SMALL BUSINESS KNOW HOW
Build a Better Business
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Evaluating the Competitive Landscape

It’s important to understand what your competitors do right and wrong, since you’ll want to avoid their mistakes while taking their marketing “wins” to the next level.

Here are six strategies for effectively evaluating the competitive landscape.

1. **Understand who Google thinks your competitors are.**
   You probably can easily rattle off who you think your top five competitors are, but does Google agree? Here’s how to test your assumptions: Think of your five to 10 most important keyword phrases and plug them into Google. What companies show up in the organic listings on the first page? On the paid listings? Any surprises? Make note and add these new-to-you competitors to your master list of competitors.

2. **Conduct regular website audits.**
   You can approach a website audit in several ways, but at the very least, you’ll want to review the competitor’s home page, about us section, product/service pages, calls-to-action, a couple of landing pages, and blog posts. Ask yourself what you like and don’t like about...
   - Design and layout
   - Copy
   - Article topics on the blog

   And, of course, pay attention to any important breaking news (look for a media or PR section).

   Based on these audits ask yourself how your site compares. What are you doing well? What could you be doing better, based on what your competitors are doing?

3. **Conduct regular social media audits as well.**
   In addition to keeping track of your competitors’ fans and followers and the types of content your competitors are posting, pay attention to ads on places like Facebook and other websites you visit.

   If your competitors are doing lots of [PPC advertising](#) and [retargeting campaigns](#), then you might want to investigate this further and see if it makes sense for your business.

4. **Subscribe to your competitors’ blogs and newsletters.**
   As you receive the newsletters, evaluate the content, design, and frequency (knowing, of course, that you are a bit biased). Regarding the blog posts, note the frequency and topics.
What resonates? Does your competitor get anything wrong? If yes, this provides an opportunity to write a “rebuttal” post about the same topic, but correcting everything your competitor got wrong. You can also brainstorm topics based on the ones your competitors are focusing on and add these topics to your tickler file for future content calendars.

5. When conducting customer surveys, ask participants about your competitors.
Get to know who your customers think your competitors are and ask them why they think of these companies. Just as some of the “answers” you got from your Google search likely surprised you, you’ll probably be surprised to learn what businesses your customers consider to be your competition. Once again, keep these competitors on your radar and add them to your master list.

6. Don’t ever dismiss the new kids on the block.
If you’re in business long enough, you’ll experience competitors who come and go. That’s the reality of doing business. That said, you should never underestimate a new competitor simply because the competitor is new. Remember, there was a time when My Space was it, and then this little social media platform called Facebook came along. You’ll want to conduct the same due diligence we outlined above with whatever new companies pop up.
How to Ask Customers for Reviews (without Annoying Them)

Your customers just paid for your products or services, so asking them to do one more thing, like leaving a review, might feel like too much. But it’s important to keep in mind that reviews matter. And happy customers don’t mind giving them.

The key is learning how to ask customers for reviews without being a pest. Here are six tips.

1. Ask while the experience is fresh in their minds.
If people have had a great experience with your company, they’re usually more than happy to share the details, especially when the experience is front and center in their minds. That’s why it’s important to follow the adage “strike while the iron is hot.”

If a customer expresses his or her gratitude to you or your employees, follow up by asking the person if he/she would be willing to write a review or testimonial. If the review or testimonial is for your site, you could even offer to write it for the person and then get his/her sign off.

If the review is for an independent site, such as Yelp or Amazon or Houzz, then simply send the person a link to the appropriate page and ask if she/he would be kind enough to leave a review. Some sites, such as Houzz, have an “ask for a review” function baked right into the platform, which makes the process turnkey for you and the customer.

It’s important to make sure everyone in your company who interacts with customers is on board with this approach. Why? Because you never know which employee might encounter a happy customer. So, for example, if your sales rep gets a thank-you email from a customer, the sales rep should follow up and ask if he/she can pull a quote from the email and add it to the testimonial page and other pages on your site.

If a customer service rep does a great job handling a customer issue, and the customer is incredibly grateful for the help, the customer service rep should ask the happy customer to share her experience by leaving a review.

And so forth—you get the idea.
2. Provide non-intrusive reminders at different marketing “touch” points.
Here are some examples of what we mean by non-intrusive reminders:

- If you have a testimonials page on your site, you could add a blurb saying, “We always love hearing from customers. Feel free to drop us a line and share your experience.”
- After the customer completes a transaction on your site, you could prompt them in the confirmation email to share a review of the customer service experience.
- If you’re an ecommerce site, you could send a “rate your experience” email a week or so after purchase (Amazon is famous for doing this).

3. Create a “Help us spread the word” page on your website.
Your biggest fans will be eager to help spread the news about your best products and services. People do this for many reasons: they like sharing great finds/deals, they love looking like heroes to friends and family, and/or they like being ahead of the curve when it comes to cool products or services. Whatever their reason for wanting to sing your company’s praises, make it as easy as possible for them to do so.

