

B2B marketing: Small business success in ten simple steps.

These ten steps breakdown into:

▶ **Strategy**

Working out what you need to say to whom.

▶ **Planning**

Developing the most efficient way to do it.

▶ **Execution**

Optimizing your ROI.

Strategy

The background features a complex geometric pattern of overlapping triangles and polygons in various shades of teal, light blue, and white. The shapes are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement, with some areas appearing to recede and others to come forward. The overall effect is modern and dynamic.

1. It's all about marketing

Many of us in small business can be tempted to view marketing as the end of the process. The window dressing. The bit that new prospects see first.

Wrong. In truth, marketing is the very cornerstone of a business.

If you are a business owner or CEO then marketing is at the heart of your role and central to your success.

Like all strategy; it's about using resources well. In any small business, resources are precious, whether people, time, money or kit.

Crucial is you use your resources to develop a compelling product and "cut through" so that the people who need to know about you, do so.

We define marketing as:

"Finding out what your target clients want, working out how to give it to them better than the competition, then telling them about it."

So rather than being a 4pm on a Friday task.

In reality, marketing is a Monday 9am task.

In reality, marketing is your number 1 task.

2. It's not about you

This is probably the hardest won lesson that many fail on. Not because owners and managers of small business don't care about their customers, far from it.

In fact, it's more because they are so passionate and committed to their business.

As owners we have invested years of our lives into our products, our "baby" and so we love talking about it.

We perhaps feel we know our customers well enough, because after all we built our product or service for them in the first place. But this passion can misdirect us.

In truth your would be customers simply do not care (yet). It is still down to us to connect the dots between what we do and the problem the customer has in their business. A reason for them to care.

It maybe they already know they have a problem, but often they don't.

So, its not enough just to mention the problem, sometimes we need to actively sell the problem in order to then talk about how we can solve it. Finally, it's no good talking about the problem in our terms, or our words. It will only engage a prospect if we talk in their language, in their terms. Solve the problem as it appears on their 'to do' list.

Talk about the client problem



you solve.

3. Developing your proposition

People often talk about what they do and how they do it, the functional things, but very few talk about why they do it.

Successful businesses have a very strong understanding of why they exist and are clear about communicating it to people in a simple way and compelling way, so that people relate to them in a more emotional way.

People don't just buy what you do they buy into why you do it. So you need to identify your personal business cause (the passion that drives you and the reason why you get out of bed in the morning) and then articulate the promise you'll deliver and the conviction that sets you apart from others.

In summary, we want prospects to feel:
"I get it, I like it and this is definitely for me."

No business should even commission any marketing until they have defined their proposition in a way that is unique to them.

This should be based on a genuine human business insight (the problem that needs solving). This should be captured in a brief statement of why they are in business and what makes them better and different to relevant prospects versus competitors or other alternatives (including doing nothing).

3. Developing your proposition

A very simple format for this could be like this:

Why we exist	What client problem do we seek to solve ?	E.g. We save you money on printing	E.g. We help clients reduce manufacturing cost
What we do	Tells the customer what they need to know about you - Think emotional and functional benefits of why you provide	E.g. We are the only one line printing and display company with a passion for excellence	E.g. We are a time served consulting firm specializing in high tech manufacturing peopled by personable eggheads
How we do it	What makes us unique	E.g. That gives you free lights and next day delivery	E.g. That brings our in depth ABC model to engagements that gets you to the best results in half the time

Being single minded in this is tough but essential. It's not hard to write a huge amount of "stuff" in doing this task. What matters is deciding your single most compelling and important message because that can then be the foundation of your marketing and ensure you will make an impact.

This can be the unique bit of pixie dust that is only true to you. That way it can't be copied by your competitors. You also need to be consistent in all you say and do. Clients don't spend much if any attention on you and your product (or even your competitors).

If you are scattergun in your thinking and marketing, the chance of anything "sticking" in your prospects' minds is low.

You won't succeed if you are not memorable.

Decide on your single minded proposition, your



"why, what and how."

Planning

The background features a complex geometric pattern of overlapping triangles. The color palette includes various shades of purple (from light lavender to deep violet), teal, and light blue. The triangles are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement, with some shapes pointing towards the top right and others towards the bottom left.

4. Don't just jump in

In B2B marketing, the buyer decision is probably complex. It may also be expensive. And indeed it may be risky.

