



Marketing for Small Business

One of the biggest challenges for a new small business is getting the word out about what you offer. Once you've decided what type of service or product you are going to sell and who your target customers will be, your next important step is to get the message out to your target audience that you are in business. There are several marketing strategies you can employ. Some will be more effective than others, and many are low cost or no cost. Try to do as much as you can with "sweat equity" (that is, free) when first starting out. The key is to develop a variety of marketing tools and platforms to reach your target audience in all the places where they might be.

Establish Your Brand

You will want to create a professional image for your new business as you get ready to launch. There are some things you can do yourself, and other things that will require outside help. At the very least, consult with a professional designer to create your logo. Discuss with them what your business is about, and ask them to help you create a professional image. Don't rush through this. Take the time to develop something you can be proud of.

Website

Among the first things you should do to market yourself is to create a professional website. With the widely available content management systems and open source products on the market, it is relatively easy to set up a website. If you have some technical acumen and no budget, take the time to learn one of the platforms, such as Wordpress, Dot Net Nuke, or Joomla. They are straightforward to use with a minimum of programming. If you are not comfortable with setting up your own website, there are many skilled web professionals who can be hired for a wide range of fees. Hiring a web developer has its advantages since they will likely include basic search engine optimization (SEO), as well as suggestions based on your specific needs. All this is designed to get more traffic to your website.

Blog

As part of your website, you can develop a blog. This is an ideal place to talk about the comings and goings of your company. It is also where you will post information of interest to your readers, perhaps answering their questions or offering solutions to problem situations. A blog requires commitment, however, so only start it if you plan to stay with it. There is nothing worse than discovering a new blog, and then having the author not post for weeks. There is no hard and fast rule on this, but it has been suggested that to keep people interested, you will need to post at least once a week, or three times a week to have any real impact. Search engines will look at your blog with greater interest if there are frequent and consistent updates.

Marketing Plan and Strategy

Much like a business plan, a marketing plan can be as complex or as simple as you like. The focus is on whom you will reach out to and how you plan on doing it. One of the greatest marketing philosophies I've come across is from Susan Carter of www.writerprofits.com. She suggests that you create a repeatable marketing strategy. In other words, come up with two or three tactics that you actually enjoy doing, such as email blasts, determine the time frame under which you will do them, and then get to work. For example, if you have a 40 percent open rate for your email blasts (this is the number of recipients who actually open the email; 40 percent is considered good), then set a regular schedule and send out email blasts with a marketing focus. Consistency is key because people will need to see your message or brand several times before they've actually built up enough trust to call you and hire you. Also, the timing of the message needs to be right for the person receiving it. If they aren't ready to buy, they just aren't ready to buy. This is why you need to send your message regularly to keep you and your business offerings "top of mind."

Marketing Collateral

When starting out, you will want the message about the services you offer to reach as many people as possible, which means you'll be distributing non-digital materials. Helpful tools include a business card, a brochure or flyer, and perhaps a direct mail piece. There are templates and tools you can use that are already on your computer, such as MS Word, but you may wish to contact a graphic designer to help you develop these marketing materials. Online services such as Vistaprint are a good place to start, to show you the wide variety of options available.

Social Media

There are a number of social media platforms that can help you get "out there" and connect with people online. Be selective in choosing which platforms you will participate in, and set up a profile. Recommended platforms for you to start with are LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus. Here are some of my observations on how these social media platforms might be useful for your business.

What Can LinkedIn Do for My Company?

LinkedIn is a platform designed to connect professionals, and you will likely see people there that you've worked with. Setting up a LinkedIn profile will enable you to outline your experience, as well as describe the services you offer. You can set up both a personal profile page and a business page. I recommend doing both.

LinkedIn is referred to as the "world's largest professional network" and is particularly useful for business-to-business organizations. It's a tool that lets you keep tabs on what your business contacts are doing, search for professional services and products, participate in groups, buy targeted ads, get recommendations from customers and colleagues, and research potential customers and competitors.

LinkedIn offers a platform where you can network and keep in touch with contacts. If there is a former colleague you haven't heard from in a while, going on LinkedIn to find out where they are and sending a message is a great opportunity to reconnect.

LinkedIn is often the first place that businesses go to seek professional services such as copywriters. It makes sense to have your profile and company page optimized with the appropriate keywords so that you are found more easily.