Create a page on your site that outlines all the ways people can become brand ambassadors for your company. One of these ways will cover the many places where people can leave reviews. In addition, you should create compelling call-to-action buttons that you place throughout the site that point people to this page.

4. Post reminders on Facebook.
Open with “Here’s a testimonial from a happy customer…” Then at the end add, “Our happy customers are our best form of advertising. Have you told your friends and family about your experience with our company? Share this post and let them know!”

The goal, of course, is for people to share the post and add details about their own awesome experience with your company.

5. Devote a bonus section of your next newsletter to happy customer comments.
It needn’t be long—simply highlight three to five recent customer reviews from various outlets (Yelp, Amazon, Facebook, and so forth). End with a call-to-action saying, “Would you like to leave a review? Here’s how.” You could link it to the platform where you want to boost reviews, or you could link it to your “help us spread the word” page that we talked about earlier.

6. Get innovative with video.
If you deal directly with customers in person, get proficient with your smart phone’s video recording functions and video happy customers talking up your products or services. (Get their OK first, of course!) Then make a plan to share this video content on your website and social media.
How to Grow Your Email Newsletter List

You’d love to have more eyeballs reading your email newsletter every month, but you just don’t know how to get them. Here are ten strategies for growing that all-important email list.

1. Follow the rule of 250.
The rule goes (roughly) like this: everyone knows 250 people whom they can market to. So start with the people you know. Ask them to sign up for your newsletter and ask them to promote the newsletter to the people they know. If you have employees, encourage them to do the same thing.

2. Include a link in your email signature.
You know all those emails you send day in and day out? Let them work even harder than they already are by adding a link beneath your signature with a compelling call-to-action.
So, for example, if you’re a message therapist, you might write the following: Learn 3 easy massage points you can manipulate yourself when you sign up for my monthly newsletter.

3. Create a page on your website devoted to newsletter sign ups.
On this page, you should provide an answer to the “what’s it in for me” question that everyone asks. Make it a persuasive answer. Make it a fun answer. Here’s a good example of a page that does just that.

4. Make sure you have call-to-actions throughout your website as well.
Yes, you should have a dedicated newsletter page and a newsletter archive so people can check out past issues. But you should also sprinkle a newsletter call-to-action button throughout your website, especially on some of your most trafficked pages, like the home page, contact page, team page, and so forth.

5. Add the request to your social media schedule.
Ask people to sign up on places like Facebook, Google+, and LinkedIn. Make these requests more than once. “The ask” should become one of your regular updates. Experiment with different days and different times, but remember to ask regularly (without spamming people, of course).
Honestly, for your newsletter, all you need is a first name and email address. People who sign up are NOT qualified sales leads—at least not yet. Use the other offers on your site to qualify people further. Your newsletter simply provides value to subscribers.

7. Create a system for in-person events.
Networking events. Trade shows. Organizations that invite you to come and give a talk. These are ALL opportunities to grow your list. Create a system that works for you—and that you’ll follow—to gather signups.

For example, it could be something as simple as keeping a newsletter sign-up sheet on your trade show booth and letting people know it’s there. Or as you gather business cards at networking events, you could ask people if they’d be OK with your signing them up for your newsletter. Keep the “yes” cards in one pocket and the “no” cards in the other. When you return to the office, add the contacts to your newsletter database. Then, take the time to send everyone an email alerting them you’ve done so (it’s an easy way to reconnect with the person and engage further). Make sure you point out how they can unsubscribe in case they’ve changed their mind.

This is probably the most work-intensive tip on our list, but if you get in the habit of doing it, you’ll be able to add a handful of names to your list almost every time you’re out and about.

8. Include a newsletter link on customer communications.
Think invoices, order confirmations, customer service requests, and so forth.

9. Add a sign-up link on your promotional products.
For example, maybe you’re a financial planner and you’ve ordered a bunch of custom coffee mugs. Add a line that says, “Get a handle on your finances with easy tips. Join now: awesomecompany.com/signup.”

10. Include the request within each newsletter itself.
Somewhere in each email newsletter, add a call-out like this: “Like what you read here? Know someone who could benefit? Encourage them to sign up.” Then link the phrase “encourage them to sign up” to a pre-written email that the person can send to her friends.
The Anatomy of an Irresistible Social Media Post

We can probably all agree about the importance of social media, but now let’s talk about the nitty-gritty reality. What makes a great tweet? An awesome Facebook update? A cool Tumblr blog?

Cozy up, because we’re about to reveal the anatomy of an irresistible social media post. It involves two essential organs: heart and brains.

1. **Heart: Be genuine.**
   Your social media posts are an extension of your business and your brand. In other words, your posts need to sound like YOU, not like Lady Gaga or Nike or Oreo. Yes, you can—and should—be aware of what works for other businesses ([here are three brands rocking social media](#)), but that doesn’t mean you should copy exactly what they say or how they say it.

