

# Digital Marketing: A Guide For Small Business Owners

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Small business owners, whether they own a fashion boutique or provide a landscaping service, have much to juggle. In addition to core business activity, there's HR, purchasing, accounting, sales, customer service, insurance, maintenance; the list goes on and on. Too often, marketing is neglected, or ends up as an afterthought. You know you have to do it, but you're not sure how, and you don't have the time to focus on it.

The result may be stale websites, infrequent eNewsletters and ineffective social media campaigns.

So how should you decide what's right for you and how you can get it done? We asked three marketing experts for their advice on practical approaches to digital marketing for small business owners.

## The Importance Of Planning

"Everyone takes the time to do their financial planning, but oftentimes they don't consider marketing," says Allison Oberton of Cape Cod Digital Marketing, a full service digital marketing firm based in Mashpee Commons. Services include program management, website optimization, content marketing, pay per click marketing, social media marketing and PR, as well as photography, video and graphic design.

"Marketing should be a higher priority," urges Oberton. She recommends doing a quick business evaluation to determine what resources and budget are available, and then creating a plan and a schedule, and sticking to it.

Christine Perkett of Mindful Marketing, an integrated marketing firm specializing in branding, content marketing, digital media and advertising and PR, agrees, and says marketing plans should be well thought out before proceeding with a campaign.

"Too many times companies get caught up in the idea of marketing because it's fun to tell the world you exist. But they can get caught up in doing what's trendy or something that isn't relevant to their audience because they see everyone doing it (for example, Snapchat, Facebook Live, Tik Tok, etc.). I help them to step back and remember their business goals and build everything around reaching those," says Perkett.

How much should you spend? That depends. Perkett's advice: measure and analyze. "If it's your first foray, you have to jump in and for small businesses, I would say focus on spending 7 percent to 10 percent of total revenue. If you've been in business longer, you can go a little higher, but try a few key things first. Measure impact, pivot as you need to. Then, measure again and repeat or invest more in what's working to increase revenue (not just what seems cool or is fun.)"

## A Practical Approach

According to Dale Shadbegin, CMO of 118 Group, a web design firm located in Hyannis (and the new CEO of Cape and Plymouth Business Magazine), any marketing initiative, whether it's an email or social

media campaign, starts with your website.

“We believe your website is really the hub of your universe. You should be driving traffic to your website,” says Shadbegian.

When advising small business owners about their websites, he begins by making sure the client is willing to participate in the project. He then assesses their business goals, and their current digital efforts and asks lots of questions. What’s the driving need? Are they trying to jump to the next level? Is a better website something that would benefit their business?

Is the purpose of the website to find new sales, attract new employees, or retain existing clients? That’s important because there are many different purposes for websites, and every business owner has a different goal for their website.

For example, most commercial websites are designed to get information across and generate revenue. Shadbegian says it’s important to convey confidence, and to align your messaging with the target audience in order to attract new customers.

“Give a signal that you’re ready and open for business, that’s important. If your website looks out of date, people will think, ‘is this company still operating?’”

A website for a service business should also show creativity. That results in the customer thinking ‘these guys look like they’re with it. If they made that they can do what I want,’” says Shadbegian.

The goals for a nonprofit’s website are different, he notes. Nonprofits are generally focused on trying to find more people they can help, they also probably want large corporate donors or small donors visiting the site to see that the nonprofit’s vision aligns with theirs.

Sometimes it’s important for a website to attract people to an event, in which case the key is to clearly present information, directions, and hours.

Shadbegian sees many costly mistakes that businesses make when it comes to creating a website. Often, business owners don’t put enough time into the beginning of their project to define their goals. But planning, he says, is important.

“Client participation in digital marketing is essential. Those clients who are deeply involved in the project get more out of it,” he says. “It’s costly if they don’t have a vision of where they want their business to be. I urge them to think about the message they want to put out before we start building the site.”

Oberton agrees. “Really nail down what your story is, and the rest comes easy.”

