



Intro to Digital Marketing: A Business Owner's Guide

Not a guide to doing.

A guide to understanding the basics
and avoiding traps.

Everything you need to understand about digital marketing to
make better budgeting decisions and grow your company.



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Why we wrote it.

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide. It's something that we've been wanting to put out for a long time. The following pages will hopefully help to remove some of your uncertainty surrounding digital marketing and some of the industry buzzwords you keep hearing mean. Our other goal is that this guide leads you to make better decisions.

The truth is, there are very few services out there that business owners willfully invest in when they don't know exactly what they're getting in return. For whatever reason, marketing has gotten away with something pretty special in the services world: vague deliverables, unsure customers, and the sense that these services are a necessity, not a commodity.

This guide is focused on digital marketing and getting small business owners just familiar enough with it to make better decisions when picking services to pay for. The purpose is to learn how to spend your dollars, how to pick better providers, and know when you're someone is trying to take advantage of you. Are you ready?

Let's get started.



Chapter 1

Introduction

Our goal here is to keep things simple, get you through the following pages, and leave you with a more comfortable understanding of this whole Digital Marketing world and how it applies to your business. You don't need to read this all in order -- start with your interests, go from there.

Sometimes marketing can be frustrating.

Look, you're a hard-working business owner who has spent years bootstrapping your company to the place that it is today. You've seen failures, successes, you've taken big risks, and hopefully you've at least seen the light of growth. You know marketing is the mechanism for creating more growth, but you also think of 'marketing' as a dirty word of sorts.

There are a ton of charlatans in this world. Unlike legal services, CPAs, and the other professionals you've had to hire over the years, marketers usually don't need an actual license or degree to do their job. This has unfortunately led to the marketing industry being a harbor for snake-oil salesmen as well as an overwhelming amount of confusion for you, the business owner.

Like many scams, creating confusion and guaranteeing "magical results" are preferred methods for so-called marketing experts when they attempt to fleece business owners out of their hard-earned money. Inevitably, this leads to a bit of skepticism. And you know what? It should. We understand that wholeheartedly.

The purpose of this guide is to make marketing more digestible and manageable for the average small business owner who lacks a great depth of experience and education on the subject -- perhaps someone like you. We've set out to make things as tangible and useful as possible and we hope you'll enjoy reading. Have questions? Reach out and ask. We love talking shop with business owners.



Something to keep in mind:

It's all about speaking one-on-one, with a customer.

Unless you run an eCommerce business, it's likely that you aren't too comfortable managing any kind of marketing online, but that's okay. The thing we want you to keep in mind is that at the end of the day, digital marketing comes down to using tools -- built to be easy to use by normal people -- to get a message in front of future customers.

Digital marketing can sometimes seem technical but it really isn't. People of all types and from all kinds of different backgrounds are professionals in this space. Like them, you can learn as much about it as you wish. It's not a new language. It's just good planning and execution.

Inevitably, marketing comes down to "talking" to a customer. It's all about messaging. That's what good digital marketers focus on, and if you choose to work with one make sure this is a major part of their focus. Is that the right channel to talk to your customer? Is that the right message? Are we giving them what they need? These are the questions you need to constantly be asking yourself.

"It's much easier to double your business by doubling your conversion rate than doubling your traffic"

— Bryan Eisenberg



Chapter 2

Questions You May Have Asked Yourself...

1. Okay keep it simple for now, what is digital marketing exactly?

In the most basic terms, “Digital Marketing” is just the catch-all term for the various marketing initiatives that take place in the online world as opposed to “Traditional Marketing”, which is composed of things like TV, radio, and billboard advertising. It’s not super technical like you may think, it’s not ‘coding’, it’s basically just a composition of all the different ways you can reach your audience online. Some people are just good at using these channels.

The real question is, where does your audience need to find you online? It’s almost certainly not everywhere. Some companies would see great results by advertising through facebook. Others would not. It’s just like advertising in a men’s interest magazine on the traditional side. Do you sell workout gear or supplements? If so, those magazines might make a lot of sense for you and your brand. But for most companies, there are much better ways. Digital marketing is the same.

The real question is, where does YOUR audience need to find you online? It’s almost certainly not everywhere.

So essentially, digital marketing is just the broadest way to describe all the different ways that you could market your business to reach audiences online, plus the actual skills involved in executing that outreach.



2. Do I actually need somebody else to do all of this?

That depends. Are you supremely confident that you understand your customer base and the ways they try to find you online? If you have a solid grasp of this and you have the desire to teach yourself how to actually implement digital marketing strategies, you may be able to get this done without outside help. That said, a word of caution...

Say you're a landscaping professional. Yes, your clients may be able to learn to install an irrigation system, but it's not recommended because choosing to do so is ripe with potential errors. In digital marketing, great execution is vastly predicated on experience. There are plenty of business owners who have the passion and interest to learn skillsets such as SEO or Social Media Marketing and do them well on their own. For most, however, it's better to find the best provider for your own needs and maximize the impact of those marketing dollars.



"Time well spent results in more money to spend, more money to save, and more time to vacation."

- Zig Ziglar

Trying to learn this all on your own anyway?