   Think about the things that get YOU excited regarding your business. Maybe it’s a trend, new product, or a piece of legislation regarding your industry. Those are the things to talk about on social sites, because your enthusiasm and your authenticity will shine through. This is an especially important point to keep in mind if you decide to [outsource your social media work](#).

2. **Brains: Understand the medium.**
   Certain types of posts perform better on certain platforms. For example, if you have something to say that goes beyond 140 characters or a paragraph, you should save it for Tumblr, which is where people expect lengthier postings.

   The tone on LinkedIn is markedly different from the tone on Instagram or Pinterest. Many people get annoyed over [hashtag abuse](#), and studies show that if you use more than two hashtags on Twitter, your engagement actually drops.

   And so it goes.

   This doesn’t mean you can’t share the essence of your message across different channels. It simply means you should customize the way you say it based on where you’re posting the update.
Confused about all the different social platforms out there? You’re not alone. Start with this article, which discusses the biggest social media platforms. Then, move onto this article, which looks at some other social media players.

3. Brains & Heart: Certainty is essential.
Social media is a great way to have real-time conversations with customers, employees, and prospects. But therein lies the danger. How easy it is to tweet, post, snap, pin, and so forth without stopping to think, Should I really have said that?

We’ve all heard about social media disasters where companies had to issue apologies due to inappropriate social posts. So before you make your update live, take a step back and quickly ask yourself if you should be posting this particular piece of content.

4. Heart: Have fun.
When we said that you needed to be authentic, we weren’t suggesting you needed to be boring. You can—and should—have fun with social media. Just make sure the fun reflects your brand. The fun type of comment a Kardashian posts will be very different from the fun type of comment a local dentist posts.

5. Heart: Experiment and play.
Experiment with different days and times. See what types of photos get more engagement—product images, quotes, candid shots of the storefront, images of the office pooch. Experiment within the social platform itself: create Vine videos on Twitter, Create an offer on Facebook. Try one of these ten things you never knew you could do with Instagram. You get the idea.

Don’t let your experiments go on forever. You need to understand what’s working, what’s not, and adjust your strategy accordingly. Learn how to read and understand your social media analytics—or get someone who understands analytics to explain them to you. Do more of what’s working, less of what’s not. It’s as simple as that.
Get More Retail Foot Traffic

Thanks to the Internet, it’s getting harder and harder for retail stores to compete for that all-important foot traffic. Here are some ideas that could inspire more people to walk through your doors.

1. **Make it easy for people to find you online, especially when they use their mobile devices.**
   This involves sprucing up your Google+ Local presence. Make sure you have an optimized profile. You’ll also want to check out Google My Business, which “connects you directly with customers, whether they’re looking for you on Search, Maps or Google+.”

2. **Hold special on-site events.**
   A lighting store might hold a seminar on LED lighting, since that’s a hot topic in the industry. During the off-season, a garden shop might hold a winter farmer’s market. An acupuncturist might hold a clinic every quarter for couples dealing with infertility issues. You get the idea.

   When you hold special events, you have something exciting to promote through your newsletter, social channels, and local paper. Plus, local businesses and organizations might be willing to help promote your event as well.

3. **Sublet a portion of your space to an affiliate vendor.**
   For example, an indie bookstore might invite local artists to display their work. The shop would rotate the artist every month and promote each monthly opening to its database. The artist would also promote her exhibition to her database. This way, some of her fans will likely come through the door—people who might not have checked out the shop otherwise.

4. **Entice people through pictures and videos.**
   Create photo and video content that shows how cool your store is. Highlight the benefits people will receive from visiting in person:
   - They can touch and try out products.
   - They will receive immediate help and answers from knowledgeable sales associates on the floor.
   - They can get new items that haven’t made their way to the website yet.
   - They can get “in-store-only” sales items.
   - They can sample products. (Raise your hand if you know people who visit places like BJ’s and Trader Joe’s just for this reason.)
Joe’s because of the regular food samples that are offered?

- They can take pride in the fact that they’re keeping business local. Yes, you should play this angle, because it IS important.

5. **Use your monthly newsletter to highlight a new product.**
Create a “hot right now” or “available only in stores” section of your newsletter where you highlight a product and encourage people to stop by and check it out.

6. **Experiment with cost-effective advertising.**
Facebook allows you to choose your daily budget (as little as a dollar a day!), and you can indicate what device you want your ads to show up on. Opt for ads that will be delivered to mobile devices and advertise a Facebook-only incentive that needs to be redeemed in stores.

7. **Celebrate anniversaries.**
*Throw yourself a birthday party and celebrate the whole month.* Promote the fact that there will be special in-store deals as a way to say thank you to customers for helping the company enjoy another year in business. Psst. You can hold this event every year.

