

## Online marketing on a shoestring: A guide for small businesses

 Simply Business™

Online marketing is an invaluable tool for businesses looking to increase awareness of their product and engage with potential customers. With an understanding of the resources available and a little bit of creativity, an online marketing campaign can be one of the most cost-effective ways of maximising your business's potential.

At London's Business Startup show, Simply Business partnered with PR agency 3 Monkeys and SEO agency Distilled to discuss some of the top marketing tips for people starting out in business. In this guide, we've compiled a list of tips from the show, along with a few strategies garnered from our own experience, to help you get started.

# Get a website

Since your website could be one of your first points of contact with the customer, it is important to develop a site that is striking and memorable, as well as authoritative and credible.

To get started, you should acquire your own unique domain name. There are many sites that can help you with this process. *Getting British Business Online* (gbbo.co.uk) is a good option, as it provides you with a free domain for one year, along with the tips and tools necessary to create an effective website. Square Space, Wordpress, Vistaprint, and Google Sites are also great and low-cost options for building and maintaining a website.

Think about what information you want on your site and the message you wish to convey to your visitors. As you create your website, consider: What makes your business unique? What do you offer that your competitors do not? Some elements that work well on a business site include an “About Us” section, a description of products and services, a customer contact form, information about your trade organisation affiliations and achievements, and a map to show your location.

Once you have posted content, you can think more about the appearance of your page. Test different landing page designs and track which format yields more traffic. Ask for friends’ opinions. An appealing, well-organised page improves user experience while driving more visitors to your site.

Remember that creating an effective website is a process. It doesn’t have to be perfect at first, as you can improve the site over time. The important thing is not to be complex, but rather informative and clear.

## **Helpful Links**

[Getting British Business Online](#), [Square Space](#), [Word Press](#), [Vistaprint](#), and [Google Sites](#)

# Learn the ins and outs of Google

With users today relying on Google for everything from their smallest needs to their biggest purchases, performing well in search engines should be one of the primary concerns of your online marketing campaign. If your site is at the top of search engines, you will see more visitor traffic, which inevitably translates to more business for your company.

There are many sites and online resources which can help you to maximise your search engine ranking. SEOmoz is one site with great resources and information to get you started. Tools like “On-Page Keyword Optimisation” and “Keyword Difficulty” conduct analyses to identify which queries maximise your ranking potential, and which keywords are best to target. Google Webmaster Tools can also tell you the keywords that are most relevant to your site, the number of hits your site is getting for specific queries, and a list of websites that most often link to yours.

In addition to using these tools, take some time to brainstorm the phrases that potential customers might search when looking for your product. If you are a cupcake business in London, for example, queries might include “cupcake business in London”, “cupcake decorating”, “local bakeries”, etc. The SEOmoz tool, Keyword Difficulty, can then tell you how difficult it is to rank for each query. If you are a new business, it is often effective to focus on ranking for less popular keywords at first, rather than trying to compete with competitors for the most popular keywords.

By understanding which queries drive the most traffic to your site, and by maximising your ranking potential, you can begin to structure a more focused and fruitful marketing campaign.

## ***Helpful Links***

[SEOMoz](#) and [Google Webmaster Tools](#).

## ***Recommended blogs for more information about search engine marketing and optimisation***

[Search Engine Land](#), [Distilled Blog](#), [SEO Book](#), [Google Webmaster Central Blog](#), and [SEOMoz Blog](#).

# Understand and measure who is using your site

Of course, increasing traffic to your website is only the first step in an effective marketing campaign. It is also important to understand how visitors navigate through your pages once they arrive.

Google Analytics can tell you who your visitors are and where they are coming from, giving you invaluable insight into your website traffic. The (free!) software shows how many people have visited your site over a period of time and which pages on your site have received the most clicks. For websites that ask users to complete a form or process, Google Analytics can identify what percentage of visitors who started your process actually completed it, and where users generally drop out in the process.

Another way to assess the amount of traffic coming through your site is to post a unique telephone number. Be sure to provide a number different from the number that you give out on your business cards and to your current customers. This way, when you receive a call on this line, you will know that the customer has found you through your website. By tracking the number of calls you receive over a period of time, you can see if your website is becoming more or less effective at reaching the right audience.

Measuring performance—understanding who is using your page, and how they are using your page—will help you to make changes that boost your ROI and increase the effectiveness of your marketing campaign.

## ***Helpful links***

[Google Analytics](#)

# Engage through social media

Social media is a great tool to help increase awareness of your brand, participate in thoughtful industry discussions, and engage with potential customers. If used correctly, social media can do wonders for your reputation and credibility.

