

Big Marketing Ideas on a Small Business Budget

Search Engine Marketing

The small business of today is far more than just a storefront on Main Street.

New customers can be reached globally. New relationships and partnerships can be maintained without the business owner or customer ever meeting face to face. New tools, which are now

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more advanced than traditional small businesses ever could have imagined, are making the dream of taking a small business global a reality.

The small business playing field is level these days, but only for those who understand how to stretch the few dollars they have for marketing into opportunities to compete with their larger counterparts.

In the past, companies with large budgets, vast resources and a team of experts naturally had an edge in marketing. In order to find and reach the customers most likely to convert, larger companies could afford to conduct market research and identify the most potent demographics. With larger budgets, they could cash in on this information to sponsor events in which the attendees were only in their key demographics, while also bombarding them with advertisements, product placement and other persuasive tactics. Essen-

tially, when it came to marketing in the traditional business environment, those who had money to spend usually reaped more than they had sown. Meanwhile, smaller businesses could do little more than wish for the marketing resources to reach the customers that could help them grow.

Then the internet emerged and, after a few years of development, established new avenues through which small businesses could market themselves similarly without the need for the same expenses and resources. Within that dynamic lies the potential for small businesses with fewer than a dozen employees to reach a customer base in the tens of thousands. In order to do so, every small business must become familiar with a few online marketing techniques.



1. Search Engine Marketing

This relatively new technique appears to be the future of marketing. Every day, millions of internet users enter millions more search terms into Google, Bing, Yahoo or any other search engine, and are presented with pages upon pages of results. These results are where a small business

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can go from a company unknown beyond its storefront to a household name for internet users nationwide.



Search engine marketing involves the techniques and targeted content needed to help move a company's website to the top

of search engine results that pertain to their business. Because search engines use complex algorithms to help wade through the internet's billions of pages of content so their users are presented with the most relevant results, marketers need to nail down a few practices to manipulate them in their favor.

The big term in this industry is search engine optimization, or SEO. As its name implies, SEO involves the optimization of search engine results, and is usually conducted through the use of strategic keywords that both relate to the company's products or services and are also searched frequently on Google. Those who search these terms are naturally brought to a company's website.

A successful, well-planned search engine marketing campaign can help a small, two-person retail store in the suburbs reach customers on several continents, simply by publishing content that gets noticed on Google.

2. Customer Loyalty

This long-time marketing staple is extrapolated by the opportunities on the internet. Online communications connect consumers and busi-

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nesses on a global scale and allow them to share information instantly.

However, conducting business online detracts from the traditional loyalty dynamic in which customers are connected to a business in-person. When a customer is only connected to a business through a keyboard, loyalty can be more difficult to maintain in the face of thousands of online competitors.

To sustain customer loyalty, small businesses can use a handful of inexpensive tools at their disposal. Email marketing, regularly updated newsletters and social media updates all remind former customers that a small business is still around, while informing them of new offerings and inviting them to join in the conversation about it.

Rather than allow online business to become impersonal, small businesses can use these tools to their advantage, and sustain a loyal and interactive customer base.



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3. Public and Community Relations

Similarly, social media has made public and community relations easier than ever before. Small businesses looking to establish a rapport with the public and their community used to be limited to press releases and the hope that a local newspaper would spread the word.

However, small business owners today can be proactive and make their announcements on their own. Now, with even a modest social media following, a small business can create, announce and gauge interest in an event in their community, which could be an essential step to a successful PR/CR campaign.



Similarly, online marketing can be used to repair a damaged public image. Hypothetically, imagine a dissatisfied customer taking it upon him or herself to get revenge on a small business by trashing it on internet forums and social media websites. This information is soon readily available, and emerges in the first page of results when a potential customer searches the company's name.

“Just as a dissatisfied customer can leave a poor review, ...loyal supporters of a business can spread the word and attract others...”

Effective SEO can help displace negative publicity, and replace it with information that highlights positive stories and information that, if crafted strategically, can become the face of a company.

4. Customer Experience

Interestingly, customer experience is an area in which online marketing has a mirror effect.

Online communications and natural customer behavior have fit together perfectly, with review sites emerging as an outlet for them to share their experiences. Now customers can share their opinions and recommendations on sites like Yelp for local businesses or Trip Advisor for travel and hospitality companies, as well as several others for organizations of all sorts.

However, this works both ways. Just as a dissatisfied customer can leave a poor review of his or her experience with a company,



those who are loyal supporters of a business can spread the word and attract others. To leverage this, small businesses are advised to encourage their customers to turn to Yelp, Trip Advisor, or any other review site that will help a positive customer experience be seen.

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5. Couponing

Online couponing has become a hot commodity lately, with local deals sites, such as Groupon, LivingSocial, and BuyWithMe, growing rapidly.

And rightfully so, as couponing via the web can attract and engage customers who may have never been interested in a company to begin with.

Online couponing can both help establish new customers – especially those who may be more loyal and interactive in the future, considering they discovered coupons online in the first place – and also protect a small business from losing revenue on a deal. Local deals sites often require that an established minimum number of users sign up for a coupon before any of them can use it. That way, small businesses can be sure the deal is reaching sales volume necessary to outweigh the coupon's reduction in cost.

Not all small businesses need to use with Groupon or LivingSocial to benefit from this, as a proactive and innovative company can establish its own online couponing requirements.

The Next Step

The internet provides plenty of opportunities for a small business to create a large-scale marketing campaign. However, these factors need to be carefully considered and strategically organized before a company dives headfirst into the world of online marketing. Because the pitfalls are as damaging as the opportunities are rewarding, a successful small business online marketing campaign involves a well-balanced, strategic approach that covers all the bases.