8. **Make it an incredible experience once they’re there.**
The best way to get people to come back is to create such a fun, memorable experience that they have no choice but to visit again. Greet people warmly with smiles, but don’t hound them. Make it easy for them to pay (e.g. letting people pay with their smartphones). Create an impressive physical space. Need inspiration? Check out our article: [Showroom Design Ideas to Wow Customers](#).

9. **As they’re leaving, give them a reason to come back.**
Kohl’s does a great job of this with its Kohl’s Cash. As people check out during their current visit, they earn a certain number of dollars—Kohl’s cash—that they can use on their next in-store visit, provided they come back before the cash expires. Since people were just in the store, they might have seen something else they liked that they didn’t get due to their budget, but now, with the Kohl’s cash, they might be able to get it during their next visit.

There’s no reason why you can’t create a similar program or, at the very least, stuff the bag with an enticing coupon that might get people back sooner rather than later.
How to Make Your Employees Better Brand Ambassadors

Your loyal employees are usually more than happy to talk up your company, but that doesn’t mean they couldn’t use some guidance along the way. In this article, we’re going to provide you with tips and suggestions for turning your workforce into the best brand ambassadors your business has ever seen.

1. Focus on internal communications.
If you want to create brand ambassadors, then you need to regularly talk about your brand with your people. In a recent article from Forbes, the author predicts that more and more companies will view internal communications as an integral marketing asset. “They will look at it as a key challenge and opportunity to create brand ambassadors and make sure that employees and vendors understand and live ‘the brand,’ as well as the vision and strategy of the company.”

2. Provide employees with regular updates on existing and upcoming marketing campaigns.
This way, people will gain a better understanding of the products/services the company is promoting and the messages that go along with them. They might also learn a thing or two (or more) in the process. You’ll want to share info, including the actual creative, on things like:

- Online/print ads
- Lead nurturing messages
- Customer newsletters/emails (your employees should be copied on everything that goes out to customers in bulk)
- Marketing plans

You can share this info as it comes in via email or your company intranet if you have one. Or you could provide a weekly or monthly recap. The key is consistency.

3. Share sales “wins.”
Whenever your company welcomes a new client, share this news with your entire team. If you work in a b2c environment, share sales numbers so that employees have a sense of how the business is doing. Sharing these “wins” helps boost employee morale, which is an added bonus.
4. **Give regular examples of company attributes that go beyond products/services.**
For example, if a customer service rep successfully resolved an issue with an irate customer, share this with the whole team. It helps people witness firsthand how your company goes the extra mile, which is an attribute that your brand ambassadors can talk up when they’re out and about in the world.

5. **Host team-building events.**
Hosting team-building events or team “days” is a great way to bring your internal communications to life. Taking time to participate in an event or day “off campus” to discuss initiatives, share ideas, brainstorm, get up to speed, and just spend time together is an excellent way to foster a “we’re in this together” vibe, which helps employees feel valued. Employees who feel valued tend to feel happier about their jobs and are often the first people to talk enthusiastically about where they work. And who doesn’t like doing business with companies where the employees are so obviously happy?

6. **Encourage collaboration and dismantle any existing “silos.”**
Work silos keep departments separate from one another. A collaborative work environment, on the other hand, encourages people to not only work together, but also learn more about one another. The engineering department could benefit learning about what HR is up to and vice versa. Your best brand ambassadors are going to have a good understanding of your whole organization, not just a department here and there. So encourage inter-departmental dialogue.

7. **Make it easy.**
Your employees are busy doing their jobs, and that’s a good thing. Always make it as easy as possible for them to become brand ambassadors without having to do a ton more work. For example, if you’ve just launched a new product line, deliver an “internal” media kit to all employees. You likely prepare a kit for the press; do the same for your employees. In this kit, you’d include easy-to-digest info on the product: copy points/messages, pre-written tweets/updates that they can copy/paste to their social media accounts, product examples, goals, tips for talking about the product, and so forth.

8. **Offer incentives.**
Yes, you certainly want people to get in the habit of talking up your brand simply because they feel good doing it. But a little added incentive never hurts, right? For example, you could hold a contest where the person who shares the most content about the company via social media over a month gets a prize.

9. **Outfit them in branded apparel.**
You’ll want your people to be brand ambassadors during their down time when they’re sitting in the bleachers at their kids’ sporting events or running to the grocery store or heading to the gym. Of course, they might not get the opportunity to talk about work while they’re at these events. After all, it’s off hours and they have other topics to chat about besides work. So let their clothes do the talking for them. Provide your employees with plenty of promotional apparel for all seasons—t-shirts, hoodies, caps, and so forth—branded with your company name/logo and message. It’s subtle, yes, but that’s OK. And it could very well end up being a conversation starter.
10. Think beyond the office.
Your employees become natural brand ambassadors when you allow them to organize and participate in volunteer efforts on behalf of your company. Food drives, road races, charity golf tournaments, sponsored little league teams—all of your employees have causes they care about. Support them and the causes that matter to them: it’s a win-win for your company and your people.
What to Include in Your Marketing Plan

OK, it’s time for a little clarification. When we say “nitty-gritty” marketing plan, we’re talking about that down-and-dirty document you and your colleagues refer to every month. It’s the working doc—the blueprint—that keeps your marketing on track, rather than the official (and often bloated) presentation with competitive analysis and financials and other stuff you might need for some other reason, like a business plan that’s being submitted to a bank so that you can secure a loan.