Doing nothing, staying with the status quo has some attractions. It's safe, and maybe things are "OK". It may be quite a uphill task to motivate a customer to change what they do (but of course if a business keeps doing the same things they will get the same results).

For all these reasons think about marketing as a buyer journey, not a one off impact.

On the one hand a wise purchase may help the company make more money or operate better, making our buyer a hero or at least feel good. But there is the real risk of the opposite.

We have all bought things for our own business that didn't do what they promised, sucked in loads of time, cost us both cash and angst.

We are all naturally sceptical and wary. Most buyers will actually buy few of the even good services or products they come across.

So, central to the marketing of any B2B product or service is building trust and credibility. This doesn't come quickly or cheaply. Trust is hard earned and easily lost.

So, you need to plan to make a strong first impression.

First impressions are vital as we decide whether we are interested in a product, brand or service through the automatic first impression we gain. Before we have the chance to consciously understand the content of what we're seeing.

This quickly forms our long-term opinion of it either positive or negative and can bias our longer-term attitude towards what we're seeing judging it as either all good or all bad.

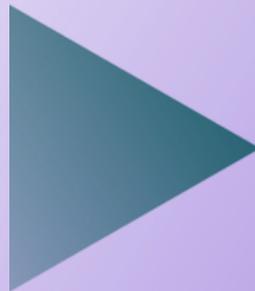
Your marketing has to make a truly great first impression.

The rule of thumb is :

60% of marketing should be spent on activities that build our name and reputation in the longer term.

40% delivers short term results (e.g. leads).

Plan your marketing for the long term.



Don't fixate on the short term.

5. Marketing versus Selling

One could say that “sales is the oldest profession in the world”. Nothing happens unless deals are closed, terms are signed, prospects are curated through to a decision and all the other nuances of professional sales.

Marketing provides the umbrella under which salespeople can operate. It supports them. Not just with qualified leads (the obvious relationship) but with reputation and credibility that is hard for any sales person to create at any speed.

Sales and marketing live in symbiosis. If they are not completely joined up then money and time will be wasted and opportunities handed to competitors. Many companies feel they started up with just “sales”. But what that probably meant is that sales did the marketing, or marketing was done by the owner or that we didn’t work very efficiently in the early stages. Perhaps our first customers were people we already knew? Maybe we were fortunate to find some early adopters who were particularly enthusiastic about what we offered?

That can’t be a basis for long term growth. If your salespeople don’t “get” marketing, or vice-versa then you may need to do some education.

Sales people can be a great source of know how to fuel marketing. They ought to understand customers, and hear first hand feedback on a daily basis. They are well placed to ask crucial questions of existing clients. These will give you clues about what to say to prospects.

Sales can be a source of referrals and recommendations. Both are crucial in B2B marketing.

Marketing people need to be results orientated. They must have a clear view how every expenditure links to a chain of events that leads to the risk of a sale in the foreseeable future.

Join your marketing
and sales planning



together.

6. Is it is working?

That old chestnut about “half my advertising works but I don’t know which half” is out of date. Certainly, it can be hard to measure the impact of some marketing activities but much of the “funnel” can and should be measured. Particularly with so much marketing on line being replete with automated metrics.

When it comes to specific campaigns, you should absolutely set goals based on past experiences, measure them and ask afterwards what went right or wrong so you can learn.

In small business marketing has an element of trial and error but evaluation testing will improve your success rate over time.

Demand that your suppliers forecast outcomes, and justify the money you send with them. Agreements with third party companies should talk about your reasonable expectations so that there is no confusion that you expect deliverables not just endeavours.

When utilising digital channels in particular there is no longer an excuse not to be close to the data given how easily this can be collected, analysed and displayed in easy to digest dashboards.

Start with the free analytics packages on offer such as Google analytics and ensure this is installed correctly on your website/app. When utilising any new channel make sure you install the tracking ‘pixel’ on your website/app.

This typically involves inserting a piece of code in the header of your website which allows you to isolate that channels performance and track conversions (sales, content engagements etc) end to end.

Test and learn. Start with your buyer personas (see section 7) and lift what you can from existing strong performers in a particular channel. Add your own twist then make use of “A/B” testing to check different variants of copy, creative, targeting and all other variables in a staggered manner and let the data lead you to the most compelling approach for your target audience.

