

Web marketing for smaller firms **Ten simple steps for getting on the right track**

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As hundreds of thousands of small British firms start to harness the power of the web to get customers, maintain relationships and sell direct, this simple guide provides a checklist of practical steps many have found useful. Every firm can benefit from online marketing, and as the techniques have matured, they've become simple to use.



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Speed read

Start small, but start quickly.

Develop a lightweight plan that will help you and the business learn about how web marketing can become a critical commercial asset.

Select simple easy channels (like search engines and email) to explore first.

Use the low cost and proven technologies to get you started.

Focus on understanding how web marketing works, as well as on delivering immediate results.

Use this knowledge to refine your marketing plan, and help you take larger decisions about online marketing.

Invest in learning and understanding. Train your team and encourage all stakeholders to share experiences.

Record your results so the team can analyze what worked, and feed this knowledge back into your marketing planning for the next wave of the campaign.

Five steps: To get up and running



Five further steps: To unlock further growth



The right approach for smaller firms

If you're a small firm, getting your web marketing off the ground can be a real challenge. Simply knowing what needs doing or where to start might seem daunting, but there are some simple steps and well-trodden paths that will make it both easier and faster for you.

In compiling this short guide we spoke with hundreds of small firms to learn what worked for them, and out of that distilled these elements of best practice. For our definition of 'smaller' firms, we consider businesses with no dedicated web marketing staff, and little in-house expertise. Typically whoever is responsible for the sales function will drive the marketing, and their focus is normally tactical rather than strategic. What we discovered is that only with a strategic plan can the web be truly woven into the way a firm acquires and services its customers, and that the actions of just one or two people inside any business can have a transformative effect on the impact the website makes. The pressures of managing small businesses and micro-businesses typically mean that senior staff have a wide variety of roles and are, by nature, generalists.

“Online marketing is now mainstream marketing; every firm should be reaching out to their customers online.”

Web marketing should now be at the core of every firm's marketing and as the tools of search, email, website building and blogging have become more accessible, the barriers to achieving effective basic online marketing have melted away. There's no reason not to be online and there's no reason not to be mobilizing now.

With this in mind, these steps reflect a simple process that seems to work well. From all of our interviews we boiled down five simple steps to get you started and a further five steps once you're up and running. We hope you find them useful and if you spot areas we've missed then get in touch so we can share them with others. If you need more support then ask us about the Digital Training Academies we run in all of these areas – from search engine marketing and email management to Web 2.0 and web analytics.

As you'd expect from the Digital team there's a place you can post your comments online, or simply email our team and we'll do the work for you. Web marketing is still a journey of discovery for most businesses and we'd encourage you to remember to use the opportunities and advice of both agencies and specialist media owners to help you refine your strategy, and allocate the right resources to bring in expertise when you need it.

1. Getting up and running

Five steps: To getting up and running



Write a simple web marketing plan with your key steps. Keep the plan lightweight, and use it to record your successes.

1. Build

Get the basic website up

Start by thinking through the role of the website in your business. Are you intending to sell directly off the screen, or are you gathering leads for conversations that may then happen by email, face-to-face or over the phone? Consider what your customers need in order to make the next step in the journey towards working with you. Look for what you can create or publish that will satisfy that, and how your website might be useful as a tool to answer the common objections people raise as reasons not to buy from you. Find ways that the website can really work for your business, and build your plan out of that rather than by taking your other marketing material and trying to copy and paste it onto a web page.

It doesn't need to be beautiful, it doesn't need to do everything you want it to, it doesn't need to have all the latest bells and whistles, but it does need to be there. In a landscape which rewards speed ahead of completeness, be sure to get to market fast. Too many firms spend years designing the perfect website, only to miss out on years of potential customer contact.

“When you build your website it's key that you build it with the search engine audience in mind.”

Once it's there, place the site at the heart of your marketing and sell your business through it. The change of focus will help you uncover new opportunities, and the more you learn about web marketing the more you'll learn how to unlock greater value.

When you build your website it's key that you build it with the search engine audience in mind. Too many sites never feature properly because they simply can't be read effectively by the technologies that build up the indexes used by Google, Yahoo and the other engines. Get it right at the start and your website will draw more customers. The techniques of search engine optimisation fall into two areas: those that are applied to your own pages, and those that involve going beyond your own site to build its credibility elsewhere on the web. Both are changing all the time, but there are some fundamental elements in the first group that you have real control over. They include how you structure your pages, the language you use to describe what you do, and the way that text is displayed. Make this a core part of the brief for your website, or the next section of your existing site.