We just want to make sure the distinction is clear. Got it? Good.

OK, all that said, even this nitty-gritty, down-and-dirty plan still needs certain elements. That is, if you want it done right. Here’s what you should include:

1. Clearly stated goals and objectives.
   We’re always surprised when we see marketing plans that simply dive into the month-to-month details. How can you create a plan, even one that’s just for internal use, when you haven’t articulated your goals? Sure, you might have a bunch of them “in mind,” but that’s not the same thing as actually listing them on paper and taking a hard look at them.

   Your goals should be...

   • **Specific.** Don’t write, “The goal is to increase sales.” State a number: “The goal for 2015 is to increase sales by 15%.” Then, keep drilling down. Stating you want to increase sales by 15% only gets you so far. Figure out how many leads you need to get in order to generate one sale.

   • **Measurable.** This relates to the above point. If you need to generate 1000 leads a year to meet your sales goals, then that breaks down to 83 leads a month. That’s something you and your employees can measure.

   • **Fluid.** Just know that things WILL change as the year evolves, and that’s OK. In other words, it’s important to focus on goals, but at the same time, avoid becoming obsessed with them.

   • **Attainable.** If your company brought in one million dollars in sales last year, then creating a goal of 20 million is probably not realistic, right? All your goals should be realistic, and not just the ones related to money. For example, if your marketing team produced six white papers last year, then expecting the same team to produce 12 white papers is probably pushing it. A more moderate increase—maybe seven or eight white papers—might make more sense.

   You can approach goal setting in two ways. When you create your marketing plan, list your overall goals...
for the year up front. Then for each month, you could create a list of sub-goals. Or—even better—every
time you head into a new month, review the previous month’s activities and results, the tasks slated for the
current month, and adjust the goals and tasks, as needed.

For example (and using the hypothetical above), if you only bring in 60 leads in February, you’ll need to
take in over 100 leads in March to make up the difference and stay on track for the year. This might mean
you need to add or move up some marketing activities, such as an additional white paper, to help generate
more leads.

2. Just the facts, ma’am.
Your marketing plan serves as a snapshot. It’s the place where you list the activities for each month. Sure,
you should include certain particulars, such as who is responsible for each task, but this document is
not the place to get into the nuts and bolts regarding each step, every process, or how each task will be
executed.

For example, maybe your marketing plan calls for the drafting of three blog posts each month. That’s all
you need to list: three blog posts (you could include the titles if you want). If people need more info than
that, they should be able to find all the relevant details regarding each blog post in the content editorial
calendar (you have one, right?).

Your down-and-dirty plan should be extremely skimmable, which is why you don’t want to overload it with
unnecessary information. In fact, once you get past the opening with your list of goals/objectives, the rest
of the plan will look like one big to-do list. And that’s OK.

Another reason why we recommend only recording “just the facts” on your marketing plan is because it’s
much easier to review 12 months’ worth of activities and gauge how well balanced the plan is. In other
words, you don’t want all your marketing “eggs” in one basket (yes, there are rare exceptions, but this is the
general rule of thumb for most small businesses).

So as you review the “facts,” make sure they include a healthy mix of the following:

• **Fresh content delivered in a variety of media.** Think blog posts, white papers, ebooks, emails,
infographics, and so forth.
• **Social media activities.** Don’t spread yourself too thin. The goal isn’t to have a barely-there presence
on every platform, but rather to build an engaged fan base. Start with one social platform, get it
humming, and add in others over time. (Your marketing plan is a GREAT place to map this out.)
• **Website updates.** This could include basic content updates, brand spanking new pages, or even a
complete redesign.
• Recurring activities. You might think no one will forget, but why chance it?
• **Analytics reviews.** People often overlook this one. You need to measure how effective your marketing
efforts are, and the only way this will happen with any regularity is by scheduling the analytics reviews into the actual marketing plan.

- **Quarterly marketing plan review.** See what we did there? Force yourself to review your plan every quarter. Adjust goals and activities accordingly.

**Note:** This isn’t an exhaustive list. You might also have tasks like advertising, telemarketing, trade shows, and so forth. A marketing plan is an extremely custom, one-size-does-NOT-fit-all sort of thing. What you don’t want to see is the same one or two things listed under each month and that’s it.