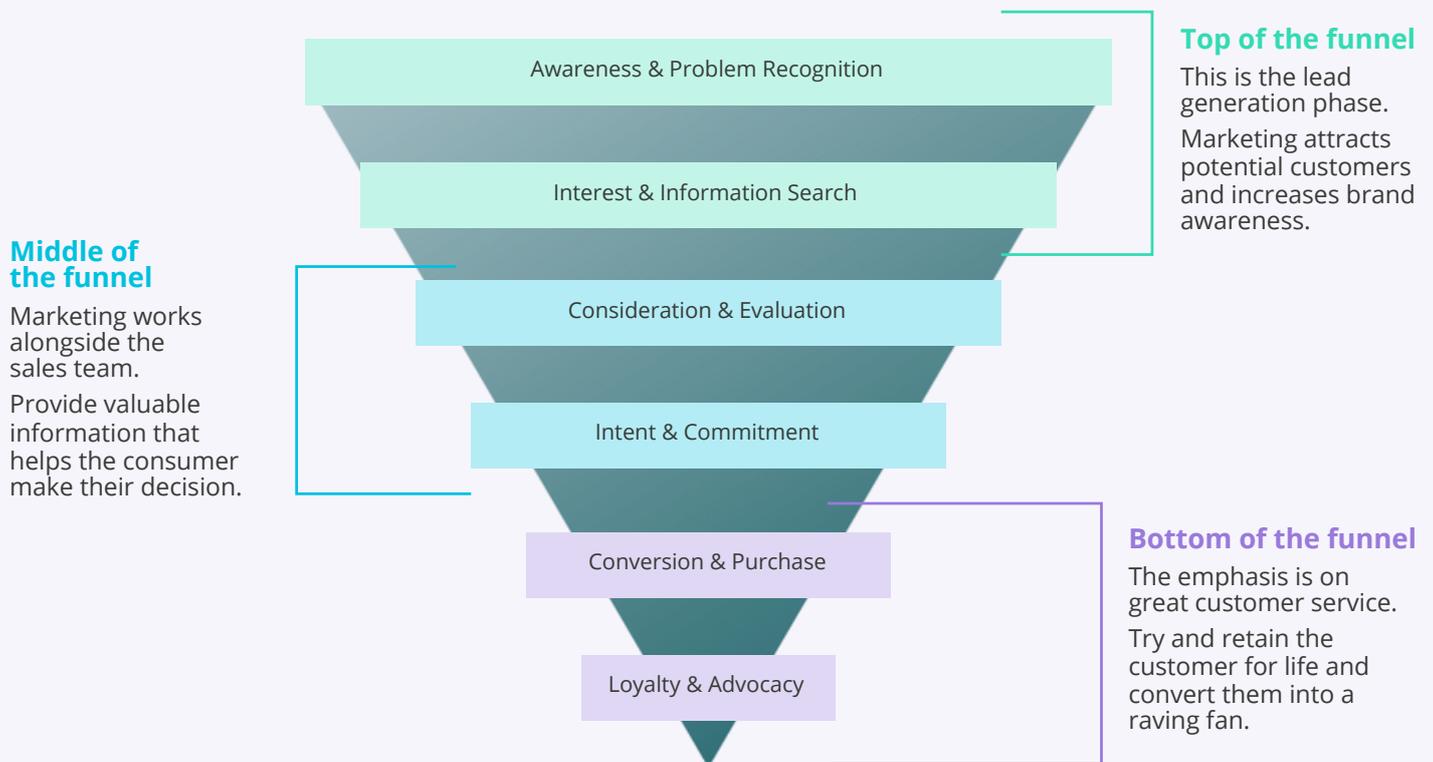
6. Is it is working?

Make sure these dashboards arrive in your inbox each week and take the time to examine them and understand the intricacies of each channel.

Key to this is understand the most important metrics which vary by channel and by goals.

Identify the priority metrics on the things with most impact

Marketing & Sales Funnel



Draw up your conversion funnel as shown above and consider how you can measure each part of the conversion process.

Measure everything you can possibly measure , plan to learn.

7. What marketing tools should I use?

The first question on choice of method comes back to your clients.

We want to communicate to them/with them so we have to figure out where they “go” and what they will appreciate.

