Small businesses often feel they are at a distinct disadvantage when competing against large enterprises and their massive budgets. They simply don’t have the finances, experience, and staff to compete on such a high level. This doesn’t have to be the case, though. There are a number of great online opportunities, tools, and strategies that make it possible for small businesses to stand up to, and compete with, the big guys.

**PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS**

You don’t have to outspend a global corporation to succeed in business. You don’t have to imitate their complex campaign strategies, tap into multiple retail and marketing channels, or use contacts and advertising platforms that are simply out of your reach.

In fact, a lean organization that is focused on a single business venture in a localized area can become a cost leader above the more established companies.

Many large businesses, with plenty of money to throw at this project or that, tend to feel safe and stable in their size and resources. They believe that their history of success will automatically guarantee their position over the smaller companies. A lot of them are so confident in their position that their strategies are based on that surety. However, history has shown time and again that the level of resources committed to an endeavor doesn’t always correlate directly to the best outcome.

**NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

The internet has opened up a lot of opportunities for the small business to compete on a higher level. It will
still involve a lot of work – anything that’s worthwhile requires some work – but if you have a good plan and can execute it effectively, a small business can do some things that the “big guys” can’t.

How is this even possible? Because money isn’t everything. Make no mistake, it’s a big part of the equation, but it isn’t the only factor in generating success. There are certain characteristics of small businesses that allow them to quickly capture attention, build a customer base, and turn customers into brand advocates while the big guys are still running things past the legal department.

**WHAT DO YOU HAVE THAT THEY DON’T?**

A small business has some important characteristics that can be very advantageous – but only if the business owner understands them and is able to put them to work. While a company is small, it is:

- **Accessible and personal**
- **Focused and fast**
- **Adaptable and agile**
- **Positioned to disrupt standard practices**

You can take advantage of these traits to establish your own business and find real success.

**THE ONLINE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

The internet is filled with opportunities, but that doesn’t mean the road to success will be an easy one. Those large companies are paying a lot of money to dominate the search engines, flood inboxes with email, and cover websites with banner ads. How can a new business possibly get noticed in the middle of all that?

Despite the apparent dominance of well-established brands online, there are a lot of avenues available to startups and small businesses that will let them reach their potential audience. It will require some effort, but it won’t require the kind of
budget that large business use to fund national advertising campaigns.

There are several online marketing strategies a business can employ to start building its brand online. Not all of them are appropriate for every campaign, but some of them are a necessity that can lead to success now and future growth down the road. The following seven strategies are used by many large enterprises, but they are also available and accessible to small businesses. You may even be able to use them more effectively than a larger, slower company.

**ONLINE MARKETING STRATEGIES**

What combination of marketing strategies will benefit you the most?

1. SEO
2. Local SEO
3. Social Media
4. Pay-per-Click
5. Content Marketing
6. Updated Web Designs
7. Email marketing

**1. SEO**

In modern search engine optimization (SEO), relevance can be just as important as brand (if not more so). The search engines are really only interested in returning the results that are relevant to each and every query, which means that it isn’t the size of the company that matters – it’s the amount of value you provide.

Over the years, SEO techniques and strategies have changed dramatically, and the actions that led to success last year might not work anymore. In the worst case scenario, they could even be harming your website now. The algorithms that judge the value and relevance or your site keep changing, and you have to be able to keep up.

Where huge, multinational corporations are slow and sluggish, your ability to change and adapt can be immensely beneficial. If a larger company, for example, has spent their entire budget on building certain kinds of links pointing to their site, and suddenly those links are devalued by Google, they will find themselves in a very difficult position, having to spend more money to clean up the problem. On the other hand, if your website is completely under your control, you can make the necessary changes to your tactics and immediately take advantage of the new opportunities.
HOW DOES SEO WORK?

SEO has changed a lot over the years, but the one constant is the focus on providing real value. Broadly speaking, there are two ways for a company to do this: by developing its own on-page content and by reaching out and building relationships with third-party websites.