“Search is a critical part of your marketing mix: get it right and all of your marketing will work harder. Get it wrong and your customers will never know you are there.”

2. Market

Get the search marketing right at the start

The Googles and Yahoos will be the lifeblood of your customer traffic. They're where your customers start their journey, and that means you'll want to have your brand in easy reach. The dual routes (of optimisation and advertising) need to be developed as early as possible.

'Optimisation' is about preparing your site at a technology level for the search engines to be able to read it and understand it. Like much of your marketing you'll probably want to get some professional help, and this needs to happen as early as possible (ideally before you even commit to building the site). If you get this right, then as people look for the things you offer, you'll appear in the editorial listings on the search results pages. The rules that govern where and how you appear change constantly – and be wary of any agency who promises to make you 'the number one on Google'. In a crowded sector you'll be jostling with hundreds, if not thousands, of competitors. But as search queries become more sophisticated, good optimisation will let you appear against the right keywords, standing out in your niche. It will probably take several months for optimization to work – another reason to start early.

Paid-for placements (sometimes called 'sponsored search', 'pay-per-click' or 'cost-per-click') is more immediate. Firms buy the right to get their advertisement listings – short text links in the listings – to appear when someone types in words the firm thinks match their offering. As the advertiser you set the price you are prepared to pay for customer leads (people clicking through to your site), and it's easy to set up an account with the search companies. The technology does the rest, and the tools can be giving you customers within hours. You can start for less than €100 and build up slowly.

3. Talk

Build customer relationships

The internet is the most powerful of relationship channels, yet most firms forget to invest significant energy in building those potential customer relationships. They either choose rarely to email their customers, or swing wildly in the opposite direction, deluging them in unrequested emails. The middle ground isn't just about getting the volume right, it's about ensuring relevancy in what you say and how you say it, and why you say it. Think about what pieces of information are most useful for you to know and gently ask those 'golden questions': the date of car insurance renewal on a finance site, a spouse's birthday on a gift site, a budget and bedrooms for an estate agents. Use the classic direct marketing skills of database management, customer segmentation and contact strategies, and you'll be off to a good start.

4. Observe

Watch your site and your customers

Digital marketing gives you exceptional insights into what your customers are doing. It will unlock the answers to key questions about who they are, what they do, where they go and why they go there. Build in some analytical tools to the servers running your website and you'll quickly learn about your hot and cold zones and the barriers to conversion from within your own site. Large firms are now creating new fulltime roles for data analysts to ferret about in all this information so the firm can streamline the way it works. Search engines, affiliates and email marketing tools will all generate additional data for you, so set aside some time and resources to watch what happens.

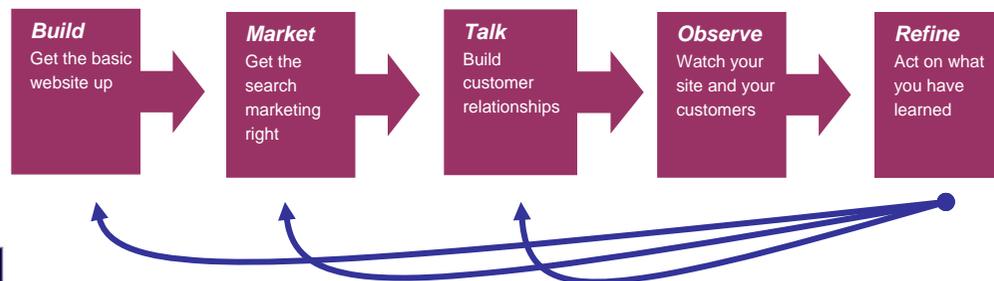
5. Refine

Act on what you learn

The cycle between a marketing campaign starting, you receiving campaign performance data, and the windows for you to tune that campaign, is a very short cycle in most of the new digital platforms. With email or search marketing this could be done within hours, and the toolkits for harnessing the data, analyzing the information, and turning this knowledge into actions, are among the most sophisticated marketing devices on the planet. The best part is that in spite of the complexity inside the software, the part you have to deal with can be elegantly simple. And it's getting cheaper and easier every year, which means that you need to be planning in time and processes to let you refine what you are doing as a routine part of every campaign you run.

