



Small Business Internet Marketing

The road to a strategy



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PLANNING VS. HOPING

Executing a plan means you have put thought into the process. It means you have considered the pros and cons, weeded the good ideas from the bad ideas, probably consulted with others you trust, and have made a decision to put it all into action. Another way to refer to all that work is to say you are implementing a **strategy**.

Hoping is almost the opposite of strategy. Think about some of the synonyms for hoping. Longing, anticipating, wishing, and yearning. Hoping is like closing your eyes, taking a big swing, and thinking maybe, if you are lucky, that the ball will hit your bat.

When it comes to something as important as Internet marketing for your small business, how are you spending most of your time? Are you hoping, or do you have a strategy?

The infographic on the previous page is an overview of how Small Biz Media thinks about Internet marketing. We think you should have a strategy instead of simply hoping for the best. In the following pages, we will examine each of these points in more detail. As you read, compare your current situation to what you could be doing to help your small business use the Internet to attract more customers, make more sales, and grow your business.

If you make the right moves now, you can be in a great position for the future. But of course, making the right moves means first developing, then executing, a strategy.

It's time to get started.





Decide to begin

Running a business, small or otherwise, entails so much work that simply getting through the day can seem like an accomplishment. After making a hundred decisions about inventory, employees, taxes, customers, products, services, profit, loss, expenses, vendors, and all the rest it might be tempting to say you make enough decisions already.

However, the fact of the matter is that if you don't make a conscious decision to grow your business through Internet marketing, you are making the decision to hope for the best. And, hoping for the best is not going to cut it any more. Actually, I'm not sure if it ever did.

In days gone by, a business or craftsman could do great work and it would speak for itself. Others would hear about the service or product from a friend and word of mouth advertising was enough. Word of mouth is still the best advertising any company can get so don't ever give it less than your best, and always take care of your customers because superior products and customer service will always pay dividends.

We have been living in a different world for some time now though. Would be customers have the Internet to do research on you and your competition and they use it to make buying decisions every day. Compared to yesteryear, what would have taken hours or days for a consumer to complete by driving around town and visiting many locations, can now be done in a few minutes on the Internet.

When considering the power of word of mouth advertising, consumers can now get opinions on your business by simply reading online reviews. These reviews are now counted almost as trustworthy as the word of a close friend, and they can see two, or twenty, or two hundred of them on a single review website.

I hope you have to come to grips with the immense power and options the Internet has given consumers. My greater desire is that armed with this knowledge, you are convinced that having a true Internet marketing strategy is not a luxury, but a necessity that you want to get started on now.

The first step to a fully functional, mature Internet marketing strategy is to decide to begin. Every day you hesitate, another of your competitors decides to begin. By doing nothing, you are falling further behind a little more every day.





Get a great website

If you wind up with a terrific Internet marketing strategy, it will be in large part because you built it around a great website. Your small business website is the foundation for every other marketing or advertising effort in which you invest. The desired result of a TV commercial, a radio spot, a print ad, or email campaign will usually be a customer visiting your website. If that website is an amateur attempt, your company will be judged as amateur as well. Is that fair? Probably not, but it doesn't matter because that is the state of things in business today.

The folks over at Entrepreneur.com said it perfectly...

"It's not enough that you just have a website. You must have a professional-looking website if you want to be taken seriously."

Any professional web design will have the goal of establishing and enhancing your **brand**. Your brand is more than a color scheme and logo. Your brand is your name, reputation, symbols, designs or a combination of any of these elements that clearly identify your products and services.

Successful branding will make sure that

- Your message is delivered
- Your credibility is confirmed
- Customers are emotionally connected with your product or service
- Visitors are motivated to buy
- User loyalty is created

Great web design also means that users can connect with your brand no matter what device they are using. More than half of all page views now happen on mobile devices. That ratio should only go up in the future, so if your website does not reformat itself on the fly, then you are in need of a redesign. This type of web design is called *responsive*. Responsive meaning the web site understands the type of device that is accessing it, and provides the format that suits that device the best. Mobile users do not put up with websites that they have to fidget with; they will simply move on to your competition.

If your website is not properly branded and up to date, it is up to you to correct that. Contact a firm that wants to give you a foundation for the rest of your marketing plan and can clearly tell you how they are going to go about that task. If they can't tell you in clear terms, then move on to someone that can.

