customers.
- Only 8% of the accountancy companies we reviewed had web chat on their website, despite the fact that research has shown that 75% of millennials admit to avoiding phone calls.
- 81% of the accountancy websites we reviewed would be classed as 'difficult to read' even though the average reading age in the UK is nine.

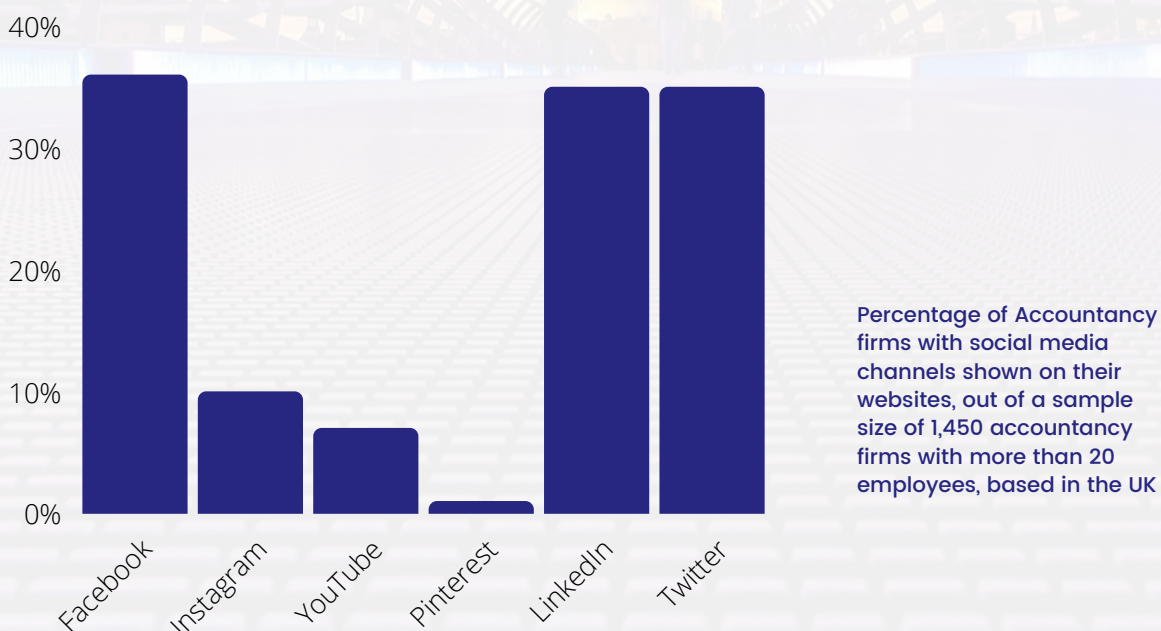
Part 1 – Lost in Cyberspace

How accountancy companies are missing major opportunities to reach new customers

Social media channels

Despite over 95% of digital users regularly using social media, three quarters of the accountancy companies we reviewed either didn't have a presence on LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter, or didn't promote it. In most cases we found that where a company was present on one of the major social channels they would be present on them all.

Social media has long moved on from being somewhere to just share holiday photos or a promotion at work. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter are well established channels for both B2B and B2C engagement and communication. This is not just one-way promotional traffic, increasingly messaging services on the main platforms and some messaging-specific platforms such as WhatsApp are being used as communication channels by both customers and companies.



LinkedIn

Despite LinkedIn being widely regarded as the primary social platform of business, 65% of accountancy companies are not using LinkedIn as a communication or marketing channel.

Whilst a substantial number in the accountancy sector are on LinkedIn in an individual capacity, companies and organisations are missing this major opportunity to engage with both existing and prospective customers.

Facebook

Similarly, only 36% of accountancy companies are effectively using Facebook as a customer service and sales channel.

Despite being seen as a predominantly consumer channel, Facebook is still an important and powerful way to communicate with customers by allowing them to engage with your business in an informal way. Customers can leave reviews and comments about your services, and you can communicate with potential customers via direct messages. The most successful companies and brands on Facebook tailor their communications to reflect the platform. Consider for example focusing on support for community projects, B2C products and services such as personal tax returns or everyday financial tips and advice to build up a following.

YouTube

Less than 10% of accountants have a YouTube presence. Whilst it might be perceived as a lower priority than a channel such as LinkedIn, with that little bit of extra effort the possibilities for reaching customers and prospective customers can be very rewarding. YouTube is a great platform to get more exposure for your accountancy firm and is the second largest search engine and third largest website in the world (Google and Facebook are 1st & 2nd).

Businesses achieving success have focused on fixing problems, providing advice and sharing ideas – valuable content which others might share or promote to enrich their own websites or content. Videos are also a signal to Google that your company is producing content that is valuable and relevant to your target audience, which is known to push your Google ranking higher.