And there you have it—three important things every down-and-dirty, nitty-gritty small business marketing plan needs.
Outbound vs. Inbound Marketing

You probably hear a lot about outbound marketing vs. inbound marketing, but the question is, does it really need to be an either/or scenario? We don’t think so.

First, let’s go over the definitions.

Inbound marketing, a term coined and made popular by HubSpot, means marketing that attracts, converts, closes, and delights customers who are already on the prowl for the products and services you offer.

So if someone is looking for an awesome kitchen renovation in Rhode Island and you—as a builder in Providence—create a blog post with the title “Awesome Rhode Island Kitchen Renovations We Recently Completed,” then that blog post could attract that particular qualified prospect. As a result, the prospect would learn more about your company and the services you have to offer.

In addition to blogging, other inbound marketing tactics include optimizing websites (so people can easily find what they’re looking for), engaging in social media, and creating awesome free content like ebooks, white papers, infographics, and so forth.

Outbound marketing refers to old-school marketing techniques that target bigger audiences. Some audience members might be looking for the product or service, but plenty of others won’t be looking or interested at all. Outbound marketing tactics include telemarketing, direct mail, print and radio ads, billboards, and emails sent to purchased lists.

Many view outbound marketing as intrusive and disruptive. And there’s more bad news for fans of outbound: According to Mashable, “The cost per lead in outbound marketing is more than for inbound marketing.”

So based on everything we just shared, you might think that inbound marketing is the way to go and outbound marketing should be kicked to the curb, right?

Not so fast.

The problem with either/or scenarios is that there’s no room for the gray areas, of which there are plenty in
Consider the following scenarios:

**Scenario 1**
Let’s say you’ve optimized your website and have a bunch of great offers that attract visitors who download those offers (all inbound efforts). Now, let’s say you have sales folks who review all the leads that come in. The sales reps decide, based on the info submitted in a form, which leads deserve a follow-up phone call. That follow-up call is essentially an outbound tactic, right?

Yes, the leads might have come in through an inbound method, such as a Google search, but if they don’t explicitly ask for the call (which could be seen as an intrusion, the hallmark of outbound marketing), then the phone call puts this strategy squarely in the outbound column.

Yet because these prospects are now familiar with your company, plenty of them welcome the follow-up sales call to talk further.

**Scenario 2**
Or think about this example: let’s say you run an insurance agency. You’ve made your website a hub that attracts prospects. You provide helpful downloads. You’re active on social media. You’re doing all these inbound tactics “right.” Now let’s say you also have a billboard on the local interstate. And let’s say some of the folks who’ve been shopping around for insurance (and who’ve visited your site) also pass this billboard as they drive into work every day. That exposure to your name might influence, even on a subliminal level, some of them into choosing your agency over another.

**Scenario 3**
Or maybe you work in an industry where trade shows are still very much alive and well, and maybe you enjoy these events because you’re great at building relationships with people. Not to mention you always see a flurry of web visits after events—visits that often turn into hot leads and eventually customers.

**Scenario 4**
Or let’s say you’re a massage therapist and you’ve had a lot of luck with direct mailers through the USPS “Every Door Direct Mail” program. You typically have a 5% conversation rate, and the majority of customers become a great source of repeat business and referrals.

**Scenario 5**
Or maybe you’re an acupuncturist who decides to offer a free workshop for women experiencing infertility issues. You have an optimized page on your website where people can register (inbound). You talk up the event on Facebook and Twitter (inbound), but you also decide to run an ad in the local paper in an effort to reach more people (outbound).
Should you axe the outbound examples we’ve described above simply because they’re outbound tactics? No, of course not.

**Here’s the thing: marketing is never one size fits all.** You need to figure out the right marketing mix for your company. Maybe it’s inbound all the way. Or maybe it’s a mix of inbound and outbound. Whatever you do, just make sure you…

- Measure, measure, measure the performance of all marketing campaigns, both inbound and outbound efforts.
- Continually refine strategies and programs based on these measurements.
- Seek outside expertise if you need it (here’s what to ask if you decide to talk to marketing consultants).
Turnkey Marketing: We Can Learn from Franchises

One of the reasons franchises so often succeed is because of their approaches to marketing. Here’s what small business owners can learn.

1. Think in terms of consistency at every level.
When customers stop by a Dunkin’ Donuts, they know exactly what to expect. It doesn’t matter who owns the shop. This is due to consistent messaging and consistent processes that ensure customers’ experiences will be the same from store to store.

*Takeaway for small business owners:* Make sure your messaging is not only consistent across all channels (web, social, in store, etc.), but also accurate. *Your messaging creates certain expectations.* Does your messaging deliver on these expectations? Keep in mind that messaging goes beyond words. For example, the look and feel of your website should translate to your brick-and-mortar store. The tone you convey on social media should be consistent with the tone of whoever answers the phone.