We recommend you start with these guides:

- [The Hubspot Inbound Marketing Certification](#)
- [Moz's Beginner's Guide to Social Media](#)
- [Moz's Beginner's Guide to Content Marketing](#)
- [Moz's Beginner's Guide to SEO](#)
- [The American Marketing Association Email Marketing Course](#)
- [Google's Analytics Introduction Course](#)



3. Will an investment in digital marketing pay off for my business?

While return on your investment is very likely with the right strategy and approach, there is no way to guarantee success. Guaranteed results are almost always misleading unless you have a solid contract in place that stipulates you only pay for results. We caution you here.

The truth is, testing is critical for digital marketing, just as it is for any kind of marketing. The right company handling your marketing will avoid channels that make less sense and instead steer you towards more proven methods businesses like yours.

The good thing is, successful digital marketing can make you an established brand of choice in many markets. It just comes down to making good up front decisions in terms of setting your goals and strategies, budgeting and allocating your budget, and partnering with highly-proven, experienced marketers.

The thing you must critically avoid is any provider that welcomes you to self-dictate all of your digital marketing without a conversation and some pushback. By jumping into a channel strategy that isn't meticulously thought out, you're running the risk of a negative ROI (return on investment). Remember, you are new to digital marketing. Also keep in mind, just because you see your competitors marketing themselves in certain ways online doesn't mean their methods are generating any success. Having ideas about how you want to market your business online is great, but there are experts out there who can guide you.



4. Can somebody, anybody, guarantee my results?

You can find plenty of folks out there that will guarantee you whatever you need to hear in order to sign on the dotted line. At our agency we don't operate that way. If you find a provider that does guarantee results and you plan to work with them, be sure they write down all those sweet nothings they whispered in your ear in order to get your business. Make sure it's on paper because there will be zero accountability otherwise. They will continue to promise you the world and cash your checks until you finally realize that you've been taken for a ride. For us, we think guaranteeing results is a terrible way to do business and it inevitably leads to a revolving door of clients, 3 months of payment, and an awkward goodbye.

The Marketing World is as business as it gets. It's critically built on strategic planning, roadmapping, and experience-based leadership. Beyond all that, doing the work costs real money for any marketing company. You need experience to maximize your chances of good returns. The best way to see results is to manage deliverables daily, adjust on the fly, and learn while growing. If results could be guaranteed, you'd just hire every marketing company in the market. They work on performance, right?

We think guarantees are misleading and usually irresponsible. To maximize your chances, start by involving yourself in the gameplan, arming your team with great customer and product insights, and making goal-setting mandatory. .



5. Okay, do I actually need to do social network stuff like Facebook or Twitter?



Many times no. Regardless of what any marketers will tell you (usually because they're trying to get to your checkbook), not every business needs to be active on social media. Ultimately, it comes down to your personal customer base and whether or not engaging with your brand regularly makes any sense at all. In some spaces, sharing your company's culture and vision socially and developing online relationships with your target consumer is critical to growth.



Take retail for example. Impassioned customers will follow a good retail brand on social and react to new clothing lines, funny posts, and more. It's all in that culture. In other spaces, hearing from your brand on social media just doesn't make a ton of sense most of the time. This isn't to say dead-air on social media is great either, but the level of activity in social networks and the various social networks where you even need a presence will vary. We think securing your brand name across most networks is always a good move but actually using all of them is definitely more debatable.



6. Sometimes when I shop online, I'll see ads later in Facebook and other places for the exact same items I was shopping for? How the hell do they do that?

This isn't coincidence and it's definitely not magic. The term used to describe this phenomenon is "remarketing", also referred to as "retargeting", though these are slightly different. The way it works is through your browser itself. A browser is something like "Chrome", "Safari", "Firefox", or "Internet Explorer" -- the software apps you use to browse the internet on your computer or your mobile device.

Okay light tech speak warning: When you visit a website to shop, that website can install a little piece of code into your browser called a "cookie". This "cookie" (not sure why it's called a cookie but I'm sure it's explained somewhere) takes note of your activity on that site. This way, if you return later, they can know a little bit more about you, your shopping habits, and that you've visited their site before.

Remarketing is something that certain third-party advertising platforms (like Facebook) allow businesses to use. Basically, they tell Facebook "okay, so if somebody visits Facebook and you see that they have my cookie installed and it has info about a product they recently looked at, show them that product in an ad". Facebook looks at users' browsers when they visit (where that cookie was installed), and if they see that info, they show you an ad based on the product listed in the cookie.

Essentially, this is just one site sharing info about you with another site for the sake of advertising. There is very little actual personal data shared (pretty much none at all), and there are pretty strict rules about what can and cannot be shown in these kinds of ads. Mostly shoes. It's always shoes.



7. How affordably can I get started with digital marketing?

Technically, you can hire individual service providers for each space you need help in (let's say Social Media, Local Listings, and light SEO) and have them follow strictly set guidelines (set by you) for pretty cheap. You could go to websites like [Fiverr.com](https://www.fiverr.com) or [UpWork.com](https://www.upwork.com) and find somebody either here in the US or in another country to do what you ask -- just be sure to lay out the task with meticulous detail and keep in contact with them as much as possible.

We aren't being sarcastic by the way, you can -- again, technically -- hire such people and 1 in 200 may be fairly skilled for small projects. In this case, maybe \$100/month to start?

But that's typically a fool's errand. There are a range of agency-type services you can buy into as well. Just be sure to investigate as much as possible before investing. We've seen companies with \$600-\$800/month services focused on specific marketing niches and we've also worked with companies that charge a minimum of \$5000+/month for strictly digital marketing.