### **Should You Hire A Professional?**

Websites require a mix of marketing and design. While marketers may have a grasp of strategy and market research, a good designer creates a positive user experience. They use color, language and design to make websites come to life.

Shadbegian cautions that great marketing people are not usually the best web designers, because they lack the technical tools and design skills.

“I would say having both talents is really important,” he says.

If a small business is generating a good profit, Shadbegian recommends hiring a professional to create the website. It doesn’t have to be an agency, it could be a part-time employee.

He suggests that business owners looking to hire a webmaster search their networks to find someone and then make sure they have the skills needed. Ask the candidate to present data that shows success in the past.

To make sure the website is achieving its goals, he recommends finding the metrics that are important to your business, and make sure they're regularly reported.

“You need a system internally to track your leads. That way you can tell if it's effective,” says Shadbegian.

If resources are limited, Shadbegian suggests bartering to find the help you need. It's also a good idea to find a mentor who can give advice. There are many free resources available, such as SCORE (Senior Corps of Retired Executives, with branches on Cape Cod and Southeastern Massachusetts. Many large digital consulting companies, such as Hubspot, also offer free online primers.

Perkett, too, notes that there are many marketing resources for small business owners.

“Follow helpful entities such as MarketingProfs, Hubspot and Social Media Explorer for tips and tricks. Learn about and try multiple social media tools, especially ones that offer free trials or visions. Some of my favorites for small businesses are Canva (design development), Buffer (publishing posts, analyzing), Hubspot (blog ideas generator), and Grammarly (grammar/writing check). There are so many affordable resources for small businesses to get started on their own digital marketing. But they also have to recognize, as I've stated above, when to transition to getting professional help so they can continue to build products, deliver services, or whatever it is that they are the professionals at and why they started their business in the first place. Think of it as a house painter, dog walker, car repair, etc. While you *could* do those things, they are probably better left to the experts to do the best job, and allow you to focus your time on other important things that do require your expertise.”

## Driving Traffic To Your Site

According to Shadbegian, there are two reasons people buy something: either they want it, or they need it. When someone needs something, they go to Google.

For that reason, improving your websites SEO (search engine optimization) for better organic search results and using Google Adwords pay-per-click advertising allows your company to come up higher on the list in Google searches. Optimizing your website probably requires some professional guidance. Be advised, optimizing your site is time consuming and costly, and it takes time to see the results. Experts will likely suggest that you establish authority and trust with your site, because Google tries to weed out sites that can't be trusted. You can do that by posting fresh content, and by including links in your site.

To drive traffic to your site, Shadbegian suggests sending regular eNewsletters to existing clients, encouraging them to visit. Social media advertising is also a possibility. It's inexpensive and easy to do. “You can get your message out to a lot of people in a short amount of time,” he says.

Blogging can help, too.

“I think that blogging has died down a little but I'm still a fan,” says Perkett. “I am always a fan of bringing audiences to your website. While there are many other places to publish content – for example, you can post a full article on LinkedIn – I still believe in the power of a blog. Today, with Google's search algorithm changes, longer blogs are back in, and that can be a burden for some teams, especially for small businesses.”

Perkett says blogs are important for small businesses that serve or sell beyond a local audience or region, such as online or e-commerce, but for businesses that only reach a smaller group, for example, a few towns, blogs are not as important as other channels.”

## The Power Of Social Media

Social media is a place to engage with your audience, highlight your business as a thought leader and gain credibility.

There are many social media platforms, we all know them. Oberton says LinkedIn is business-focused, and good for B2B and service companies. ECommerce businesses do well on Instagram and Facebook. Facebook has the best return on investment, because it's the largest, and there's also Twitter. It can be overwhelming, but Oberton recommends focusing on one platform to start with.

"I like to recommend that people have their website in good order and a plan before starting a social media campaign." Otherwise, she cautions, people's social media campaigns tend to die out as the person doing it burns out.

"You can burn out really quickly without a plan, so make sure some of the foundational elements are in place. If you don't have internal support it's going to be difficult."