**On-Page Optimization – That Which You Can Control**

It often feels like a website is subject to the whims of the search engine, getting battered around as the algorithm continues to change. A company needs a strong foundation to weather the changes, and that means optimizing the on-page elements first. This is where a company can exercise the most control, so there’s no reason not to make everything just right. These elements include:

- **Site Navigation** – Is it intuitive and obvious? Can you reach every important page within one or two clicks?
- **Internal Linking Structure** – Do your links between pages provide value, or is it just for the sake of linking keywords?
- **Quality Content** – Is your content unique? Does it answer the common questions? Is there enough of it?
- **Page Structure** – Are you depending on images to make a sale? Is the layout simple and effective or does it confuse visitors and make them leave?
- **Load Times** – Some search engines penalize websites that take too long to load because visitors don’t want to wait. Even a few tenths of a second could make a difference.
- **Mobile Compatibility** – The future is mobile. How does your website perform on tablets and smartphones? If it’s too slow, clunky, or unwieldy, search engines will likely not display it in their mobile search results.
- **Keywords** – Keywords have always been an important part of SEO, but modern strategies aren’t about filling the page with those words and turning them into links. Instead, keywords should help you determine subject matter and, more importantly, help you answer your customers’ questions.
Off-Page Optimization – That Which Is Harder to Control

Links from other sources that point to your website have always been an integral part of the optimization process. Previously, these links were equated with votes – a way to tell the search engine spiders that the site was, indeed, relevant to the keyword that was embedded with a link.

Unfortunately, this led to many companies trying to exploit the system, which forced the search engines to crack down on links it deemed spammy or irrelevant. Links are still important, but you need to use them as a means to drive traffic, not to acquire votes. Quality links come from:

Reaching out to other websites – Building relationships with third-party websites is an effective way to earn some great links. By providing quality content or valuable information for that site, they will link back to your site.

There is a right way and a wrong way to reach out to other sites, of course. Only work with websites that are relevant to your own and never send out mass emails hoping for a response. Look for ways to enhance the value of their website and they will be more willing to work with you.

Creating link bait – If you build it, they will come. You can create some great content on your own site that visitors will naturally link to. This includes eBooks, white papers, fun and engaging blog posts, infographics, and anything else that provides real value (even entertainment value) for the people who arrive on your site.

Still Think SEO is about Who Can Spend the Most Money?

A number of major corporations have tried to win the SEO game by throwing a lot of money at the process and hoping for the best. In many cases, this approach has backfired and severely damaged their search engine rankings (and reputation). Consider some recent examples:

J.C. Penny – Paying for links is never a good idea. When people started noticing that J.C. Penny was ranking better for some products than the actual manufacturer of that product, it raised red flags. After a little research, it became clear that the company was paying for thousands of links, mostly located on dead sites. Google learned of this and quickly hit them with a serious penalty1.

Overstock – This online retailer didn’t technically buy any links, but they offered discounts on some merchandise to students and faculty members at colleges and universities for simply embed links for certain keywords on the site. This got them a lot of valuable .edu links, but it also got them penalized2.

Money doesn’t solve everything in SEO. In fact, it can often get you into trouble.

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2 http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704520504576162753779521700
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2. LOCAL SEO

The internet isn’t all about going for a global audience. Sometimes it’s the perfect way to reach the potential customers in your local area. When someone is looking for a specific product in a geographical location, chances are they are ready to buy – and these are the people you really need to find. There are a few things you can do to get noticed by customers who are looking to visit you in person.

1. **Be Mobile Ready** – A large percentage of the searches performed with a geographical qualifier are done on a mobile device. Why? Because they’re already out there, on the move, looking for a place to make a purchase. If your site is mobile ready, you will look more attractive to all those customers.