At our own company, costs vary as well. We have a consulting service that simply provides owner-to-owner marketing strategy (no execution on our part, but instead, guidance and oversight of your marketing) which is priced by the hour. We also have an intro-level marketing services package at \$1000/month and our standard full-service marketing starts at \$3000/month. If you'd like to look more into our services, please visit us [here](#) for more info.



Chapter 3

Simple Definitions

Digital marketing is just a handful of ways to reach customers online. Once you understand the basic lingo, you'll be well on your way to understanding how things may apply to your company.

SEO (Search Engine Optimization):

The various ways that you can "optimize" (improve) a website for search engines (such as Google, Bing, Yahoo, etc.). There are 2 main purposes here. You want to be sure the search engines understand without a doubt what products and services you offer so they're able to make that clear to consumers when people are searching for businesses like yours. This process also helps your business be listed higher in the search rankings with the ultimate goal being for you to show up in the first overall slot on the first page of Google for all relevant search terms.

This is a bit complex so let's break that down. Search engines want to show their searchers the best possible websites when they are looking for something. They try to understand what that searcher is actually trying to find after they type something in, and they use a ton of math to make that decision. SEO is the range of tactics that can help to make your website as perfect as possible to be shown to the right people. Failure here means your possible customers never even know about you.

On-Page SEO

On-Page SEO is where it almost always starts. This is a series of changes you can make **to your website itself** to improve the way Google and other search engines understand your content, service, and product. Conversely, off-page SEO is based on building brand mentions and backlinks online to get more signals to your site that will improve rankings.



Email Marketing:

Nope, not just emailing people. This is a range of ways to engage potential customers or past customers in order to keep them aware of your brand and get them to come back when ready. This can mean “nurturing” new customers over time with a set of emails that follow-up after purchase, it can be announcements of discounts, or it can be newsletters that keep customers reminded of you. It varies.

The critical part of email marketing is developing an email list (a database) of people for you to reach out to regularly. New and former customers are a great place start, but you can also build a list by asking non-customer website visitors to provide their email address for some incentive in return (a discount code, a free item, etc).

Email Marketing campaigns are done with email automation tools (like “MailChimp”, which you may have heard of), and typically require a lot of monitoring to see what works so you can optimize your campaigns and capitalize on what has proven to be effective.



Did You Know?

You can also do Ads inside of Gmail.

While not well used yet, Google actually offers “Gmail Ads”. You can target users’ inboxes with ads when they have emails that include terms you specify. So if you’re Nike, you can target anybody with an inbox email confirming a purchase from Adidas. How could Gmail Ads work for you?



PPC

This stands for "Pay Per Click". You know when you Google something and you see those few results up at the very top of the search results page that say "Ad" next to them? If this isn't ringing a bell, just go search for "Dentist [your city]" and you'll see. PPC is online advertising that you pay for every time someone clicks on one of your ads. A PPC expert will set a budget in the network (Facebook, Google, etc.) and tell that network that they're willing to pay \$X per click for each ad. Usually this is in the \$1-\$2 range but in some spaces it can skyrocket. It depends on how many of your competitors are competing for the same space.

The key to PPC is understanding how many of the people that click on your ads might actually become a customer. Not to get too in the weeds, but just think of it this way. If you're paying \$1/click and 1 in 100 clicks results in a purchase, it's costing you \$100 for every purchase made as a result of your paid efforts. If that margin makes sense to your product line, great! But it's critical in PPC to understand that math and know the limits.

EXTRA CREDIT:

CPC

The "Cost Per Click" you're actually paying in a PPC campaign. This can be personally "bid" (as in, you tell the network like Google or Facebook the max you're willing to spend per click vs. the competition), or you can let the network determine the right CPC bid for you based on what your competition is bidding and spending.

CPM

Instead of paying per click (CPC) you pay per impression. CPM actually stands for "Cost Per Mil" which, somewhat confusingly, means cost per thousand impressions. In this case, how many clicks you get is irrelevant. Instead you bid on how much you're willing to pay per 1000 people who see your ad in that network. Some networks allow for this option, others do not. Sometimes this is a better alternative to CPC, but not always and it must be tested.

Conversion Rate

The Conversion Rate measures the percentage of people that clicked your ad and then converted once they hit your site or your landing page. A conversion could be a purchase, a form fill-out, a video play, or anything else you deem valuable.



Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing is just the catch-all (like “digital marketing”) for marketing within social networks -- of which there are many. We have Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Periscope, Pinterest, and many more. Social marketing -- as a term -- combines efforts that are both ‘paid’ and ‘organic’. A quick explanation:

Paid Social Marketing is paying the social network to advertise for your brand. Paid campaigns can have a number of different goals such as gaining more followers on your social profile, video plays, visits to your site, and many others.

Alternatively, Organic Social Marketing is simply utilizing an individual social network to strategically build brand awareness and generally promote your products or services. You aren’t paying in this case, you’re just actively using the network to (much more slowly than paid in most cases) grow an audience. Simple, right?



Set up your business profiles, post weekly, share your voice/follow influencers.



Retargeting

As explained earlier in this brief, retargeting is the digital marketing approach that involves “following up” with potential customers who have been to your site but not purchased (or purchased and may purchase again).