Twitter

Only 35% of accountants are actively promoting themselves on Twitter. Twitter provides a range of different opportunities for accountancy companies. By using Twitter to learn about the latest trends and investing in social listening, your business can get feedback on your brand's public reception. Accountants are also missing out on the opportunity to reach new customers and engage directly with trending conversations..

Twitter is an opportunity to experiment with your business's brand voice and messaging tone to find ways of becoming more human and conversational in communications.

A case study in effective Twitter engagement

Sheards, an accountancy firm based in Huddersfield is a good example of a mid-sized business that engages with potential customers through Twitter. With nearly 3000 followers and regular posts, Sheards engages with clients and often shares their posts, which serves to show off their portfolio of clients and also make those clients feel valued and recognised.

The company posts about upcoming events, shares advice blogs on the latest changes in accountancy like tax information and shares client feedback. Their slogan is 'Is the friendly face of accounting', which is supported through the regular posting of advice and the pictures of their team in their Twitter header.

This all contributes to their brand identity and demonstrates that they are trustworthy to potential customers.



Making connections – Google visibility

A third of the accountancy websites we investigated were barely registering on Google.

Visibility on Google matters for reaching customers. Without an easily located website, opportunities will be lost and customers will be left frustrated.

Our study has shown that 32% of accountants' websites had 50 or fewer backlinks from other websites. This is a critical indicator for determining their 'visibility' to people searching on Google and other search engines.

Backlinks are vital for improving your website's Search Engine ranking as they represent a vote of confidence from one website to another. Creating multiple quality backlinks demonstrates to Google that your site is a valuable source of information for topics that are regularly searched for.

Part 2 – Barriers to Entry

How accountancy companies are putting digital barriers between themselves and their customers

Nobody home? An absence of webchat

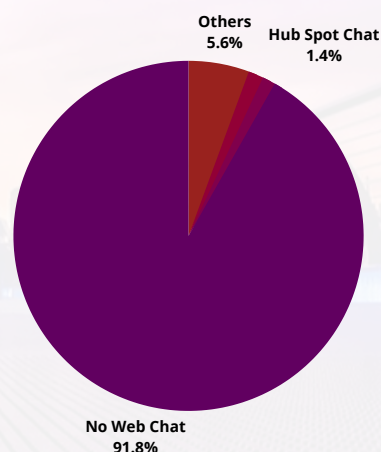
According to Forrester 41% of customers expect webchat to be available on your website, however 92% of the accountancy companies we checked don't have it.

The days when a phone call or a face to face visit were the standard methods for communicating with customers are long gone. Customers, especially digitally native younger ones expect to be able to select their channel of preference. Businesses can also benefit from a less onerous way of capturing data of prospective customers. Forms often deter users, and many don't bother using them. This means that a conversion can be struck up first and contact details taken only after the customer is comfortable to give them.

For larger/busier companies web chat is often simpler to manage than email or telephone, as a dedicated handler can manage several chats simultaneously. A challenge for smaller businesses is that webchats are occasional and ensuring that webchat channels are covered can be tricky. Some call answering companies like Verbatim are offering outsourced web chat management services which can be a good half-way measure.

Chat technology

Of the 500 companies we reviewed only 41 had webchat on their websites. Of those that did, the industry leaders including Hubspot Chat, Live chat and Zen Desk were well represented, alongside a host of other options .



Mobile Speed – Hanging about

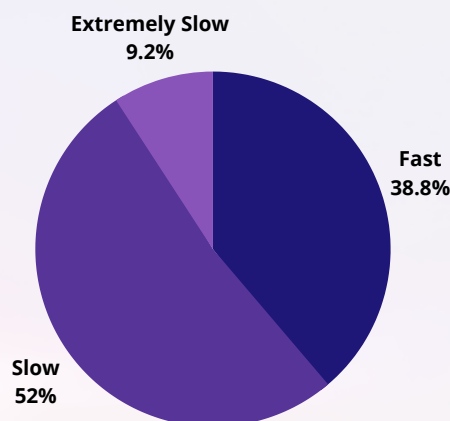
61.2% of Accountancy websites do not load fast enough for customers on mobiles

Instant information makes customers impatient and slow websites are driving customers away. It doesn't matter how customer friendly your website is, how full of engaging features such as webchat it has, if visitors are driven away by the time it takes to load the page.

A blink and breadth

Our study has shown that a sizable majority of accountancy corporate websites we investigated are taking too long to load on a mobile. On average, web pages take 5 seconds to load, which, according to Google is not fast enough. Google aims for websites to open in a 'blink' (half a second) however it is reasonable for websites to open in 'a breath' (under 2 seconds).