2. **Google Places for Business** – This is the most straightforward way to provide your customers with complete and correct information and increase your chances to get found by those local searchers. Google Places for Business is a directory of business listings, and it will display this information across Google Maps, in Google Search, and Google Earth. You can get your listing for free, but you will need:
   - A Google Account
   - A business name and phone number
   - A physical address where you can receive mail

3. **Citations** – Local SEO is not all about getting links. Sometimes a simple citation might be enough to improve your search engine standing. Loosely defined, a citation is any time someone mentions your company on their website. More strictly speaking, this is when they mention your company with your logo and contact information. There are many different ways for a company to receive this kind of attention, including:
   - Sponsorship citations
   - Listings in online phone directors
   - Member pages of the local chamber of commerce
   - Media sites
   - Event citations

Citations are important because they show that people are talking about you, and Google can associate those mentions with your business.
**Steps to Create a Google Places for Business Listing**

1. Go to www.google.com/business/placesforbusiness/
2. Verify whether a listing for your company already exists
3. Enter your business information if it doesn’t, make sure it’s correct if it does
4. Select your service areas
5. Select your hours of operation
6. Select payment options
7. Upload photos (logo, storefront, etc.)
8. Add any additional details that will help entice your customers
9. Double check and verify your listing. Verification is done through snail mail, which is why you need a valid address.

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**SOCIAL MEDIA’S ROLE IN ONLINE MARKETING**

Many companies immediately assume that any endeavor should have a measurable ROI, but social media simply doesn’t work like that. In fact, most companies find it very difficult to connect their social media efforts to any direct revenue. So if that’s the case, what is the real benefit of spending so much time on this endeavor?

Social media should be tied to all the other content you are producing. It is an announcement platform that will help you promote your other work. Search engine traffic still provides the best customer lifetime value, but promoting your content and website on one or more social networks is one of the most effective ways to get it noticed by customers and search engines. Without this promotional step, the search engine crawlers will eventually find your content or updated website, but you can speed up the entire process through social media.

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**THE SMALL BUSINESS ADVANTAGE**

Small businesses can really distinguish themselves in the social media realm. Customers follow companies to feel like they are getting a glimpse at the inner workings of the business. However, large enterprises have to go through layers of red tape and armies of lawyers to ensure that their message is spot on and incapable

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of saying anything that could go off brand, making it hard to really open up.

As a small business, you have an opportunity to be real and personable. You can react quickly to questions, complaints, and compliments that are delivered over the network. Customers can sense when you’re being real, and when they feel like you have a real interest in them they’ll become brand advocates for you.

**Facebook** – This is, of course, the most populous of all the social networks, and the first place many people go to get referrals before buying something. Whether they’re looking for reviews from real customers or participating in a conversation started on your business page, this is a great place to begin building a community.

**Twitter** – This is a platform from which you can announce your important developments, keep customers in the loop, and follow industry changes. This is a source for up-to-the-second news, so whether you’re announcing a new product or just sharing your most recent blog, you can get some immediate responses on this network.

**Pinterest** – This network rose to prominence extremely fast, and while it may have garnered a reputation as the place to post recipes and craft projects, it continues to develop and grow. Now there are specialized product pins, article pins, place pins, and more that make this platform an effective marketing tool. Some studies have even shown that this network drives more revenue per click\(^4\) than Twitter or Facebook. If you work with any visual media at all, this is the place to be.

**Google+** – You may have heard that Google+ is a ghost town and that no one is actually using it. But the truth of the matter is that it is growing by leaps and bounds. Why? Because it has become plainly obvious that if Google is important to your business model, then Google+ is important, too. The search engine giant continues to push its “social layer” into all its products, which means you’re more likely to get your content indexed quicker when you share it over this network.

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4. PAY-PER-CLICK

Paying for advertisements isn’t just for the large and rich enterprises. Small businesses can also gain a lot of exposure through pay-per-click (PPC) advertising. This is effective for small businesses because you are only charged if someone actually clicks on your ad.

**PPC AD CAMPAIGNS INVOLVE:**

Keyword research to determine the most relevant keywords on which to bid.

Bidding on a keyword and setting how much you’re willing to pay for a click. This will also determine where your ad will appear in the search engine results page.

Writing attractive ad text that appeals to the right audience.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Google is devoting more and more space on its results pages to paid advertising. It appears on the right side bar, above the search results, and occasionally at the very top of the page in a carousel. Paid listings are also important because they can get your website in front of search engine users immediately. Organic SEO will always take a lot of time to climb the rankings and secure a good position. PPC lets you bypass that process and start getting visitors to your site immediately.