Basically, when you see an ad in Facebook for the exact product you shopped for a week ago, this is probably retargeting. There are many ways retargeting can be done and it is not limited to Facebook ads. We just used that as an example. This is a great way to direct advertising/marketing towards individuals you already know are interested in your company in an attempt to complete the sales cycle with them before they lose interest.

Retargeting is done -- on a technical level -- either by actually having a user's info that they themselves provided (like an email address for some kinds of marketing) or (more commonly) by installing a little piece of code on a user's browser when they stop by your site. This is done by many major sites -- even Google -- and is common online. The website itself installs the code so it's not some manual thing, and it's simply a little piece of code (called a Cookie) that logs each user's basic activity on the site individually.

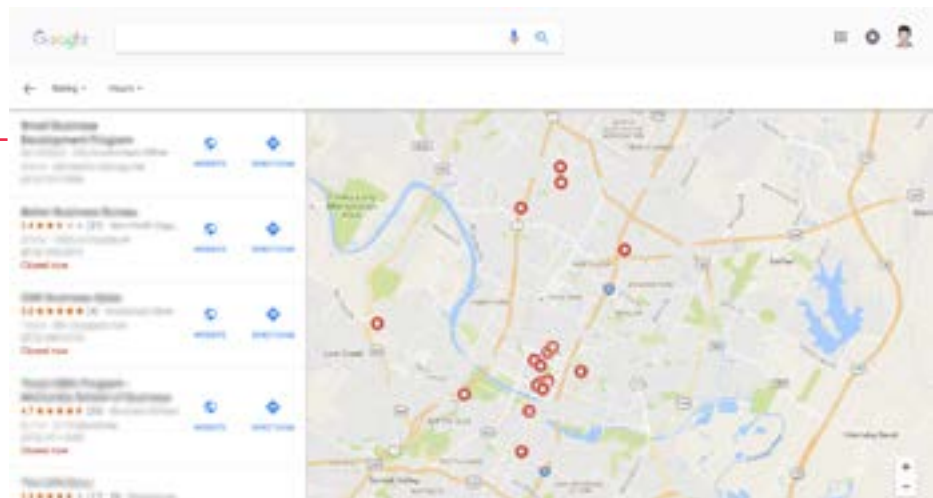
Google Analytics (the platform Google provides for free that allows business owners to see how people behave when they visit your site) uses Cookies to function, Facebook uses Cookies to keep you logged in, and advertisers use Cookies to show you an ad for products you are interested in later.



Local Marketing

Back into the catch-all terminology here, “Local Marketing”, in the digital space, just represents the many ways you can reach regional customers through online channels. So if you -- for example -- have a service area for your business that serves a single market/city and the surrounding areas, Local Digital Marketing would be the primary focus, and there are some key aspects of this approach that become priority.

The big goal.



Local Marketing almost always includes “local listings” and getting those to a place of optimization so they perform well competitively. Local Listings include Yelp, Google Map Listings (also called *Places*), and many more like Angie’s List, city-specific business listings, and more. Local Marketing also typically includes optimizing a website (SEO) for the city you’re trying to get more customers within. So instead of doing SEO with the goal of ranking nationally for something like “Dentists”, you’d optimize for your city -- i.e. “Austin Dentists”. This local SEO approach has many unique components and typically “winning” here is a bit more straightforward than trying to win for national terms.



Content Marketing

Content Marketing is pretty simple, and if you're reading this, you kind of fell for it (in some ways) by opting in to receive and read this guide. Content Marketing is utilizing content to build brand awareness and generate traffic to your website. Typically this is done by producing a piece of content and distributing it around the internet to get people aware of your existence and get them -- as a goal -- to click towards your site at some point.



One popular content marketing technique is "guest blogging", which simply means reaching out to a popular blogger that covers your space (some niches have more of this than others) and getting them to let you write a "guest authored" piece for their blog. This content piece is usually interesting and informative, but can be lightly sprinkled with reference to your own good work and links to your site.

Another popular content marketing method is simple distribution. You produce an internal infographic, whitepaper (long form document like this), or other collateral and reach out to everybody who may share your content and ask them to do just that. You can use bloggers, media outlets, Twitter users, and much much more to maximize reach.

There are numerous ways to go about Content Marketing but again, this is a distinct digital marketing channel and one that has gained immense popularity in recent years.



ABM (Account Based Marketing)

A quick warning, ABM is a bit of an 'advanced' form of digital marketing still, and for that reason, we're going to quickly touch on it without getting too deep into how it works and the philosophies behind it. But think of it this way:

In typical organizations, "Sales" may be a distinctly unique department from "Marketing". Sales teams have their key accounts, accounts they're nurturing over time, etc. Marketers are usually just trying to maximize relevant exposure to the brand and drive home sales leads.

ABM thinks of the marketing and sales relationship a bit differently and can be a game changer for certain businesses where longer sales cycles are common.

ABM essentially asks sales to help in the way marketers target accounts so that the best accounts eventually fall into the lap of the sales team. Sales teams benefit by getting the marketing team to "soften" sales targets before a call, and marketers benefit by aiming their dollars much more intentionally at the perfect audience for that company.