Considering the “funnel” in point 6, we need to think about a program that guides a prospect along, one step after the other (not each activity in isolation)

A classic tool is to develop one or more “persona” for your typical prospect. As detailed as you can. Who they are, what they care about, their interests, how they spend their time, what they read and why. Then you can build your marketing around them (you can’t expect them to come to you).

Approach them on their territory, on their terms, with their interests in mind.

A secondary consideration is the size of the purchase decision. Different tools/programs will apply for a small budget decision (maybe someone can visit a website decide quickly click and buy?) or a large one where the process may take many months or years and require much higher levels of trust (maybe they need to meet you at conferences, hear about your from their peers over many occasions before they feel ready to talk?)

7. What marketing tools should I use?

Competitor analysis is important here. We can learn a lot from what our experienced or larger competitors do and where they spend their money. We could go alongside them to fish where the fish are, or alternatively to make our budget work harder we can find a niche where they currently don't spend so much so we can get more "share of voice".

Your choice needs to be appropriate for your size and budget. Upstart minnows need to be very tactically astute. The big guys can afford to be "everywhere".

Don't just follow the herd mentality - no matter what business sectors you are in they are always a sea of sameness.

Lawyers are happy being lawyers, accountants are happy being accountants etc. and they tend to follow established behaviours and patterns.

Stepping outside of the norms can be scary but it is up to you if you follow the normal conventions or do something different. It is good practice to look outside of your world to the wider world.

Look to see how other market sectors work what is being done that you admire - something that is basic in one industry sector can appear revolutionary in another.

Never forget your customers are people like you. They want to be inspired, educated, entertained as well as informed.

7. What marketing tools should I use?

Here is our “back of a fag packet” assessment of the typical B2B marketing toolkit components.

1. Advertising – Usually in relevant journals or newsletters. Important for credibility, but slow build. Probably best to pick a few media and work closely with them.

In the ever growing world of digital advertising you can test out various audiences quickly and safely at low budgets then replicate and scale the best performers. You can also get much more granular than you can across any other channel in the marketers’ arsenal.

Digital ad’s can be incredibly powerful at driving leads and brand awareness from day one but again the channel depends on the goals. Google Ad’s and LinkedIn are probably the front runners for business but Facebook/Instagram and twitter have their place.

The key is to focus on testing, starting small and scaling up.

2. Social media – Linked in more than the others, but continuous well curated content* should drive leads at a modest cost (although time consuming). Personalised material around the company leader/staff works well. It’s important to understand the nuances and disparate audience across each platform and alter your approach accordingly. Make use of “groups” and focus on delivering value and engaging with your audience more than overt selling.

3. Events – For many B2B sellers, this is the one chance to get quality time face to face and build more meaningful conversations. Costly, but hard to get around for larger value sales. Obviously the appetite for these will have changed in the short term, post pandemic and you need to think about how you can reach people virtually which brings

7. What marketing tools should I use?

Typical B2B marketing toolkit components.

4. Referrals – Crucial but often neglected. Need a plan to get your clients to engage others, maybe share groups and networking lunches could help? Share best practice or new insights as people always keen to learn how others have been successful.

5. PR – Can be the best money you spent because “free” media coverage can be fantastic, but it is hit and miss on what you get, how quickly. Probably a long term payback.

6. E-marketing – Emails, newsletters, prospect databases. The cornerstone of your marketing platform, everything should revolve around building then communicating with a prospect database. Pay real attention to the simplicity and clarity of your messaging less is more and motion content is vital. Make use of pre-built databases, manage data correctly to stay within legislation such as GDPR through correct use of opt-ins’ and again focus on providing value to your audience through a co-ordinated content plan which spans your entire online presence.

7. Website – It has to be simple and engaging with a clear route to action (does it “convert”?) and has worthwhile content. It’s your shop window in today’s world after all.

Focus on the basics: make sure you have Analytics installed, a clearly articulated (non flowery) description of your offering, clarity and simplicity, looks good across all devices, loads quickly and don’t overwhelm a first time visitor. Start with a good looking ‘launchpad’ and then slowly roll out content and features over time. Give your customers a reason to come back with high quality content, good value and a positive experience.

Don’t forget to capitalise on lead generation opportunities and make sure there are clear “call to actions” at the key points.