It is worthwhile to register a Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn account under your business name. But, know that not all of these outlets will be suitable for all businesses. Try different strategies and see what works. Businesses that involve customers' personal life or hospitality (e.g. hair salons, restaurants) may find the most success on Facebook, while IT consultants may find the most success on LinkedIn.

Whichever site(s) you choose as your focus, remember that the primary goals are responsiveness and engagement. Share your knowledge and insight; contribute to the discussion; interact with users. Be active on your page and work to garner likes and comments, so that potential customers will continue to see your updates. This type of engagement will help to build up a network of people who know who you are, recommend you to others, and link to your site.

Social media can also be a great medium for interacting with opinion leaders outside of your direct network. 'Opinion leaders' are those that have large spheres of influence online; they have high following counts and retweets on Twitter, many likes and comments on Facebook, etc. Essentially, their feedback reaches and impacts a large audience. You can register with Klout.com to see statistics on users' online influence and to identify who in your network has "True Reach." Befriend these people, comment on their statuses, retweet their messages. By engaging with these users, you are rapidly spreading the word about your brand—not just to them, but to their entire online network.

In all cases, the objective is not to shamelessly plug your business. Rather, it is to participate in the online community and posit your company as a voice of authority. If you do this, the business will come.

## ***Helpful links***

[Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Google+](#), and [Klout](#).

## ***Platforms to manage and aggregate your social media sites***

[Hootsuite](#), [Radian6](#), [Involver](#), and [Topsy](#).

## ***Recommended blogs to read more about social media***

[Mashable](#), [Social Times](#), [Econsultancy](#), [The LinkedIn Blog](#).

# Blog to bolster your authority

By publishing industry-related blog posts, business owners can communicate expertise and personal style, while building and maintaining relationships with potential customers.

Though some shy away from this medium, writing blog posts is a skill accessible to anyone. Remember that it is not about being the most brilliant writer. It is instead about sharing advice and demonstrating your knowledge of the industry. Read what is being said in other similar blogs, and find out what your customers are talking about. What are their business concerns? What questions do they have? Which current events do they care about? These topics are great starting points for your own posts.

In addition to promoting discussion with your clients and driving traffic to your site, blogging can help to bring fresh content and new links to your site—two qualities that Google considers in evaluating your site. Ultimately, then, blogging increases the likelihood that your current clients will trust you, and that potential clients will find you.

Publishing directly onto your site is a great way to attract visitors to your page. But, if you would prefer to link to an external blog platform, Tumblr, Wordpress, and Blogger are good options with useful templates.

## ***Helpful links***

[Tumblr](#), [Wordpress](#), and [Blogger](#).

# Harness the power of your customers

A satisfied customer can be one of your most valuable assets. People interact and share experiences online, and if you can find customers who are willing to share a positive experience they had with your business, then you have acquired one of the best marketing tools—completely free of charge.

The first step, of course, is to encourage engagement by providing great service. When you do receive positive feedback, use those comments in a way that benefits your business. Post customer testimonials on your website, and ask clients to write reviews about you on Google. Set up accounts with sites like Qype, Tipped, Yelp, and TouchLocal, which allow users to review and recommend local businesses. Positive reviews on these platforms will both bolster your reputation and increase the searchability of your business.

Remember also that you need customers to be able to easily find your business online after reading a review. By creating a free account with Google Places, a search for your business will yield a listing with your address, hours of operation, a map of your location, and storefront photos. Google Places also operates as a business review tool, providing yet another way for happy customers to rate your service and share your business with their friends.

## ***Helpful links***

[Qype](#), [Tipped](#), [Yelp](#), [TouchLocal for London](#), [BView](#), [Rated People](#), and [Google Places](#)

# Remember that paid search doesn't need to break the bank

If you can set aside a portion of your budget, consider displaying a few paid advertisements on Google. These ads will appear either at the very top of the page or on the side panel, making them the first results that potential customers will see when they make relevant enquiries. Among various other settings, you can choose which keywords you wish to have linked to your ad and the geographical regions in which your ad is searchable—ensuring that your ad is viewed by a well-targeted audience.

Although pay per click (PPC) advertising requires an initial financial investment, it can pay for itself many times over if your ads are reaching the right audience. A successful marketing campaign is as much about quality as it is about quantity; a few paid ads that are focused on the right demographic will often yield higher returns than a large pool of ads that are viewed by disinterested users.

You can often find vouchers online to get your business started with PPC advertising. Simply Business offers a £75 voucher for Google PPC ads when you purchase an insurance policy. Google similarly offers a £30 free credit for setting up an AdWords account. By using a voucher, you can test your success and get a feel for the return on investment without any financial loss to your business. If you find that the initial test of PPC advertising has bolstered your sales, you can then proceed with confidence—knowing that this campaign will not hurt your budget, but rather, increase your profit.

## ***Helpful links***

[Free Google advertising voucher](#)