If you're still in any doubt whether mobile website speed matters, its worth bearing in mind that even amongst work related websites half of all traffic is now mobile.



Mobile website loading speeds

We measured a random sample of 100 our accountancy company website through googles PageSpeed Insights tool.

Google Matters

And if that's not enough, although It might not impact on your customer experience, mobile speed is a 'ranking factor' on which google decides to place your website in its search rankings

Access all areas?

One in three accountants' websites are failing to ensure basic accessibility standards on their website.

Accessibility is the practice of making your website usable by as many people as possible. It is often assumed that accessibility only really matters to the people with disabilities in the UK, and they do after all represent a significant market (over 2 million people). Good accessibility ensures the experience for all your customers is better. And if that's not enough, an accessible website will help ensure you don't fall foul of the Disabilities Discrimination Act and can even help with search engine ranking! Changes can be as simple as using headings to organise the structure of your content, giving your links descriptive and unique names and applying written descriptions or 'alt text' for your images.

We reviewed over 500 accountancy firms' websites to see whether they were using ALT tags on images. ALT tags are an industry standard way of providing the visually impaired with descriptions of images on a website and one of the simplest accessibility improvements to achieve.

Our findings were surprising, less than a quarter were regularly using ALT tags. 50% were only using them sporadically and over 30% were not using ALT tags at all.

Impenetrable

8 out of 10 Accountancy companies have websites which would challenge the average reader

Our study uses the Flesch Kincaid scale which provides a reading ease score for website text between 1 and 100, with 100 being the highest readability score. Scoring between 70 to 80 is equivalent to school grade level 8 which reflects the national average amongst adults.

80% of the websites we tested fell well below this threshold. Even amongst more proficient readers, website visitors often have limited time and attention, and long sentences, jargon and poor grammar all deter prospective customers.

Part 3: Help Me if You Can

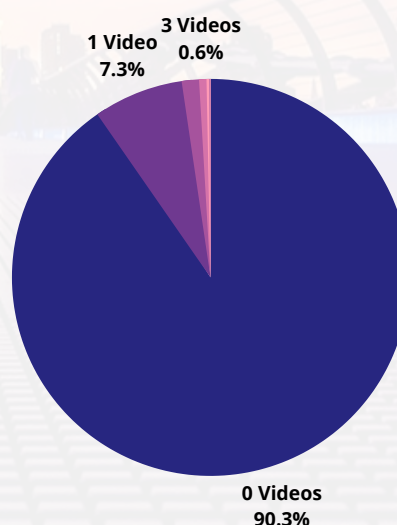
How accountancy firms are missing an opportunity to win trust with customers and prospects

90% of accountants' websites did not contain any video content

Videos are a useful way to keep potential customers on your business website longer, as generally, people are more interested in watching than reading. Trust is established between your brand and the viewer when watching video content that demonstrates your services or products. This is because the human communication within a video allows you to connect personally with clients, creating emotions that trigger them to contact you.

How you can help your customers using videos...

Use video content to explain services or financial processes to customers to save them the difficulty of speaking over the phone, allow them to watch resources in their own time, and save your customer service staff time away from other customer support.



Part 4: Getting it Right

What does getting it right look like?

These days an accountant needs more than just an office on the high street and a good reputation to successfully grow their business. To keep their customers up-to-date with the latest industry insights, and to share knowledge with customers looking for financial advice, accountants must keep up with digital best practices.

Having a strong digital presence and good online customer service is vital to help accountants grow their business financially.

We have taken five example accountancy websites to demonstrate best digital practice and online customer service.



1. The Accountancy Partnership

www.theaccountancy.co.uk

Findable

The Accountancy Partnership is easy for customers to find on Google. Google recognises this website as an authority on accountancy because it ranks highly in search results and is linked to many other websites. The Accountancy Partnership has a strong digital presence, which means it is easy for customers to contact the company, keep up with their news and services, and get good customer service.

Friendly

The company regularly posts content to their multiple social media accounts. For instance, their Twitter feed features reviews, news, and financial advice. Features like their 'day in the life' article written by an employee gives a personality to their brand and shows the people behind the face of the company which comes across as friendly and approachable. Their contact information is displayed in their header directing people to their website or to call them directly.

Available

Once on the website, customers are directed to get in touch with The Accountancy Partnership through webchat, 'get an instant quote' button, and their telephone number. Having a web chat function, allows real-time conversations to answer the customer's queries.

Informative

The Accountancy Partnership also has a well-structured website with well-written quality content, including blogs and guide videos. This helps customers find out information for themselves about financial services. The call to action button 'get an instant' quote saves the customer time if they know exactly what they are looking for. The website also features TrustPilot reviews, which demonstrates to customers that this company can be trusted.