So instead of -- for example -- running online ads to all people who have a job title of "CEO" (which is possible in some places), you'd run online ads only at CEOs of the 500 companies that the Sales team is actually trying to win as accounts. They've already vetted these companies and know they'd be a good fit, so marketers will likely see a higher return on ad spend while spending less because they're only targeting a handful of important people vs. every CEO in the world.

ABM includes a number of steps to continue 'nurturing' a potential client with digital marketing, but these are the basics. This is a digital marketing approach where targeting specific people is key. It's a great fit for B2B companies especially.



Chapter 4

The Tools Digital Marketing Nerds May Mention (simplified):

Again, we don't need you to learn to use these various tools. However, to feel more comfortable with the lingo you'll come across when hiring a digital marketer, you should quickly review the following tools and familiarize yourself with their purpose. Here we go:

Google Analytics

This is a [free tool](#) that Google provides for any website. You just add a piece of code (copy/paste, it's simple, but whoever built your site should probably be the one to install it) and Google begins allowing you to track how many visits your site gets each day, how long those visitors stay on your site, where they come from, where they live, and much more.

Google Analytics -- like many Google products -- is also very easy to use for most people. This is a fantastic tool for measuring the success of your website in engaging visitors, and any marketer should be keeping an eye on this for you.



Google Webmaster Tools

Webmaster Tools (also called "[Search Console](#)") is a pretty bare-bones tool that is tied to Analytics. It has a fairly 'techy' name but don't let that fool you. Webmaster Tools is super simple to use. This tool allows website administrators to watch for errors that Google may experience with your site and keep on top of them. Among a few other things, it also allows some tracking of what search terms are driving traffic to your site from Google Search -- tied to SEO.

Google Docs / Google Drive

And finally, one you may actually use even if you aren't in marketing. [Google Drive](#) (which started as Google Docs before it evolved) is essentially Microsoft Office, except online. You can make documents, spreadsheets, forms, surveys, presentations, save videos, and much more here. It's free for most and is a great way to collaborate as a team on content. Need to have your team review something you recently wrote? Just email them the link to your document and each can provide comments and edits real-time. No more emailing documents back and forth to finalize something.



“MOZ” and similar tools

Moz is just another way to say “[Moz.com](https://moz.com)”. Moz started out as “SEOMoz” but has since evolved to be a thought-leader in much more. The site is essentially a blog for digital marketing, and they do a great job of offering advice in simple terms while constantly keeping an eye on industry changes. “[Whiteboard Fridays](#)” -- by Moz’s CEO, Rand Fishkin -- is another great feature. This series is a video that comes out weekly where the Moz team talks in plain terms about interesting aspects of online marketing.



Your digital marketing agency may also use a paid-feature of Moz called “MozPRO”. Moz Pro is a suite of tools that allow for search rank-tracking (again, where your site actually shows up for each relevant term), error tracking, and all kinds of other tools for market research and site improvement.

Similar tools include [SEMRush](#), [AHREFS](#), and many more. All are great in their own right and most agencies will use at least one of these regularly on their clients behalf.

Facebook Business Manager

The Facebook “Business Manager” dashboard is an advanced interface for managing both paid ads in Facebook and for managing company brand pages. You can manage posts, followers, designate members of your team to manage a page, and -- most importantly -- create and manage Facebook Ads here.

Word of warning: This tool is shockingly buggy. For a company with such dominance in the online space (Facebook literally controls almost 30% of all dollars spent online just based on their ads) the Business Manager is often difficult to use and a bit confusing. Load times vary, guidance is commonly wrong, and more. Hopefully you won’t personally have to manage much within this platform.



Chapter 5

Why you may not love most agencies.

A quick explanation of the classic digital marketing agency model.

Talk to most business owners...

Talk to most business owners who have worked with agencies and you'll find that they are most often left with a sour taste in their mouths. Telling people you run a 'marketing business' is often received like a dirty word.

The issue is this... Most marketing companies -- by model -- can't inevitably provide a very high tier of service to clients when utilizing employees. The basic reason is salary limitations (and therefore limitations on the level of experience their employees have) by model. Here's why:

Consider that by some estimates, over 50% of small businesses spend less than \$300/month on marketing. That does **not** imply that those types of businesses are the target customers of most agencies, but it's worth keeping in mind. In our experience, an average client at an agency who accepts a range of monthly spends (\$3k - \$50k+/mo.) is still only spending on average around \$5k monthly.

Let's say a small agency has 20 clients spending \$5k/month. That's \$100k/month average monthly revenue. That agency likely has at least 10 employees to manage that \$5k/month average client spend so that leaves \$10k/month in total per employee revenue assuming each and every one of those employees is loosely controlling 2 clients. Calculating CEO and other executive salary, costs of doing business, taxes, employee benefits, any and all overhead, etc.... there is an obvious cap on how much that company can inevitably pay any individual employee.



The problem becomes a bit more clear here...

When you consider that the median salary for a marketing specialist today is around \$60k (\$5k/month), the agency model where employees are utilized to handle most of the lifting (strategy, client management, and execution) becomes untenable. Eventually, those employees become skilled and want a raise that the company just can't afford, especially in more expensive metros where agencies tend to thrive.

The result? *High employee churn and entry level employees managing the execution for a client.*



Yes, many agencies perform well, but most that are beginning to establish themselves as the next generation of leaders in marketing rely on technology (like brand tracking for example, which is the practice of monitoring brand mentions online with software) instead of traditional marketing and grassroots efforts in order to make their dollars. Also, many of the most established marketing companies that do rely on their internal talent tend to focus on larger business accounts with massive monthly spends because they have to in order to afford their highly skilled project managers.