Take-aways

1. Build: How will you enhance the website? What is working best? What are your customers looking for? What do you need to do to achieve higher conversions?
2. Market: Which types of search engine keywords worked for you? How many leads did you get? How much did they spend?
3. Talk: What caused your customers to respond? And how did the response vary between the different segments of your customer base, the timing of the mailings and the offers?
4. Observe: Which data are most useful for your business to track? Can you select some key performance indicators that will act as a monitoring system for your web marketing? Do you or your partners need to install tracking tools? Invest in your web analytics so you can hear what your customers are really saying.
5. Refine: Refine the plan and decide what are the changes you'll make.



“By investing in web analytics you’ll be able to hear exactly what your customers are saying and doing; by freeing up management and operational time you’ll be able to act.

Get this right and you’ll be constantly tuning your site to become a more efficient business engine.”

2. Unlocking further growth

Five steps: To unlock further growth



1. Community

Use your community media

Every community has its own online media. Whether it's the local newspaper or radio station's online sites, or the special interest magazines and blogs of communities that are not tied to geography, your audiences cluster together around the media they need. By figuring out which is the right media property for your community, you'll be able to find a place and a space to get your message across. If you're unsure about which websites are used then why not ask some of your existing customers?

Look at these websites to learn how other firms are using them, and talk with the site owners about what they can offer you. By tapping into these traffic hubs you'll reach a much wider audience than you are able to through your own website, but the message must be relevant, and if you are seeking clicks then the call to action must be both strong and compelling. Just as in your traditional advertising and marketing, this all needs to fit into an overall strategy to acquire new customers, raise the sales among existing customers, and prevent previous customers from lapsing. Integration is important as web marketing is often carried out by teams and agencies operating alongside those responsible for the traditional channels.

2. Distribute

Join affiliate networks

To distribute your offer to much larger networks, why not join one of the affiliate programmes. They'll place your products alongside those from thousands of other firms and give customers a comprehensive view of the market on a single screen. Find out how this works by shopping through affiliates first, and see for yourself the difference in price, service and brand experience from each of the stores offering their products for sale. Affiliate marketing is becoming just as powerful in business-to-business marketing as it is in consumer online retail.

3. Be quick

You need to find ways to move fast

The new digital markets are evolving much faster than most traditional parts of the economy, and that means you need to find ways to be able to respond to new ideas quickly. This needs your attention, because it demands that you take a different approach when it comes to thinking about how to market yourself on the web. Can you find ways of being able to update the web pages, prices, and listings extremely fast? Can you send emails to your customers the moment you discover a new idea that may trigger them to purchase? Can you fast-track the development of your web marketing so it goes 'live' in as few steps as possible.

“It’s not the strongest or most intelligent species that survive; it’s the ones most adaptable to change”

Charles Darwin

4. Invest

Resource it adequately

Web marketing may prove to be relatively cheap, and potentially extremely cost-effective, but the results that come out will only be as good as the thinking that goes in. You'll need to resource it with your best people's time, and that means your own time as well. Often it's not the budget that is the scarcest resource; it's the senior management's time.

Resourcing your digital marketing means giving it the time and attention it needs at the most senior level in the firm. It's a core element to your future and leadership teams will want to be in the know.

Structuring the developments into an action plan will help map out when your time will be needed, and what other resources have to be brought in. Be generous about how long technologies take to be implemented, and be clear and structured in your approach to suppliers.

5. Learn

Institutionalize learning

Watch, learn and reflect. If this is a new area of marketing for you then invest the time to learn how it works. This will help you make stronger decisions. Spread that same learning culture across your team and encourage your suppliers and partners to share their insights with you.



Learning together

Use local business networks and industry associations to get the inside track from other similar sized firms.

Look for relevant experience from across all of your team: find out who uses the web most, who shops online, who is a whiz with email – you may already have many of the skills you need!

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Research: Digital Insight Reports

Our Digital Insight Reports give you the inside track. Recent editions include Digital Europe – tracking the rise in online advertising spend across Europe; Digital Advertising Futures – our forecasts for online advertising growth; and Digital Media Substitution – how online is eroding the brands and revenues of traditional media.