**WHY YOU MUST BE CAUTIOUS**

Even on a small budget, PPC can be extremely effective, but only if the campaign is properly managed and carefully controlled. You need to know what a single click is worth. You need to know the value of a customer who comes to your site through an ad. If your cost per acquisition is too high, a PPC campaign could do more damage than good.

On the other hand, if you are careful, you can bid on the right keywords, have them appear at the right time, and put an upper limit on what you’re willing to spend so you’ll never go over budget. PPC is an effective tool for attracting the consumers who are interested in your products and services.

5. CONTENT MARKETING

High-quality content – *that you give away for free* – is a major part of modern online marketing strategies. The goal is not to produce content that seems attractive to the search engines, but to create digital assets that are very valuable to your potential customers.

“It is not to produce content that seems attractive to the search engines, but to create digital assets that are very valuable your potential customers.”

Content marketing is an established method of driving traffic and building a community. It is also a powerful way to boost your authority and represent
yourself as an expert within your industry.

To be effective, you have to think beyond simply creating keyword-rich copy and focus more on developing content that is engaging, answers important questions, and targets the right audience. Search engines look beyond the simple words on the page and consider everything from user interaction, social shares, and natural linking patterns to determine how much value it really offers.

In other words, content creation is just the first step. You’ve still got some work to do.

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CAN SMALL BUSINESSES REALLY COMPETE?

It may seem like larger companies will have a distinct advantage in this area, but that isn't strictly true. There in the long run. You will either fail to create something that engages your consumers and prompts them to action, or the actions they take won’t generate any returns. Your strategy needs to include different elements that will ensure you’re reaching the right audience and encouraging them to work with your company. The process is simple:

1. **Determine your target audience** – Develop personas to represent your ideal customers as well as customers who might have concerns about your products or services. Any content you create should appeal to these people or answer their questions. Content isn’t about what interests you, but what interests them.

2. **Create the content** – Be creative, unique, and direct. No matter what media you are using, focus on creating quality, valuable content that consumers will be willing to share with others. (This willingness will be directly related to the content’s ability to address their concerns.)

3. **Promote the content** – A blog is just a bunch of words until someone reads it. And it’s only effective when someone actually shares it. Once you’ve created the content, you can start putting it out there on your social networks or recommending it to other websites and companies that may find it useful. Start the ball rolling yourself and encourage others to spread it around.

**CONTENT STRATEGY**

It’s been said that content without strategy is just “stuff,” and right now the internet has become a repository for so much “stuff” that it is getting harder and harder for people to find and consume the content that has any real value to them.

If you’re only producing more stuff to fill up the empty places of the internet, it will not benefit your business
are still many ways in which a small business can leverage their agility and freedom to stay ahead of the competition.

Small businesses can keep the lines of direct communication open much easier than larger enterprises. This means you can determine the consumers’ pain points and address them directly while bigger companies are moving sluggishly toward content creation. You can also react faster to content opportunities without having to run a simple blog past a legal department for the necessary approvals. You have the freedom to explore your own brand and present yourself in a new way to attract new customers.

### 6. Updated Web Designs

A modern web design isn’t just about adding new pictures and colors. It’s about the user’s experience and making sure there are no impediments between arriving on the site and making a purchase. One too many clicks may be all it takes to convince a visitor to go elsewhere.

Website trends are constantly changing, and if yours looks like it is still relying on the design standards of five-years-ago, your customers are going to feel less confident with your business. Sometimes it only takes a small tweak to improve the site’s appearance and performance, so it’s important to update the things you can and remain relevant.

### Types of Content You Should Be Creating

- Blogs
- Images
- Videos
- Podcasts
- SlideShares
- Newsletters and Emails
- Whitepapers
- Infographics
- Case Studies
- Online Tools
WRITING FOR THE WEB

The words of a website are just as important as the images and linking structure. You must be able to grab your visitors’ attention within just a few seconds and give them a reason to stay on your site. That means you must, in very short order, answer some very specific questions:

- Am I in the right place?
- What can I do on this website?
- Why should I do it with you, rather than your competition?

There was a time when web content writing was about keyword density and complex link schemes between pages. Now, it's all about providing value and focusing on the consumer rather than what will rank better. The search engines can tell the difference. More importantly, so can your customers.