This leaves a gap for small businesses and startups but, thankfully, many companies are now turning their focus towards these owners with better and more intentionally built services.



Chapter 6

Okay, so I can pay for all sorts of things....

What should I **NOT** pay for in the digital marketing world?

Pay close attention. Here's where your budget can get screwed over:

Paid-For Social Followers

If you're new to all of this digital marketing stuff (which we expect you are if you're reading this), you probably don't really know what we mean here. Paid-for social followers is when you buy a large amount of followers for a Twitter account, Facebook account, or similar in order to make your brand seem more established. These are almost always fake profiles and they will do little to help your business at all.

That being said, having a good follower count is awesome and it adds to your street-cred as a brand. But rather than paying for some random guy to follow your account with 500 fake profiles, you can usually spend a similar amount to actually get real people -- with real interest in your business -- through advertising within the platform directly. Sure, it takes a little more setup, but the result is potential customers learning more about you and potentially sharing whatever you post in the future.

So if someone offers to get you a large amount of followers on the cheap, ask questions about where they're coming from, if they're real accounts from real people, and if they're real people in your actual target audience. If not, skip that nonsense.



“Link Building” -- Depending on How it’s Done.

This one comes down to asking for more details on WHAT that marketer means exactly by ‘link building’. Since you’re new to all of this, we’ll put it in basic terms:

“Backlinks” (links) are fuel for SEO. Google and other search engines rely on links from external sites to your site in order to understand how much cred you have in the space. The more relevant sites that talk about you, the better in most cases. This will typically make your site more valuable in Google’s eyes and give you an advantage in SEO.

The problem is, years and years ago there was a popular tactic of simply buying massive amounts of backlinks over time to link to a site. Google wasn’t very good at catching this and it helped SEO. The problem now? Google could ban your site from their search engine if you do this. If this happens, it can be very difficult if not impossible to recover.

“Building Links” is a common SEO tactic and anyone that excels at SEO makes it part of their service. We do, our friends do, all good SEOs try and get backlinks. But the key is understanding “how” they’re doing it and how natural it is. Much like buying social followers, the devil’s in the details when buying links.

Good link building involves trying to get backlinks from relevant sites and experts in your space as they talk about your business or share your content. This is a lot like PR in the sense that it involves outreach, content syndication to relevant sites, and other brand-awareness-building endeavors.

If a company promises a specific amount of backlinks over time, that’s typically a red flag. It’s not really possible to promise any amount of real backlinks because getting real backlinks is a game of building brand awareness in your space. The only way to guarantee backlinks is to buy them outright -- and this is when that Google-Ban-Worthy tactic starts to raise its ugly head.



“Micro-Sites” or a Network of Tiny Websites to Link to Your Main Site

Want to set off Google’s spam alarm, potentially get your entire website banned from search, and burn a lot of dollars doing so? Play the Micro-Site game.

Micro-Sites are just tiny (usually 1-5 pages) websites that are made to talk about a certain space and appear to be unrelated to a central brand. They post content, have a few articles, and typically have names like “BestHomesAnywhereInAllOfTulsa.com”.

These sites are made quickly based on templates, put online, and then links are put into them to link back to your actual website -- with the goal of making Google think “hey, look at that, a lot of relevant websites are linking to this website, lets move them to the top of search results!”

Just as mentioned in the Link-Building section above, this is a dangerous game. Google is well aware of this tactic and can temporarily or permanently ban websites from search if they’re caught doing this. Why? Because this usually is a direct attack on how Google does business as they try and ensure the best possible results for their visitors. If you try to cheat the system, they will simply red-card you and kick you out of the game.

In 99% of cases, this effort is much better spent producing new content for your own site and building a better experience for your actual visitors.



Monthly “Site Management” Fees -- Unless you’re actually using them.

If you weren’t already aware that most small business websites don’t require much, if any, monthly oversight, changes made, or updates to the site whatsoever, now you are. And never let anyone to try convince you otherwise.

You only have so much budget, and paying a monthly retainer for a company to be on standby so they can change a phone number, add 2 lines of copy, etc to your site is almost always a waste of money. Yes, you should pay your service providers if you can’t manage your site yourself because you lack the technical know-how or just don’t want to do it. That is fine. Pay them. But do this when you actually need work done, and negotiate an hourly rate for such work. Never lock into an ongoing monthly agreement just to have someone available when there is minor work to be done and that work is rarely needed. Unless you’re constantly asking for changes or need design overhauls, simple site updates are just that -- simple -- and they shouldn’t be very expensive.



This is usually just a tactic to keep recurring income for the development company without doing much in terms of actual work. And by the way, this is almost always also done exclusively by the kind of developer who claims to “own” your site and will take it with them when you decide to stop paying them. Buyer beware, which brings us to our next warning...



Spending Crazy Amounts for Web “Hosting”

Yes, absolutely, web hosting costs money. We’re not arguing that you shouldn’t be paying for hosting but, rather, that you avoid getting ripped off. Not sure what web hosting it? Well, you have a website, but somebody (a web host) needs to hold all those files and “serve” them to visitors when they stop by. This is called hosting. It’s just a necessary part of owning a property on the internet.