The same is true regarding how you conduct business. Make sure your employees deliver consistently. Customers should not have different experiences depending on the employee they interact with, nor should they hear one thing from one employee and the opposite from another. Proper training and solid guidelines and policies can help eliminate inconsistencies.

2. Test different marketing programs and repeat what works.
The franchisor will often test new marketing programs in some key franchises to get a sense of what works. The best programs are then made available to all franchisees. Some programs are seasonal, but the popular ones make appearances every year and loyal customers anticipate these programs (e.g. pumpkin flavored coffee at Dunkin’ Donuts during the fall).

*Takeaway for small business owners:* No, you don’t have the same franchise “focus groups” to test your marketing campaigns, but you do have other ways to test them. For example, you can conduct A/B tests on your website. For your next promotion, create two slightly different versions of the landing page and see which one performs better. When emailing your distribution lists, consider testing different subject lines. Mail a small segment with one subject line. Mail another small segment with a different subject line. See which one performs better (e.g. gets the most opens) and use that subject line for the remainder of your list.
3. **Develop camaraderie and pool resources.**
Franchisees are usually willing to help out a fellow franchisee, even if they’re in the same town or city, making them essentially competitors. For example, one franchisee might provide a fellow franchisee with supplies due to a delivery glitch. Why? Because of the big picture. They’re all working for the same franchisor. The success of the overall franchise will only help each individual franchisee.

This camaraderie and pooling of resources benefits both parties—the first franchisee is seen as a team player (and can count on the other franchisee in his or her time of need). The second franchisee can continue with business as usual thanks to the help.

**Takeaway for small business owners:** You might be wondering how you’re supposed to pool resources if you’re a small business owner. Here’s where you should get creative: can you pool resources with some complementary businesses? For example, could a limo company, photographer, and florist come together to create special wedding packages for couples? By pooling resources, you can share the costs of creating marketing materials and advertising. You’ll increase your reach/exposure without necessarily paying more since you’re sharing the expenses (this is more formally known as alliance marketing). And this camaraderie and goodwill you’re fostering among fellow business owners is good for everyone involved, including the community.
Overcoming Business Challenges: What Real People Have Done

Even the most successful small businesses have faced their fair share of challenges. The issue isn’t always how to avoid challenges, since some are inevitable. The key is figuring out what to do when you come face-to-face with one.

For this post, we asked real small business owners to share some of their biggest challenges, including how they overcame them.

Contractual Hell: Remember to Read before You Sign

We’ve probably all heard this adage: don’t sign anything you haven’t read and understand. It’s simple, straightforward advice, yet even those who are typically cautious when it comes to contracts can sometimes fall victim to contractual headaches.

Just ask David Mark who runs a mining exploration company called Geotronics Consulting Inc., which has been in business for over 45 years. Mark explains, “We were offered a chance to bid on a fixed-price job, which we’d normally avoid, but the property was beautiful and fairly flat (steep properties can make jobs much more difficult) and having our company name on that project could bring in some more work. So we figured it was worth the gamble, bid on the job, and won the bid. Boy was that a MISTAKE!”

Mark explains that the property ended up being much steeper than anticipated, and it was covered in thick bush to boot, which made access challenging at best. There was little Mark could do. His attempts at negotiating with the client didn’t work out (a fixed-price contract puts the onus on the vendor, not the client). Mark had to honor the contract, and, as a result, the company lost real money on the job.

Mark says, “It was incredibly frustrating because it was both avoidable and unnecessary. Our egos and ambition had gotten the better of us and had hurt our company.”

So what’s Mark’s advice to other business owners? Understand every element of the contract and its potential ramifications. Mark says, “The first piece of advice would be to avoid fixed-price contracts. That might sound obvious given our experience, but fixed price puts all the power with the client. If you need
to renegotiate, they are often unwilling because unlike in a variable price contract, they’re completely protected. If you must take a fixed price, such as if it’s the norm in your industry, make sure to include provisions that protect you from cost overruns. Often, even if the price is fixed, there are a hundred other variables in a job contract that can be negotiated, if you’re just willing to try.”

Julie Austin echoes Mark’s advice regarding contracts. Austin is the inventor of swiggies, which are wrist water bottles for adults and kids. She, too, had a bad contract experience. Austin recounts this challenging time: “There have been many challenges, but one of them was when I signed a contract with a con artist. The guy came recommended and had worked with several celebrities, so he seemed to be okay. After the contract was signed, it was like Jekyll and Hyde! I ended up having to hire an attorney, but in the meantime my business was shut down during the busy season.”

Today, Austin is extremely wary and skeptical of all contracts, preferring to do business with an old-fashioned handshake. Would she ever sign a contract again? She says, “It would have to be a very large deal or a very simple contract for me to do that again. What I know now is that you never sign a contract you don’t fully understand. Having a personal referral isn’t enough, as I found out. Use your gut instinct when going into business with people. I really ignored mine. Have your own simple contract drawn up and insist on using it. Do a test with distributors before doing anything exclusive. Never give an exclusive without getting something in return. Most people are honest. It’s just the few that aren’t who can bring down your business.”