THE ADVANTAGES OF SMALL BUSINESS WEBSITES

While it's true that any major renovations to your website will probably require a significant investment, you still have some advantages over the larger enterprise websites. There comes a point when a website gets so large and unwieldy that it even minor changes will take some significant effort and a lot of money.

When your website is still smaller and focused on just a few products or services, you will have more freedom to change and update your content, images, user interface, and a range of other elements. Fix your content to attract a different audience. Restructure the website's architecture to make it more user-friendly. Refresh the look with new images throughout the product pages. These are things you can do quickly and easily without having to hire an entire development team to do it.

EMAIL MARKETING

Many marketers have written off email marketing as outdated and ineffective. However, studies\(^5\) repeatedly show that, when it's done right, it can be extremely profitable. You are going to be competing with a lot of spammy emails and overflowing inboxes, for sure, but there are some things you can do to stand out and get your customers to give you a chance.

A SUCCESSFUL EMAIL HAS 3 IMPORTANT COMPONENTS

1. The Subject Line – This is where you create the most crucial few words for your email marketing campaign. You've got just one line to make the difference between someone opening your email or sending it to the trash unread. It won't matter how prolific your voice or how great the offer contained in the content might be if no one actually clicks on it.

The subject line isn't just about grabbing attention, though. Anyone can devise a crazy, over-the-top phrase that gets a person to stop and look. The goal should be to get past the impulse to read the headline and start generating interest in what is actually inside.

Put simply, the subject line must connect directly to the value that is inside the email.

Your purpose in writing a subject line, then, is not to sell a product, but to sell a click.

2. The Message – You're subject line has convinced them to give you one click. Now you need to encourage them to give you another. An email is not a landing page – which is a distinction that trips up many businesses – because you're not trying to sell a product or service at this point. You're still just looking for a click. All the selling should take place on the website where the customer can actually make a purchase.

The content of your message needs to make it clear what the reader is going to get by clicking through to their website. Where will the link take them? Why is it worth their time to go there? Can you create a sense of what they'll see when they reach the landing page? The more you can prepare them for what's on the other side of the email, the more likely they'll be to follow through to complete a purchase.

If there’s a “trick” to it at all, it would be to make sure your email message contains just enough value to make someone want more. Just remember that email is about communicating, so always speak to your readers as you would any other person.

3. The Call to Action – Even though you're not selling a product or service in the email, you will want the reader to do something. You don't have to hide this fact. Instead, you need to make this action an easy choice to make. Use a single, direct call to action to tell your potential customers exactly what you would like them to do. Don't confuse the matter with multiple CTAs, and make sure that the other end of the action immediately addresses their expectations.
Where Is the Advantage for Small Businesses?

The benefit to small businesses isn't just from the sheer number of emails you can send out. Yes, you can send a message out to 30,000 people at once, just like the big guys, but that doesn't actually give you an advantage. It just means you're able to intrude on the inboxes of 30,000 people, just like them.

The advantage of the small business is that you can still make it personal. Email marketing earned its poor reputation because so many companies just randomly blasted out all their messages just hoping that one or two would hit a target. You could certainly do this, too.

But it's ineffective.

The best way to use email is to avoid intruding on someone's personal space and time. This means you need to have a personal invitation to send them product specials or business announcements. Who gives this kind of permission? Everyone who goes to your website and signs up for these kinds of emails.

When your readers already have a connection to your brand, they will be more likely to open the emails you send. And if you are working on a smaller scale – those people who have already expressed interest in your products or services – you can tailor your message to meet their needs.
LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

A small business can be accessible and personal, focused and fast, adaptable and agile. While it may often seem like the big guys have an immovable advantage, the fact is you are in a good position to disrupt some of the standard practices and fill the gaps that a large, established enterprise can easily miss.

You don’t need to spend money on the level of a multinational corporation to compete in the larger marketing arena of the internet. It will take dedication, time, creativity, and some research, but by using these seven online marketing channels we’ve outlined, you’ll be able to build an audience, communicate with customers, increase revenue, and compete with some of the “big guys.”

Connect with us on social media where we share tons of small business resources every day!