Opinion: Meet the Digital Thought Leaders

Our monthly Thought Leadership interviews explain what key opinion formers believe the market is doing. Craig Newmark takes us behind the scenes at the classifieds website Craig's List. Richard Duvall shares his plans for the world's first online bank exchange, and web analyst Jim Sterne shows how any firm can unlock more value from their site by harnessing the power of website analytics systems.

Take-aways

During this second phase you will be exploring more sophisticated web marketing tools, but don't forget to carry on nurturing the search engine and email campaigns you started with.

For these new tools, here are some more questions you might want to ask:

Community: Which sites are the most effective? How are you measuring that effectiveness? What other relationships can you explore with them?

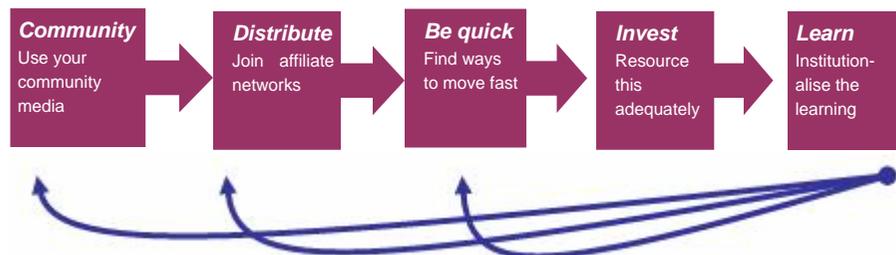
Distribute: What are the factors influencing your performance in the affiliate networks? How can you extend your distribution to reach even more customers? Can you tap into the private networks of your customers' own friends and family, or those of their business partners?

Be quick: How can you make decisions and get feedback faster? Your marketing can be switched on and off quickly in online, so you can experiment more easily than in other media channels.

Learn: Being able to learn how these new tools work, and then act on what your team has learned, is key to making the most of your online marketing. With the connection between marketing and results much tighter and more accountable than other media channels, smaller firms who can change their processes to absorb the learning that comes with each campaign will be better placed to maximize their return on investment and customer acquisition.

“Invest in training and developing your team for the digital challenge and you'll be investing in the very competence that will change your business. Continued learning is a fundamental of digital success.”

Summary; Five steps to unlock further growth



Analyst's profile

Danny Meadows-Klue has been a commentator on digital networked marketing since 1995. He managed the UK's first online newspaper and has helped run web businesses ranging from mass market portals and consumer magazines, to online stores, search and email services. Among his industry roles he is the co-founder and former chairman of the UK and European Internet and Interactive Advertising Bureau, and has been lecturing on digital marketing for more than a decade. He helped set up IAB organisations around the world and created Digital Strategy Consulting in 2000 to help more firms accelerate by harnessing the tools of the digital networked economy.



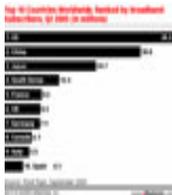
About the Digital Insight Report series

In times of huge economic and technical change, knowledge becomes a critical success factor. We created the Digital Insight Reports to bring you insights from a particular part of this fast changing industry. They are independent perspectives on key issues around business or marketing in the digital networked economy, and are published monthly. We also publish similar Digital Thought Leadership interviews and Digital Book Club reviews to share the ideas and thinking of some of the people and companies shaping the digital networked world. These often accompany our keynote talks and training workshops. Making sense of the digital world can be tough, but knowledge and training can unlock the potential of your team.



More research: Digital Intelligence

Keeping on top of the latest research and trends is still a challenge for many, but Digital Intelligence can help you. To keep our Digital Training Academy classes up to date we trawl through hundreds of websites, magazines and research newswires every month and distil some of the key points into this review of the industry's growth and the evolution of marketing.



Training and Development from Digital

If your firm wants to harness new marketing and publishing approaches, then why not talk to the team here at Digital? Our senior associates can deliver the hands-on expertise you need to change the way your team behaves, enabling them to understand and implement new publishing strategies. We can work with your board to improve understanding and your operational teams improve execution. We can support the rapid prototyping of new ideas and the building of simple tools to allow you to use these new insights to improve your conversion rates, unlocking more of the value from the digital channel investments you've already made. Our range of training spans all areas of digital publishing, marketing and business and includes mobile and emerging platforms. Call us to find out how we can help your team achieve more.



Our company support programmes includes

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Making sense of a digital world

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