What Can Facebook Do for My Company?

I initially used Facebook only for personal connections with family and friends. I have since gone on to build a business page for my writing company where I can create messages and share links specific to my target audience.

I admit to not being that active on Facebook. My Facebook “page” consists of several pages together, which make a mini-website with the same look and feel as my actual website. I share interesting links or ideas, but, for the most part, I consider Facebook to be more valuable if you are operating a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) business. My primary reason for maintaining a Facebook page is to illustrate to prospects and clients what they can do with Facebook to broaden their network. At the very least, if you are consulting with someone on how to market themselves more effectively (and hence hire you to create the marketing communications), then you must understand how and why Facebook is a valuable tool.

What Can Twitter Do for My Company?

When I first heard about Twitter, I simply didn't get it. I could not understand why people would waste their time writing tiny little messages to people they didn't know. Eventually, I started to connect with people who had similar interests to mine. I followed experts in my field and professionals who owned businesses that I admired. I checked out news and celebrity offerings to offset all the business connections. I remember finding one person who was taking a year and communicating only using social media. I thought it was an interesting exercise, and we tweeted back and forth a few times. It just seemed amazing to me that a total stranger doing something unusual ended up talking back to me from his farm on the east coast. If he ends up writing a book about the experience, I'll buy it.

One of the things I enjoy about Twitter is the links that people share. I've been learning SEO tips for years, and in order to keep up with the ever-changing industry, there are some experts I like to follow such as Search Engine Watch. The links they provide (which are usually links to their well-written blog) help keep me up to speed on the latest and greatest in the search industry.

Of course, it is easy to get distracted on Twitter (as with any social platform!), so I usually give myself a specific amount of time to read and post tweets, after which it gets turned off. I then may tweet periodically during the day if something interesting is happening. I also like to share inspirational quotes, which aren't time sensitive, so I schedule those using such tools as HootSuite (www.hootsuite.com) or Buffer (www.bufferapp.com).

What Can Google Plus Do for My Company?

Many believe that Google Plus was a little late to the game and will never catch up with Facebook in popularity. While that may be true, the platform does offer a different and compelling user experience worth checking out. Chris Brogan has written an excellent book on the subject of using [Google Plus for business](#), which provides quite a few tips and techniques for using the platform. It has been proven that having an authoritative Google Plus page will help you rank higher in search results.

The communities and hangouts are fun features that set the platform apart from the others. You can invite people to “hang out,” and have a video chat with up to ten people at a time from anywhere in the world. The community feature is ideal if you want to keep messages, posts, and information shared between a select few people. One of my favourite websites, [Social Media Examiner](#), offers in-depth examples of how to use Google Plus.

Market Research

Once you've set up an online presence, you will want to do a little digging to see exactly who you will be targeting to get some business. Going back to your list of services, whatever you are planning to offer will determine where you will look for business. There are many ways to find businesses through the use of directories, library searches, and online searches. It also makes sense to reach out to your local chamber of commerce for businesses in your area, or consider becoming a member to take advantage of networking and business opportunities. Check into national associations as well. You may be able to access their membership lists by becoming a member, but be cautious not to become an annoying salesman to your fellow members. You wouldn't like to be treated that way.

In addition to researching who will purchase your service, take the time to research your competition. Who else in your area is offering the same or similar services? Check services directories and professional associations to try and get more information about the competition. Find out how long they've been in business and what sets you apart from them. Or, if you offer something similar, perhaps reaching out to them makes sense. I have often collaborated with other writers, or we've passed on work to each other if our schedules are backed up.

Networking

One of the best ways to market your business is through networking. People do business with people, not with websites and brochures. Looking someone in the eye and shaking their hand can mean the difference between being hired or being passed over for the competition. Joining associations and going to their events are a critical part of getting face-to-face with potential clients.

As a small business owner you wear several hats. Consider the 'marketing hat' to be one of the most important as it will help drive your business. This is one of the areas where many small businesses find themselves falling down simply because they lack the time to dedicate to it. If you want your business to be successful, it is critical that you schedule marketing activities every week.

*About the author: **Marnie Hughes** of Communication Artistry is a writer, website consultant and project manager. She specializes in marketing communications for small business. To learn more visit her website at www.communicationartistry.ca*