

Online marketing for small businesses in South Africa

People are now shopping and learning in whole new ways compared to just a few years ago, so as a small business owner you must adapt or risk extinction. I always advise our clients that the internet is the new yellow pages and therefore they should have a compelling online presence if they are to reach the numerous customers searching for information about their products and services.

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Clearly, you don't have a choice on whether you do digital marketing but the question is how well you do it. The latter is the point of this article. The starting point of any successful marketing lies in the strength of its strategic and tactical plan. According to Sun Tsu, "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win".

So before you go to the market with your service or product, make sure that you have a winning plan of action in place. Just as a map helps travelers to reach their destination with ease so will a comprehensive strategy help you to achieve your goals.

The first stage is to conduct an audience analysis based on hard cold facts as well as psychological insights. The reason why this is an important step is that customers are pivotal to everything that you do. That they occupy this prime position is hardly surprising. Remember, you actually set up your business to satisfy their wants and needs. Take them away and your business will not have any reason to exist.

The insights about your audience will enable you to build common ground with them. Your marketing communication should be created in the image of your customers if ever you are to connect and influence them.

After this step, go ahead and set realistic and achievable marketing goals. Know what you want to accomplish. If you don't know where you're going you will not know when you get there. Your goals are nothing more than a statement of the kind of results you want to achieve with your marketing. Most significantly, they should fit into and support your overall business goals. Examples of marketing goals include:

- Sales
- Units sold
- Market share
- ROI on advertising expenditures
- Awareness
- Number of new accounts/relationships
- Share of customer's business

The next stage is to look at your content and how to communicate it. Always bear in mind that marketing revolves around content and communication.

What makes content core is that it enables you to communicate your value proposition to the *informed* and *uninformed* customers to drive bottom line results. A value proposition is a business or marketing statement that a company uses to summarise why a consumer should buy a product or use a service. Use your content, directly and indirectly, to convince your potential customers that your product or service will add more value or solve a problem better than your competitors' offerings.

Always align your content with your business goals when educating and inspiring your customers. You can use news and product updates, landing pages, ad creatives, case studies and videos to accomplish this.

Bear in mind that content needs an effective distribution strategy to boost its audience reach. Use the insights you glean from the analysis of your audience or customer base to determine which channels they use that will give you the best results.

Examples include emails, social media and forums.

Once your content is in place and you are able to communicate your value proposition to your potential customers, you must then work on enhancing the chances of your content being found online. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) plays a key role in building brand awareness and purchase intent. There are a host of onsite and offsite SEO tactics that you can use. However, my recommendation is that you should leave this to experts who know what they are doing.

Content marketing is another effective strategy that can increase the online visibility of your products or services. It is a simple technique of unlocking value for your customers by educating and inspiring them through content. A good example is Unilever which has a very popular fan page called 'Whats For Dinner?'. It uses this page to dish out meal ideas and recipes for their customers. This is after they realised that most of them struggle daily at 4 o'clock on what to cook.

You also cannot overlook social media as it is a crowd puller. Don't forget that membership of social sites runs into billions. The audience is clearly there. However, you must have a clear cut strategy and decide whether you just want a generic presence or you have specific goals that you would like to achieve like acquiring new customers or servicing them.

Always engage your customers via email, social media and webinars, amongst other things so as to retain them. It is cheaper to keep a customer than to get one. On the other hand a happy customer is a walking billboard. Happy customers talk about their favourite brands and this triggers word of mouth marketing. Statistics show that WOM marketing has a trust rate of 94% in comparison to paid ads and it produces higher conversions.

Finally, implement a tracking and monitoring plan that allows you to consistently measure the performance of your marketing activities. Web metrics help to show you how your target customers are responding and reacting to your content and communication. You can use this information to consolidate your campaigns and most importantly, to refine your marketing programmes for improved results.

Implement these tactics and you will see a major improvement in your bottom line results.

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