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Typical B2B marketing toolkit components.

8. Analytics, Tracking etc. There are a plethora of channel specific tools available to better understand and enhance on line marketing performance. These include analytics platforms, CRM systems, automation tools, scraping tools and a massive collective of other websites built to offer you advantage over the competition.

Examples include enhanced keyword research, insight into your competitors marketing activities, services that track the best performing content in a given niche and more. Probably best to access a specialist in this area.

* For many B2B marketing plans, content is the key plank of engaging new prospects. Enter a relationship by providing material they want to read, that addresses their concerns and positions you as the expert.

Execution

The crucial way you bring your distinctive personality to life as in a customer experience.

8. A brief avoids waste

If you use an external designer or agency to develop any marketing activity then a good clear brief is absolutely crucial.

They can only “create” based on what you tell them. And here the motto has to be “garbage in garbage out”.

The risk is either that you just don’t get good ideas, or maybe worse you get stuff that looks good but isn’t going to do the job you want. The former is frustrating but the second is money wasting.

The brief has to tell the designer who you are targeting. What they currently think about, worry about (what problem you can solve), and what the message in this piece of activity is that you want to get across. Usually it will be based on your proposition (as above) but it is crucial to explain what you want that particular marketing idea to achieve in the short turn. Where does it sit in your process (what part of the funnel)?

It’s a good idea to ask the recipient to talk to you about the brief to make sure they understand it before burning your time (if you pay by the hour) on “creating”.

Be clear why you’re doing this. Explain the business challenge in a nutshell? E.g. a problem with lost market share. Need to boost sales by encouraging brand reappraisal.

Look to outline 3 clear objectives for the work and how you are going to measure the effectiveness of the work.

What are the top-line business, marketing and design objectives?

Keep them short, factual and measurable.

**1. Design objective
(Desired output)**

**2. Marketing objective
(Desired outcomes)**

**3. Business objective
(The impact you want)**

Identify how we want our prospect to feel and do as a result of the work? What do we want the key out-take of the work to be?

A good brief saves time and money,



as well as focussing your mind on your goals.

9. Evaluating your ideas

We'd recommend a check list for any communications activity.

1. Will it stand out and get attention?

Too much marketing fails because no one even notices it. Is it easy for the recipient to understand who you are, what you do, why you are relevant? All your marketing must be cut through and be memorable - so recipients feel "It's different, uniquely appealing and interesting to me."

2. Is it obviously about you?

Your brand should have distinctive elements that are used in all your marketing so any message a prospect sees becomes quickly identified as from your firm. Develop or use your visual assets in a way that ensures you are easily recognised and stay top of mind - "I know who that is immediately."

3. Is it interesting/engaging?

The B2B prospect is busy and smart, they need to be treated as such.

4. Is your message simple and clear?

(Whist not being "duh" in your face).

5. For relevant marketing, is the call to action obvious?

What are you asking the recipient to do next?

You can reach your own view on the importance of the these 5.

We suggest you get input from other "arms length" people on this as well. It's notoriously difficult to assess your own marketing. You are too close to it.

Objective feedback



will prevent many marketing failures.

10. Keep on going

Marketing for B2B companies isn't an exact science. Not everything will work. Sometimes you won't even know if your activity worked or not. It may feel like you are wasting precious money.

But the important thing to remember is that your marketing effectiveness is likely to be measured over years not weeks.

You are investing to build reputation and trust, to become well known and familiar. You want to get onto short lists. You need to be in the consideration set. This might require multiple "touches" to a prospect over time. We all know this from our own experience – a major purchase is unlikely to happen from a single experience with a supplier.

Above all you need a continuous flow of leads and opportunities as fuel for your sales in the coming year (or longer). This isn't a luxury, it's the lifeblood of your business. Effective marketing over time builds this volume and keeps it coming.

Don't think about marketing as a one off. It's a way of life, and as we said in point 1, it's central to your company's success, not a bolt on.

Inspire your people to be creative and bring their best ideas to work for marketing. Let people experiment. Try new things. You have to be "in it to win it"

Don't be afraid to fail or try different things, encourage people to be brave and follow your gut. Listen to the nagging little voices in the back of your mind, they are there to tell you the truth. If something does not feel right its not right if it does it is. Instinct is a powerful guide.

Take a long term view



and be brave.

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