That said, web hosting doesn’t cost that much money. If you’re a small business, web hosting can cost as little as \$10-\$30/month total, and even the highest tiers of hosting typically don’t run more than \$130/month. Do you have a ton of web traffic and a lot of large files like a video series? Well in that case, maybe the higher cost hosting makes sense.

Here’s what you can do. Ask the guys managing your hosting to tell you where the hosting is being purchased from. This may be all sorts of companies -- NameCheap, GoDaddy, HostGator... the list goes on. But once you know, go look for yourself at the different pricing tiers that hosting company offers. Make sure the price you’re paying is at least closely aligned with the host company’s pricing and that the people managing your site aren’t taking you for a ride. Most hosting companies have pricing front and center. This is a simple search that can save you a lot of money.



Somebody Else Owning Your Site

Looking to annoy a good marketer who wants to help you out in the future? Tell them about that company that built your site and is holding it hostage. This is a terrible, terrible trick played on unaware business owners and you should avoid this at all cost.



There are many website-building-companies out there that pitch themselves as specialized in certain niches. Dentistry, real estate, food & beverage, the list goes on and on. These companies (in most cases) crank out cookie-cutter websites with worn-out designs, duplicated content, and many times they'll ask the business owner to pay a monthly rate to have the site. There is no one-time flat payment to get a website and set up hosting. You're quite literally paying someone else to own your website.

Maybe you think the costs are better here -- but keep this in mind. If you have a 10 page website with a blog, you could own that site forever and it would likely cost less in total than you would spend in 6-12 months of paying that other company, which you'll be doing forever I might add.

Having somebody else own your site means you're at their mercy to market your company, make improvements, evolve the site over time, and generally control your brand. If you find that you're getting less-than-ideal marketing returns and want to hire a new company to help, they'll have to jump through hoops to get your site "owner" to make things happen. Costs will rise, time will drag, and you'll likely end up jaded and annoyed.

There's virtually no reason to ever let a company "own" your site. If you want to leave them and take your site with you, you should be able to do this at no added fee. Ask about this. Ensure that you control what happens with your online business and get it in writing. Don't fall for this trick. We've met too many heart-broken business owners who were led down that path and taken advantage of.



Vague Deliverables

And the final thing to look out for when you pay for marketing services -- vague, undefined deliverables.

Let's go back to a real-world example. Imagine paying for a haircut where you aren't told in advance what kind of haircut you're getting, and at the end -- not knowing who cut your hair, how qualified they were, what kind of hairstyle it was, or if they even did a good job -- you're told "There's your haircut. That will be \$50."

In marketing, it can be easy to fall into the trap of paying for something and not being entirely clear on what, or why, you're paying for it. You think you know you need social media help and SEO, so you pay a monthly fee for social media and SEO.

If you -- the business owner -- aren't entirely clear on what you're paying for each month (or better yet, each week), you're not receiving the involvement you are due as a business owner.

While in most cases you alone should not be dictating the deliverables, you should have clear visibility into exactly what your providers are doing and how results are moving forward.

Ask for reports, ask for regular detailed updates so you can feel more confident that you know what your team is doing. If things aren't moving forward, you should understand why and be able to explain what's been tried already and what failed to the next team you talk to.

Paying for something you have no visibility into is, frankly, somewhat your own fault. You don't need to be the marketing expert, but you should know precisely where your dollars are being pointed and make decisions, when necessary, based on transparent communication with your service providers.



Chapter 7

Most people check your website first. What do they think?



Your most important asset

You may never need to know how to make a website, how to manage SEO or Facebook, or how to run ads. That's totally fine. But when you think about your website, think about it like a brick and mortar store in real-life.

When somebody walks in, do they get a good idea for your company culture? Do they understand how seriously you take your business? Do they feel like you're aligned with their own beliefs and their own needs as a customer? Is it easy for them to find what they're looking for?

Imagine you just walked into your favorite local pizza place...

The menus are written completely in Italian and they don't list any prices. All the tables are in one single corner and the chairs are way too close together. The owner, meanwhile, uses the open space as his personal dancefloor. Oh, and their business hours on the door were incorrect. They close in 10 minutes.

Many company websites have a similar problem, but that's because so many business owners still don't think of their websites like a storefront. Do your best to explore your own site with this in mind.





Failure on any of these fronts can mean failure in marketing no matter how good your marketing is. If a good marketer can drive quality traffic to your website but that traffic jumps ship when they get there, that's probably the fault of your website itself.

A great marketing team will discuss this critically with you and be honest about what they can do in terms of lead generation or sales based on what they're working with.

If you've already invested in a website and don't have the budget to improve substantially, it's still worth asking the question "Well, what can we do today at a low cost to improve things even marginally?"

In some cases, simple messaging improvements, image updates, and other small changes can make a big difference. Other times, you may need a form or a shopping cart on your site to make things more effective. In any case, you should work with your marketing experts to ensure that your website is in a place to perform once marketing is running in full speed.

A few final points here:

I'll use SEO to help give this more perspective. If a good SEO service provider is able to do the right things to get your site moving higher in search results, eventually you'll be getting traffic to your site from those results. The problem is, if the site is not in a good place to serve those searchers, they'll return to search results and try a competitor. This is not only bad because you've lost a potential sale, it's bad because Google sees this.