Perkett recommends that prior to a social media campaign businesses should conduct a buyer's persona research project to understand where the majority of their audience gets their information and engages with brands, and start small, she advises. "For consumer businesses, I would say Facebook and Twitter are a good place to start. For B2B, LinkedIn is a definite."

Oberton has identified the four most important things about social media. First and foremost is providing value, then comes consistency (frequency and brand consistency), engagement, and genuineness and authenticity. The 80/20 rule applies to social media, she says. Eighty percent of posts should provide value; only 20 percent should be selling.

It's helpful to keep a calendar and maintain a good cadence. Too often, a business will post regularly, then stop, then start, then stop. That's not good, says Oberton. She recommends keeping a marketing calendar and defining specific goals. Consider big milestones, awards and events.

"Once you get into a good rhythm you can expand to other platforms," says Oberton. "There's always an opportunity to highlight your business."

Social media is an opportunity to engage with potential customers and to take people behind the scenes and show the personality of your company. Oberton notes that one of her clients, a large landscaping company on the Cape, has a very effective social media presence because the owner does it and he's very genuine and authentic. "So there's positives to having it done in-house by yourself."

Organic posts can be spontaneous and fun, says Shadbegon. "I see a lot of people get too serious and forget that part of it."

Oberton says the best way to build a following on social media is by engaging and using hashtags. Engaging means participating in conversations on other people's posts and in groups, and replying to comments. Social media algorithms detect engagement and more people see your own posts. "It really comes down to engaging, and then people gradually start to trickle it. The more engaged you are, the more people see your posts," says Oberton.

## Paid Digital Advertising

Deciding whether to use paid digital advertising depends on the type of business you have. If people have a need for the product or service you offer, then you might want to consider a pay-per-click Google Adwords campaign in addition to optimizing your website for good organic search results.

If you offer a product or service that people don't "need," or rather, that they wouldn't search for, then social media is your best approach.

If you do advertise, it's important to coordinate digital ads with your website. For example, follow up with people who left their contact information on your website, or simply visited your website, with paid Facebook ads. You can also target specific categories with Facebook ads, for example, if you own a tile store, consider targeting people who just moved to Cape Cod.

Facebook offers the chance to pay to "boost" your posts, that is, to present it to an expanded audience. You might consider this, but Oberton cautions that boosting results in low value followers, people who have no connection to your business.

Perkett also advises small business owners to be careful when it comes to paid digital advertising.

"Yes, it can be easy to set up but it can be costly and a waste of time and money if not properly executed. Some people do great with them but others not so much. Choosing the wrong key words or using ineffective copy are common mistakes. It's also important to measure conversions and pivot from what isn't working – and do more or what is," says Perkett.

"Digital advertising in general is often a costly mistake if you don't know what you're doing. It's important to at least hire a consultant for an educational overview before you dive in, if you can't afford to have an expert execute a full digital ad strategy for you. That's part of the challenge in today's world – so many people think that they are marketers simply because amplification tools (like social media) are easily accessible. But as I've always said, just because you have access to paint and a paintbrush doesn't make you a good painter, access to a phone doesn't make you a good communicator. Access to digital tools doesn't make you a good marketer," she says.

While digital advertising can help jumpstart a business, Oberton suggests that business owners focus on social media, email and website optimization to nurture relationships. Only when that is working, then start paid advertising to people who are unaware of your brand, if the budget allows. And she recommends that you don't use paid ads unless you have a clearly defined goal for the ad, such as driving traffic to your site, selling a product or capturing customer information on a form.

When it comes to digital advertising, she suggests that handling it internally as long as possible. That way, she reasons, you'll learn about it yourself. It's hard to pay someone to do something you don't understand.

So when it comes to digital marketing, Shadbegian says his agency has a saying, "'if you're not growing you're dying.' It's like an airplane, if you're not fueling that airplane it stops flying."

*More info: [www.capecoddigitalmarketing.com](http://www.capecoddigitalmarketing.com), [www.118group.com](http://www.118group.com) and [www.mindfullmarketing.com](http://www.mindfullmarketing.com)*



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