

# Word of mouth is still the best recommendation

Sharing your likes with the online world may be the way of the future, but DICK LUMSDEN feels it doesn't give the whole picture

**DON'T** like cats.

Everybody who knows me well, knows that I am most definitely not a cat person.

The advantages of this are that I will almost certainly never get a birthday card with a cheesy cat picture on the front, nor will my house smell of cat wee, and the furniture will remain unscratched.

I do, however, like a nice drop of red wine, and any time I come across a decent bottle at a decent price, I don't mind telling friends and spreading the good news.

The advantages of this are that when friends come for dinner they are likely to bring me a nice bottle as a gift, knowing in advance what my preferences are. And, vice versa, when I go visiting, a cork will already have been pulled and the wine will be coming nicely up to room temperature.

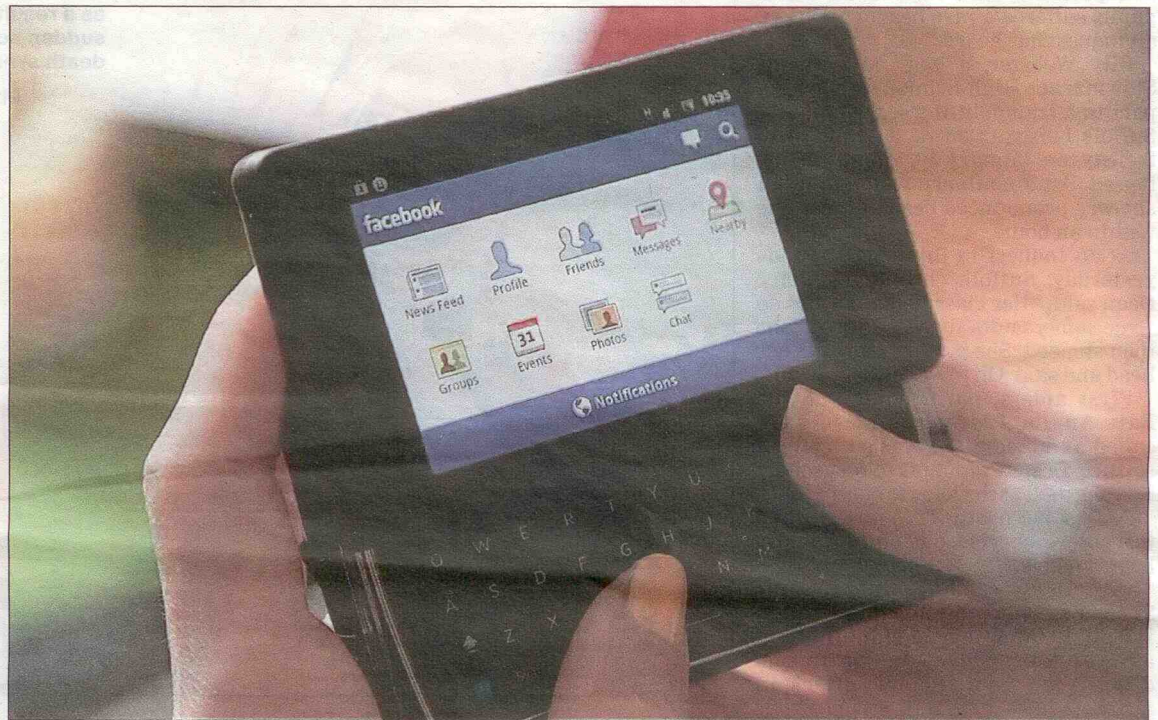
Why am I telling you all this? Because in the real world (not the virtual world we all seem to be spending longer and longer in these days) our likes and dislikes are the bones which make up the skeleton of our personality.

We tend to mix with people of similar views and we are reassured by what they like, even prepared to try and like these things ourselves because their recommendation is gold plated in our minds.

If I have a good experience in a restaurant, I am likely to tell my friends and recommend it. Equally, if I have a bad experience, I will most definitely tell my friends.

If you are trying to sell something - from cats to curries - reputation is everything, and word of mouth is by far the best (and worst) kind of advertising.

So - stepping now into the virtual world - that is why so much fuss is being made these days about who or what you



**"NOT LIKE" CATS:** Dick Lumsden has embraced social media but would appreciate the opportunity to express dislikes as well as his likes

Photographs: PA AND ALEX FAIRFULL

"like" on Facebook, or who you "follow" on Twitter.

Facebook has more than 800 million users worldwide, and Twitter now has more than 100 million.

The fastest growing age segment using social media is those of us over 45 - who make up almost 40 per cent of the users on Facebook. In the UK alone, there are more than nine million of us over the age of 45 who regularly use Facebook.

Advertisers are very clever at targeting you on the internet, but using "social media" it is like shooting fish in a barrel because they can very specifically aim their ads at a target group.

For instance, and

excuse me for picking a subject close to my heart as an example, if a wine shop in Ipswich had a particularly good deal on a nifty little

Bardolino that it wanted to share with men, who are married,

could deliver an advert right on to the computer screen of 14,240 potential customers - including yours truly.

That close targeting is a pretty powerful tool, and, according to Facebook's own statistics, we are 28% more likely than any other age group to hit the little blue icon saying "like" and share news of this deal with our friends.

At local level, it is a good cheap way of building your reputation, and for shops or restaurants it is a proven way of increasing footfall.

But hitting the "like" button really comes into its own for global brands like airlines, soft drinks, pop stars etc., where the sheer volume of people using social media means promotions, fares, albums etc. are being given the word of mouth treatment on a global scale. And that means big bucks can be made.

It is difficult to see where this is all going to end.

The more things you "like" online, the bigger your virtual profile becomes. The mechanical innards of remote computer servers are gradually Hoovering up data on you and putting together an identikit picture in pixels.

Somewhere, on a tiny piece of

relationship status "Dick Lumsden is married", it will know all of my friends, and all of their friends, it will know that I like Ipswich Town, and it will know every brand I have ever "liked", and when I last purchased it.

Should I be worried? Not really. This is just an online collection of gossip - the sort of gossip that anyone talking about you might repeat, and by signing up to use these online applications, you just have to accept it.

The only annoying thing is there is no way to "dislike" something. So Facebook will never know that I hate cats and I therefore live in constant danger of being tapped up for a donation to Cats Protection, or being asked to adopt a stray, or pay £2 a month to keep cats free from fleas.

I think it is only a matter of time before someone invents anti-social media - and I'll be first in the queue to sign up.

Dick Lumsden is Managing Director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over 50 and would like to take part occasionally in some gentle consumer research, please