If people leave your site and return to search results regularly, you'll begin to move down in our search results placements even though your SEO provider did an okay job. Yes, they should have warned you about this, but the site is inevitably at fault.



This applies to any online marketing initiative. A bad site is a recipe for wasted spend. Focus on making your online brand great when you get started. Ask for feedback, talk to customers, and get the input of a good marketer who knows great sites. Furthermore, look at the competitors who dominate your industry online and look for what they do that you don't. Can you adopt some of that strategy? Can you improve upon it? This is a worthwhile endeavour.



Think like your customer. That's what makes a great marketer.

Whether or not you ever hire a digital marketing company, you still need to be thinking about your customer and how they'd find you at all times. If you were your customer, if you knew very little about your industry or your brand but knew you needed your product or service, how would you go about finding you?

All of these considerations should impact the way you structure your budget for marketing, and they will not only help you make better marketing decisions, they'll also help you to have a better online presence.

If your website is all about you and not all about what you can do to fulfill the needs of your customers, you may be failing. Pricing pages get substantially more visits than "About Us" pages on average. Messaging that speaks to why you're in business over what you do as a business is more effective.

Your website should cover in broad terms who you are and what you do. In addition to that, it should easily guide visitors towards their goal -- purchase, contact, educate, etc. Offer people solutions quickly and provide answers intentionally. Undoubtedly, providing great service is a major part of your business model. Make sure people know that whenever they have an online experience with your brand.



Chapter 8

4 Basic Rules of Digital Marketing For Small Business Owners

1. You do not need it all.

Don't assume that with infinite budget you should engage in all of the sexy online marketing options out there. Your business is unique and it has unique customers who only want to look for your product or service in certain ways. Sure, keeping aware of your brand is great and there are ways to do this across numerous channels, but that doesn't mean that you absolutely need press releases, paid ads, content marketing, a pinterest profile, and a video series.

Every brand is different, and a good marketing company should critically consider what makes your brand unique before determining the right marketing approach for you and your budget. Seek to understand from your marketers why they're doing what they're doing and what the expected results are.



2. Testing and Improving is Everything

Marketing is a game of best-case assumptions and improving upon successes. With your marketing team, look for ways to closely monitor results and ask how things may be tweaked to improve returns. Cut the fat, invest towards the channels that show more promise. Trial and error combined with never-ending optimization is the key to success.



A great marketer will help you to understand both successes and failures and testing always includes just that -- failures. Don't criticize transparency on what doesn't work. You want to know that. But do be critical when everything is positive in the marketer's report except your own bottom line.

Ask how long you should expect trials in certain channels before adjusting and regularly look for metrics (as in, numbers on how things are getting better or declining). Taking this stance on marketing will ensure that you always know what's happening and feel comfortable with the actions of your team.



3. You Should Have **SOME** Control

While you shouldn't be dictating the overall marketing strategy, you should still be encouraged to play a part in direction. You are the sole person who knows your business best and if you find yourself working with an agency who doesn't provide you lots of transparency, don't just assume this is business as usual.

You, as the check writer and business owner, should have a clear understanding of goals and who is doing what. Look for a team that you can talk to at least monthly and who listens to your needs and responds in kind. No, they shouldn't always say "yes", but they should always open dialogue with you to keep you abreast of strategy and reason.



4. You're the Expert. That's Important.

Yes, a strong digital marketer in their niche (SEO, email, etc.) can do a lot to move the needle for your company with the right control and appropriate budget. Inevitably, however, your voice is almost always needed.

Social media will never be as good as when an actual expert is sharing their thoughts. Email campaigns that speak from the passion of an owner resonate more with your base. Content marketing -- where the content is produced by a person who has genuine industry knowledge and bonafide insights -- is always more effective with owner involvement.

Removing yourself entirely from digital marketing is a failure to fully swing the bat. No, you should not try and dictate all strategy, but as the business owner, you should be involved and providing input where appropriate.

When you come across interesting industry news, share it with the team. When you have an internal improvement, great hire, new product, etc. ask about a press release. When you have something to say, write up a rough blog draft and email it to your marketers to improve upon and post. You're not being asked to add significant work to your already busy load, but it's a small effort to send an email with thoughts and that can make all the difference in marketing execution.

We encourage you to ask your digital marketers how you can become slightly more involved to improve performance. Ask about social media, content, and PR mainly. These are areas where your input almost always adds value.



Chapter 9

Final Thoughts, Sunshine.

If you've made it this far, thanks for reading and congratulations! We hope you've learned some new things about digital marketing here, can put digital marketing into better perspective in your mind, and have a slightly more tuned-in vision for how your own company may utilize digital marketing to grow.

At the end of the day, digital marketing -- like any marketing -- is mainly reliant on great touch and a passion for sharing your voice & vision as a brand. SEO is more and more built around rewarding how well you address the needs of customers and less about "old-school" tactics like link-building and keyword stuffing. Social marketing is entirely based around tuning into your audience's daily lives and resonating. Design, email, content, etc... all of these can use an owner's voice and completely removing yourself from these efforts is a misstep.

We say all of that to say this:

By taking the time to read through this guide, you've taken a step towards making digital marketing more approachable for you and your team.

We wish you the best of luck in your growth and success online. Ask questions, show interest, and challenge results. Now go build that business!

Thanks for reading! Let us know if we can help.



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