Overall, The Accountancy Partnership has a strong digital presence that shows customers that it is trustworthy and accessible. The company could work to improve their page speed score so that customers can contact them more easily over mobile and make more use of their web chat.

2. SJD Accountancy

www.sjdaccountancy.com

Helpful

SJD Accountancy have put a lot of work into marketing their customer service, which is reflected in their digital platforms. Their website's landing page highlights their customer service as their USP, claiming:

- Expert and dedicated team
- Hassle free – we handle everything so that you can focus on what matters
- Direct line to your accountant – contact as many times as you need.

This is placed below a large image of the accountancy team, putting people at the forefront of their company brand.

Their direct customer services are reflected in their website's web chat which gives the option for live chat, calling, or call back.

Informative

Their website is also packed with content helping their customers on their user journey and the sections for navigating the website are easy to get around. SJD Accountancy has videos which explain their service and values, and FAQ guides so that customers can help themselves and free up customer service channels for more complex enquiries.

Much like The Accountancy Partnership, SJD Accountancy has a strong digital presence but the company could work to improve their page speed score so that customers can contact them more easily over mobile.



3. AMS Accountancy

www.ams-accountancy.co.uk

Helping Customers Help Themselves

AMS Accountancy has created a lot of content in order to pack its social media channels and website with useful customer information. The landing page of their website has an introductory video which explains their values and services to potential customers. As well as selling their services their company website acts as a hub of financial reference guides for their customers. This means customers will keep returning to their website for support and the company's conversion rates will increase.

AMS Accountancy has developed so much content that they even have their own YouTube channel with playlists dedicated to answering FAQs for small businesses on topics such as expenses and tax.

Fast

Whilst their authority score is lower than bigger accountancy companies such as SJD Accountancy or The Accountancy Partnership, AMS Accountancy has much better page speed scores. Google has calculated that their browser website speed is fantastic with their mobile speed not far behind. Although their mobile speed is less, it is well above the average of their competitors and larger firms. This means that this smaller business is more likely to rank higher on Google and will be found by their customers.

Overall, this smaller firm has made use of diverse and useful content to draw customers to their landing pages because they took their time to answer financial questions. Paired with their page speed scores, this website is a great example of good digital practice and customer service.



4. Debitam

www.debitam.com

Trustworthy

Debitam Online Account Filing has fully embraced digital customer service. They offer online paperless accounting services which help small businesses complete their accounts. Customers need to be able to trust that Debitam is GDPR compliant, can process accounts quickly and correctly online, and can support clients with financial queries.

This is why Debitam have focused on marketing their brand as trustworthy and easy to contact. The landing page of their website features a reel of TrustPilot reviews showing that they are ranked as the #1 accounting firm in the UK, and show a list of reputable trusted partners such as Lloyds banking or Stripe. This shows customers that big brands are vouching for this company, and that small businesses are leaving effective testimonials.

Easy to Understand

Their website layout is very clear and simple. Customers can easily navigate around the website, read about their services and can watch videos or read articles for more information. If they have further queries, customers can easily contact Debitam using their webchat.



5. Fusion Accountants

www.fusionaccountants.co.uk

Simple and Trustworthy

Like Debitam, Fusion Accountants use the landing page of their website to immediately demonstrate to customers that they are trustworthy. Fusion makes use of their social media and Google business profile to promote their customer feedback, and feature reviews from Google, Facebook and Yell.

As a mid-sized business with a lower authority score than other businesses we have looked at, Fusion Accountants use recent awards such as Xero mid-size firm of the year winner to show that they can compete and are a successful growing business. This is reflected in their tag line 'we do the accounting so you can grow your business'.

Communications

We would recommend that for this business to continue growing, Fusion Accountants could expand their communications and add a live web chat in addition to their 30 minutes consultation booking system. This would mean that their customers could ask small queries that may stall their customer journey if left unanswered.

Research Methodology

How we carried out this research

Commissioned by Verbatim , this is a quantitative research study of 1460 accountancy company website URLs collected on 21st May 2022. The study is comprised of a nationally representative sample.

The composition of the sample was as follows:

Total sample size: 1460 companies

Company size: 10–50 employees

The study's website URLs have been processed within URL Profiler, SEMrush, and Screaming Frog to generate some of the statistics used in this report.

We also took some smaller sample sizes for more specific data sets:

- 100/1460 sample URLs were processed through Google's Page Speed Insights, to generate data about website loading times.
- 500/1460 URLs to process through Wappalizers' tech look up tool. This provided datasets about website web chat plugins .