Your website is the most important piece of your Internet marketing strategy, so do not skimp. You look to control costs all across your company and good for you, you should be careful. When it comes to the most important element of marketing for your company though, pay for what you are getting. Don't settle. Don't skimp. Don't neglect.

An investment in a professional website will pay for itself many times over and for years to come. After you have made the decision to get a strategy going, the next step is get a great website.



A team effort

If you are a one-person shop, this section will not have much direct impact on you but read on because you may get inspiration anyway.

An often-overlooked point in executing a marketing strategy is the fact that marketing is not the exclusive job of the owner. Anyone with customer contact is a marketer for your company. The customer service rep, cashier, service tech, or driver may be the only contact a customer has with your company and they therefore will judge your company by that one person.

If that idea scares you a bit as you mentally run down your employee roster, you are a definite candidate to start a new program of employee awareness as to the importance of marketing. Even if all your employees already are “on the same page” in terms of being a marketer for your business, you would do well to examine your current efforts to see where you could be doing a better job.

Customer service and appreciation starts at the top. Your employees will take their cue from you on how to handle customers. So, if you make a habit of going out of your way to please and care for customers, your employees will be much more likely to do so. However, you can't assume they are watching and following your example. You must reinforce the fact that great customer service is the only option with your employees by mentioning it often.

Make sure customer service is a big part of any initial employee onboarding process. It doesn't matter the role of the employee. Remember, if they are ever in contact with a customer, they are marketing your business. One proactive item that you should be doing as owner is **following up with customers on a routine basis** to find out if they had a great experience the last time they dealt with your employees. If the employees know that you are talking with the customers specifically about customer service, it lets them know that you take this seriously and that they must do the same.

It is commonly known that the cost to secure a new customer is many times that of retaining an existing one that will provide repeat sales. The surest way to retain customers is for everyone in your company to be a marketer and provide top-flight service every time.

When this type of customer-centric attitude is routine at your company, you know that both old and new customers will have a great experience every time. As we will talk about in a moment, that will pay big dividends for your business down the line.



All processes are marketing

It might be appealing to separate marketing from the rest of the activities of the day-to-day operations of your business. Maybe it is easier to think of your Internet marketing strategy in a vacuum. A standalone issue to be thought of when a planning session is in order, and left alone the rest of the time.

This *might* even be the most common way marketing is handled at small businesses. If it is, that does not make it right or acceptable. Truly successful marketing is integrated into most processes and therefore is practiced constantly, not just during the monthly planning session.

To get a clearer picture of what I'm talking about, you should think about your business from the customers' viewpoint as they go through the various ways they can interact with your company. In marketing, we call this process *developing a persona*. People only buy from us because we solve a problem or issue for them. If a person wants a salad, they will need lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers. If they are missing any of these ingredients, then the grocery store or produce stand makes a sale. If it is a hot day and my air conditioning unit breaks down, the local HVAC company makes money on a service call. So, it is a good practice to understand why and when a customer does business with you.

Think about the processes that have a customer interacting with someone at your company. Now, walk through that process in your head (or better yet on a dry erase board), figure out where the marketing opportunities are, and take advantage of them.

As an example, take the sales process. What do you or your employees (we'll just say "you" from now on) say to a customer after a sale? Do you say something like "come again" or "thank you for your business"? Both of those are okay to say for sure. What if, additionally, you said, "please refer us to a friend" or "it would be great if you reviewed us online". That only takes two seconds more and studies have shown this simple act of asking can create very positive results. Customers that are satisfied and feel taken care of are happy to tell others about it. The sales process then, is marketing.

Or, how about the case of a service call? What do your service technicians say when they enter or leave a customer's home or place of business? Do they say "sign here" or "call the next time you need us"? Again, these are okay things to say. Something they could be doing in addition is asking if there is anything else they can do for the customer. They could ask the customer if they need anything explained about what just happened on the service call. They should be verifying that customer contact information, especially email addresses, is up to date. They can be suggesting additional products and services that will increase revenue for you and be beneficial to the customer. The service call then, is also marketing.

This concept of "*all processes are marketing*" should be applied all across the company wherever you have contact with a customer. New customer sign on, sales, service, billing, phone calls, emails, and the rest.

You are the owner and it is your job to make sure that everyone understands his or her role as marketer for the business. If you want enthusiastic participation, you might even offer a bonus for new sales because of their efforts.



