

# The Small Business Digital Marketing Playbook

How to Attract and Retain the Next  
Generation Customer

By

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# The Small Business Digital Marketing Playbook

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## Preface

Digital marketing is a fast-growing industry; with nearly ninety percent of all purchase decisions beginning online, connecting with consumers in the digital world has become the principal strategy to efficiently scale business growth. I wrote *The Small Business Digital Marketing Playbook* to fill the tremendous need for a practical, no-nonsense guide for small and medium-sized businesses to the growing digital marketing industry.

For the past twenty years, I've been involved with building websites, growing audiences, and attracting customers online for businesses ranging from multi-billion-dollar companies to sole proprietorships. The companies I assist represent a wide variety of industries including media, publishing, telecommunications, manufacturing, local government, information technology, construction, and finance.

My passion for creating and executing successful online marketing strategies leverages my technical skills within SEO, paid advertising, email marketing, social media marketing, and web analytics. My core technical skills include web programming, graphic design, writing and editing.

With a background in statistics and big data, I take a data-driven, pragmatic approach to digital marketing that provides scalable growth through an emphasis on optimization and testing. As digital marketing continues to evolve at a frenetic pace, I believe that testing, discipline, and continuous education are the linchpins of success for all online marketers.

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I've been able to use my varied organizational experience to help target and identify strengths and weaknesses within digital marketing programs. The net effect of this approach is cutting-edge opportunities and solutions that may originate in one industry and work even better in another.

This book has been written to help you to understand how all the components of digital marketing work together, and how the devilish details within each component need to be aligned to become a finely tuned machine for lead generation, lead nurturing, and business development. The book gathers my diverse technical skills, creative abilities, experience, and state-of-the-art industry knowledge to help you assess online opportunities before building and calibrating your digital marketing strategies and components into a highly profitable revenue source for your business.



To help you put these strategies into action, I've included the above button throughout the book to identify when related online content is available. On my website ([walterlis.com/resources](http://walterlis.com/resources)), there are 20+ lists containing links to the latest digital marketing tools, software, platforms and service providers.

Instead of including these lists in the book, I chose to post them online so they can be updated on a consistent basis. As I discuss in the book, the digital marketing world changes quickly, so having this content online will help us keep these resource lists relevant.

## Chapter 1

# **The Rise of Digital Marketing**

Like never before, the information economy has brought power to the customer. If a consumer is looking for information, they can turn to their smartphone, computer, or a countless number of digitally connected resources to instantly get information on what they're trying to buy, fix, or accomplish.

This digital revolution is no more evident and impactful than for small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs), which are generally defined as those businesses having fewer than five hundred employees. Over the past twenty years in the United States, the percentage of SMBs has dramatically increased. According to the Small Business Administration, SMBs make up 99.7 percent of employers in the United States. Small and medium-sized businesses make up 64 percent of net new private sector jobs. SMBs number 27.9 million, as compared to 18,500 companies with 500 employees or more. That's a huge number, and these enterprises have a major impact on the global economy.

So what does that mean for SMBs when they need to compete with larger businesses in the new information economy? It means major opportunities!

The power of the information economy is translated across all demographics into nearly all segments of the marketplace, where we are seeing a rapidly growing digital audience. Even for those who didn't grow up with this type of technology, the information revolution is becoming a major part of their lives.

According to the United States Census Bureau, 78.9 percent of all US households owned a computer in 2012, and 94.8 percent of households with a computer use it to connect to the Internet. This includes devices such as laptops, touchscreen tablets, smartphones and gaming consoles.

Pew Research has reported that as of April 2012, 53 percent of American adults ages 65 and older use the Internet or email. This is a dramatic surge from August of 2008, when just 38 percent of adults ages 65 and older were online.

In addition to increasing adoption rates across all age groups, the popularity of smart phones has continued to grow exponentially, providing an entirely new audience for small and medium-sized businesses. According to the 2014 Pew Research Center Internet Project Survey, fifty-eight percent of all adults have a smartphone. Among age groups, eighty-three percent of ages 18-29, seventy-four percent of ages 30-49, forty-nine percent of ages 50-64, and nineteen percent of those 65+ use a smart phone.