**Building Teams: Choose Wisely**

Dealing with unwieldy or unfair contracts isn’t the only frustration that can plague a business owner. So, too, can finding a team of people you can rely on and trust, as Lori Cheek, founder and CEO of online dating site Cheek’d, discovered.

Cheek was new to the entrepreneurial world, having worked as an architect for over a decade. After she came up with the initial idea for Cheek’d, which has been described as the next generation in online dating, she spent a year walking around “in circles” trying to figure out how to turn her idea into a viable business. During that time, two people came on board to help her, but they weren’t the right fit (for one thing, their skill sets were the same). Today, they’re no longer with the company, but they still own nearly 20% equity.

Cheek reflects on this hard lesson: “Team is EVERYTHING. I just wish someone had told me the importance of having the right team surrounding me. The technical aspect of my business has been one of the bigger challenges I’ve faced and it’s the one thing I definitely would have approached differently from day one. I needed a CTO.”

Paige Arnof-Fenn, founder and CEO of Mavens & Moguls out of Cambridge, Mass., learned a similar lesson. She explains, “My biggest challenge as an entrepreneur is not getting rid of weak people earlier than I did in the first few years of my business. I knew in my gut they were not up to snuff, but out of loyalty
to them I let them hang around much longer than they should have. It would have been better for everyone to let them go as soon as the signs were there. They became more insecure and threatened as we grew, which was not productive for the team. As soon as I let them go, the culture got stronger and the bar higher.”

**Funding Pitfalls: Learn What You Can Do on Your Own**

You’ve probably heard the pithy saying “you need to spend money to make money.” What this old saying doesn’t offer is what to do when your seed funding either runs out or gets pulled before you develop any momentum.

Matthew Reischer, CEO of LegalAdvice.com, explains how he dealt with this dilemma. “After having spent over $350,000 in the first two years primarily on product development and securing intellectual property, we ran out of capital. We had not launched any marketing initiative and saw no solution for attaining new capital. Moreover, all the solutions that were offered were onerous and involved saturating our business with debt. I was depressed for a full 15 months and our company essentially ground to a standstill because we had no working capital.”

Reischer did eventually pick himself up and soldier on by focusing on affordable guerrilla marketing tactics that he could execute himself. He learned a valuable lesson in the process: a big public relations and marketing budget is a luxury, not a necessity.

Reischer says, “Having capital merely buys you a knowledge base and the capability for other people to do work for you. If you are intent on learning how to execute marketing initiatives yourself, there is no need to pay for public relations. I have now learned how to do outreach to reporters myself and realize there are many things that can be done to promote your business without capital.”

Cheek learned this lesson the hard way as well. She says, “I launched my business in May of 2010, had hired a PR firm a couple of months before launch and got a couple of articles written. After paying them nearly $10K, I realized I had more passion for the subject, had tons of connections to start out and could do what they were doing and decided to go for it. I’ve been doing my own PR for the past 3 1/2 years. Ten thousand dollars lighter and a few years wiser, I’ve been covered in just about everything from *The New York Times* to *Tech Crunch* and *Forbes*. Our press has extended internationally now and we currently have customers in 47 states in America and 28 countries internationally.”

Kenny Kline is the founder and CEO of Slumber Sage, which he describes as the premier resource for sleep on the web. He offers some good advice regarding funding that dries up or disappears unexpectedly. It’s based on the unfortunate experience he had launching his business earlier this year.

Kline says, “Two months into starting, our main funding pulled out, and we were unable to secure money to continue the operations. We had already put a lot of work into preparing for the launch, and we didn’t have
time to approach new investors. We had put our eggs in one basket, and it fell through.”

Luckily, Kline and his team were able to pool their own personal resources, allowing them to launch. Today, they’re bringing in enough revenue to sustain the business and themselves.

Kline acknowledges the important lessons he learned, specifically about diversifying investors. Kline says, “We were lucky in that we were able to achieve some financial success quickly after launching, but this isn’t the case for every business. Investors get cold feet for a variety of reasons, and you need to have a back-up plan. Even doing a smaller friends/family round to give ourselves more time to get a bigger round of funding would have been prudent.”

Kline also recommends having best and worst case financial projections and always being prepared for the worst. “Don’t put yourself in a position where you need outside investment to continue the business, if possible,” he says.

**Parting Advice from Those Who Have Been There, Done That.**

Two of the best pieces of advice come from Reischer and Cheek. Reischer reminds us to face an important reality regarding the almighty buck. “Money is not the solution to every problem,” he says.

Cheek adds, “My advice for others in the entrepreneurial world is if you truly believe in your idea, give up excuses and doubt, surround yourself by a trusted and talented team, bulldoze forward and DON’T. LOOK. BACK.”