Manage your business listings

Local business listings are an online profile of your business that includes information like name, address, and phone number (**NAP**) information. Some also contain other pertinent details like website address, logo, hours of operation and so on. The companies that display the NAP information are collectively known as directories, with some examples being Manta, Yelp, Google My Business, and Foursquare. There are dozens of these directories in the United States. Google and other search engines cross-reference NAP information across a variety of websites as a validation that you are a legitimate business, greatly impacting search engine optimization (SEO).

Business listings show up early on the search engine results page whether your actual website does or not. If you have never heard of business listings or think they don't play a big role in how consumers make decisions to spend their money, you have your head in the sand. Try it for yourself. Go to Google and type in your industry and town name and see what results you get back. If you are a dentist, then type in "dentist Bristol Virginia". Hit search and look at the results.

If your SEO is strong and mature, you might see your website on the first couple of pages. What I can guarantee is that you WILL see business listings on the first page. It works for any industry and any town. For this reason, Small Biz Media ranks business listings second to only your website as the most important element of your Internet marketing strategy.

If you consistently manage and leverage your business listings, you have a chance to dominate your competition in Internet traffic. If you fail to do this task, you run the risk of being dominated by those who are actively managing their listings. There is no reason for you to not take charge of this segment of your marketing and make it work for you.

Customers use the Internet to find businesses, products and services. Search result pages return business listings. Properly edited and maintained business listings deliver those would be customers to your website.

I'll bottom line this for you. Business listings mean more phone calls and web traffic. That means more sales. That means more profit.

Is it easy to find, update, and maintenance your listings on your own? In a word, no. But, Small Biz Media has tools and dashboards that allow us as resellers to pull listings from all over the internet and remove the hassle factor for our clients.



Tie together #1

The first of three "tie togethers" from the infographic involves the combination of the two most important elements in your Internet marketing strategy, your website and business listings. Small Biz Media understands how to best configure these two services to maximize the benefits of each.

Certainly, they work well on their own but simply having two marketing devices up and running is not really a strategy is it? No, it is not. Blending multiple services is another of the ways Small Biz Media earns its status as a professional marketing strategy company.



Online reviews are vital

What if I had a terrific customer experience with your company and chose to tell a good friend about it? Would you be happy about that? Of course you would. As discussed earlier, positive word of mouth is the Holy Grail of advertising.

What if I told a few dozen or a few **hundred** others? Now we are talking about the power of online reviews. The survey group Nielsen reported recently in their *Global Trust in Advertising* report that when asked which advertising they trusted most, "*recommendations from people I know*" came in first at eighty-three percent. That is not surprising. Word of mouth has always held the top spot. What may surprise you is the method that came in second. At sixty-six percent, the second most trusted form of advertising is "*consumer opinions posted online*" a.k.a. online reviews.

This trust factor may be one of the most important facts that small businesses across America don't even know about. Consider that most of the value of a business today is intangible. The building you have, the inventory you control, and the active accounts on the books are all obviously important, even critical, to your business. They don't match the importance of one intangible item though, your reputation.

Negative customer comments have always been a sore spot for business. Somebody gets mad and takes their business elsewhere. We don't like it, but it happens. Just part of doing business right? Yes, except now that person does not merely take their business across the street. Now they go home, fire up the laptop, and let everyone on the Internet know about the bad experience they just had with your business.

Remember, as we just said, that online reviews are the second most trusted form of advertising. One review full of harmful remarks can poison many people against your business. Even worse, that review stays out there for a very long time potentially damaging your reputation for weeks or months to come.

This is serious stuff here. In fact, it is so serious there are entire firms out there, called reputation management firms, devoted to the single task of helping businesses overcome negative online reviews. Moreover, they are not cheap.

What makes this issue even worse is that most small business owners are often unaware of online reviews, good or bad, being posted for their business. If you are not even aware of what is being said, how can you do anything about the situation?

As with business listings, Small Biz Media has tools to collect reviews from across the Internet. If something bad is posted, we can let you know about it and you can make a plan to respond and lessen the damage. The even better news is that when something good is posted, we will know about that as well and you will be in a position to benefit.



Tie together #2

If you have an Internet marketing strategy that has your website, business listings and online review management working together, congratulations. You are probably doing much better than most of your competition. Most small businesses, even today, do not have a comprehensive strategy.

Knowing exactly how to get these elements working together so they provide maximum benefit is the real value of doing business with Small Biz Media. We understand not only how to hook these elements together, but when and why to hook them together.

