

ANA

101

eMarketing to Small Businesses

Written by



1. The Lowdown

Small businesses represent a tantalizing audience for online marketers. After all, 99.6 percent of all businesses have fewer than 100 employees, according to the latest U.S. Census numbers. In fact, 80 percent have only one employee, the owner. Their small sizes make them cost-ineffective for sales calls, so the Internet has become the go-to channel to get them.

Conventional wisdom suggests that they be treated like consumers because small businesses usually have a sole decision-maker, the owner. However, an e-marketer should think twice about that.

2. Why do I need to know about it?

Aside from the basic principles of email marketing, consider these ideas when marketing to small businesses.

Adopt the Mindset of a First-Time Parent

Unlike a large business that has already gone through the early growth stage, a small business has fewer employees and is most likely still in its infancy stage.

Small businesses are still learning the ropes on how to grow their businesses in a cost-efficient manner. Your role as a small business marketer is similar to that of a first-time parent trying to understand growing pains and how to nurture growth. However, instead of changing diapers, you'll be sending emails and other e-direct communications (sounds glamorous, doesn't it?).

The more small businesses can see you as someone that they can depend on to bring solutions that scale to their growing needs, the more readily they will put their trust in you. Build emails around solutions that meet small businesses' needs. Don't sell copiers, sell the ability to present professional-looking documents to clients. Don't sell health insurance, sell a program to keep employees healthy and productive.

The solutions concept can also come from the types of products or services offered and through relevant articles and tips included in an email newsletter. Small businesses crave the information resources that bigger businesses have, so white papers and how-tos can definitely reach this audience. Success in reaching this audience results in: continued interest from subscribers who want to receive and open your emails, repeat customers and visits to your Web site, and new customer referrals.

Seek Out a Support Network With Shared Interests

Now that you have retained your existing customer base, you should be asking yourself how to grow your list. There are several ways to do this, including the typical acquisition strategy of list rentals, paid/organic search, co-registration, and display advertising. Seek partners with shared interests.



Just as first-time parents look for support through parental networks, small business marketers should align themselves with partners who offer complementary solutions to the same target audience. For example, if you are selling telecommuting solutions, partnering with online collaboration services providers would be a natural fit. Both parties could mutually benefit by sharing email subscriber lists and participating in other co-branded marketing opportunities like direct mail, Web sites, Webinars, and events. Also, take a look outside the box and consider the not-so-obvious partnerships such as travel services providers who can bring your people together.

Get Involved in Playgroups

Nurturing the growth of a company does not have to come solely from products and services you have to offer. In fact, not many companies can truly offer everything a small business needs to grow, which is why many small businesses seek advice from their peers.

Just as you might start a playgroup of suitable friends for your child, consider creating a circle of peers for your small business clients to communicate amongst themselves. If you have the resources, build a small business community on your company website for subscribers to get advice and tips related to growing their businesses, and the opportunity to share experiences with their peers. If building a community is not within your budget, participate in small business or industry-specific communities, social sites, or blogs your customers may visit.

At the same time, keep a pulse on what people are saying about your brand and combat any negative feedback whenever possible. If there is a need that is not being met, use that knowledge to improve upon or change your company's strategy.

Companies that listen and demonstrate care by addressing small business needs and helping them grow will benefit from the positive brand image that they project.

Keep Communication Lines Open

In marketing to small businesses, reaching the key decision maker with your marketing message is the ultimate goal. Like catering to your teenager, who may prefer text messaging rather than conversation, it is your job to find the right communication channel to get your message across. Take the time to know your audience and the primary channels through which they obtain information.

According to Marketing Sherpa, 64 percent of key decision makers view emails on a Blackberry device first. With that in mind, design email that is mobile friendly and can be viewed in the small window pane of various mobile devices. Optimize your email design with brief and impactful marketing copy in pre-header text and limit the number of images. Test email creative on multiple mobile devices, include a link at the top of the email that allows the recipient to view a plain text version, or create a WAP version of the email.

Other communication channels frequently visited by key decision makers are social media sites and blogs, where they conduct research and read customer reviews by their peers before making their buying decision. Consider participating in blogs, creating a social media page, or advertising on these sites to build brand awareness and reach your target audience.



3. The thing to remember is...

Marketing to small businesses requires nurturing and guidance to help build a strong foundation for growth. If this is new uncharted territory for you, consider incorporating these ideas into your marketing strategy to take on this new challenge.

These recommendations are not meant to be considered all-inclusive best practices but rather some useful tips for marketing to small businesses in this ever-changing digital world we have happily embraced.