A small business with a mature Internet marketing strategy at this level is likely seeing a significant increase in customer contact and growth opportunities. They are in a far better competitive position compared to those who have no real plan and are hoping for the best.



Email campaigns

Email campaigns on average return \$40 for every \$1 invested.

I almost stopped writing this section after that first sentence. No other form of marketing or advertising produces results similar to email campaigns. There are several reasons why email marketing is, and has been for many years, the number one way to market. I'm going to talk about some of those reasons but before I do, consider that first sentence one more time.

We should talk a bit about why email campaigns are so effective. Keep in mind that email campaigns are only conducted against your current customer list. This history and familiarity is a big part of the success of this tried and true marketing method.

I am going to lay out some numbers for you and it would be easy to gloss over them as you speed through the list. Do yourself a favor though; do not speed through the list. Read and reflect on the significance of what it could mean for your small business.

After all, you are reading this document because you take marketing and growing your company seriously.

Here are some reasons why email is so effective

- Sheer size alone
 - There are three times more email accounts than Facebook and Twitter accounts combined.
 - Takeaway: Practically all of your potential customers have email. That cannot be said about any other communications outlet.
- Users are connected to email
 - More than 90% of consumers check their email at least once per day.
 - Takeaway: No other advertising channel (TV, radio, print, or social media) commands the attention of such a large percentage of consumers in this way.
- Email gets customers to your website better and they are in the mood to purchase
 - Email is six times better at getting the reader to your website than Twitter
 - Visitors from email are twice as likely to purchase than a visitor from Google
 - Visitors from email are seven times more likely to purchase than a visitor from social media
 - Takeaway: If sales are the object, then email does it better.
- Email can be branded, targeted, and focused like no other media
 - With email you could tailor a campaign to reach the following group (as one example)
 - Only existing customers, that purchased something in the last 90 days, that live within 40 miles, and have been with you at least 3 years.
 - Takeaway: No radio ad, billboard, or TV commercial can do that. The possibilities are only limited by the size and scope of your customer database.
- Email campaign results can be tracked and evaluated precisely
 - Because of their nature, TV and radio ads can only be broadcast at a date and time. Whoever is tuned to the broadcast is your target group and there is no real way to understand the specifics of how, or if, the ad worked.
 - When someone clicks anywhere on your email, we can and do track it and learn from it
 - Takeaway: No more fuzzy or hazy results. No more thinking "Did that work?" Each email campaign will provide data on not only what worked, but what didn't work. That information can be used to make future campaigns even better.



I could keep going but by now, you get the idea. When you factor in the cost of email campaigns compared to TV, billboards, and radio the value is even more pronounced.

Email cost comparison (generalizations, specifics will vary, prices subject to change)

- **Billboards** (Southwest Virginia - rates gathered from Lamar Advertising)
 - \$580 - \$1,500 per month in Big Stone Gap
 - \$3,600 - \$11,250 per month on I81 between Abingdon and Chilhowie
 - \$1,500 - \$4,050 per month on Rte. 460 between Raven and Claypool Hill
 - Annual: \$6,960 - \$135,000
- **TV** (one local channel only)
 - You should expect to spend around \$2,000 per month for a minimum of three months to see real and positive results. (as cited on phone call with station account executive)
 - Annual: \$24,000
- **Radio** (one local station only)
 - \$38 for a :30 second spot
 - Annual: 2 spots on all 260 workdays \$19,760
- **Email** (three campaigns per year with Small Biz Media, 200 recipients)
 - \$400 per campaign
 - Annual: \$1,200

Obviously, those numbers will go up or down if you increase or decrease the number or frequency of use. For a moment, forget all the details about marketing your business. Sum up what you want any marketing effort to be in one word. How about... **effective**. That is what email marketing brings to your Internet marketing strategy. It converts readers to customers. It translates effort to cash flow. It transforms customers to repeat customers.



Tie together #3

An Internet marketing strategy that has all four bedrock services working together will serve a small business well. Combining a professional website with complete business listings, monitored and managed online reviews, and targeted email campaigns puts your small business near the front of the pack.



There is a road to this strategy and Small Biz Media will join you anywhere along that road. If you are at the “decide to begin” point, then we can start there and begin to build and design your solution. If you are somewhere further down the road, we can join you there and determine the next steps.

Wherever you are and whatever you do, don't **hope** for the best. Develop a strategy. Contact Small Biz Media now to get started! We'll help, and it won't cost a bag full of money.



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