Even more telling is the changing focus of all US Internet usage from the desktop to mobile. According to a study by comScore, in January of 2014 Americans spent 46.6 percent of their total Internet time with mobile apps, versus 45.1 percent who accessed the Internet via a desktop computer.

With this increasing mobile acceptance and growing audience comes great opportunity. Nowhere is this more evident than for small and medium-sized businesses as their customers become more digitally enabled and digitally focused.

At the same time, response rates across all marketing channels have been shrinking. That means not only billboards, display ads, and other types of traditional media have seen decreasing responses, but most digital forms of marketing and their responses have as well.

Small and medium-sized businesses need to have a plan to reach this digitally connected audience, and they need to provide themselves with all the necessary tools and information to cut through the clutter and sell their products and services. While this is a great challenge for SMBs, it's one that has to be met head-on.

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What does this mean for the marketer? It means that while we are in an increasingly competitive environment, it's one that can be successfully managed if you have a plan and systems in place to help take your business to the top.

There are many reasons why the challenge of marketing has become more difficult, including a host of new channels as well as many more options and opportunities for distraction. But it doesn't mean that any of these opportunities should automatically be avoided. Consumers have more information and nearly all their answers at their fingertips—and it's your job to find those fingertips.

In addition to finding the consumer in this congested marketplace, and reaching them with the proper message, there are numerous new opportunities that all of this evolving technology has provided. The audience and communities created by social media channels allow marketers the chance to reach their potential customers in their own neighborhoods. Marketers today can now search for and find leads in a variety of new ways that were not available a few years ago. This changing of the guard, and the opportunities that come with it, is happening at a rapid pace. Therefore it's up to the marketer to keep track of all that is going on.

One of the primary benefits of digital marketing is its ability to construct a cost-effective approach to building an audience and attracting leads. However, without the proper system and processes in place, the exact opposite can occur. An organization can waste a great deal of time, money, and opportunity cost trying to put together a scattered or fragmented digital marketing plan, with limited or diminishing returns.

However, when executed properly, digital marketing can allow for the scale and growth that is necessary for small and medium-sized businesses to transform their organizations. The importance of a properly developed program within the digital realm is that it can allow a small and medium-sized business to compete with an organization of any size.

The reality is that while small and medium-sized businesses must continue to compete with larger organizations, the playing field has been leveled. Many of the tools and advantages that a large organization typically could enjoy because of greater resources are muted in the digital realm. This

technological and resource equality presents many opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses to grow like never before.

A question that I often receive when meeting with businesses is what is a realistic timeframe for an organization to see results with digital marketing programs. As you might expect, the answer to that question can be tricky, because it depends upon multiple variables and lots of different internal and external factors.

However, a balance can be achieved between the efforts put forth within a digital marketing campaign and the fruits of this labor that directly reflect how well the program is put together. This means that a better organized, more thought-out, more defined program is likely to bring about much more widespread, impactful and faster results.

So how does digital marketing fit within your business? The reality is digital marketing is now just marketing. Your email marketing, your social media marketing, your paid digital advertising, and your search engine optimization are now all components of your traditional marketing program and should be managed as such. A new and constantly changing skill set is required to be able to manage these components; however they must interact with the rest of your marketing program. Having a digital marketing campaign on its own island will negate many of the benefits that a solid digital/offline combination program can produce.

### *Mindset*

One of the aspects of digital marketing that has always appealed to me is the idea that the tools, elements, and factors within digital marketing allow for constant improvement. Inherent within your digital marketing toolset will be feedback on nearly every data point, both internal and external.

The magic with this is that we can learn from what we've done, and from what our audience, leads, and customers have shown us.

Marketing is a continuous process, not a destination; and “set it and forget it” is an idea that is well past its time. Every campaign and every program that you put forth across all channels within digital marketing has to be constantly improved. This also means that those of us working within digital marketing, whether you are a full-time marketing professional or

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you're an owner of your own business, must be able to change and adapt with this fluid environment.

Virtually nothing stays the same within digital marketing, from Google's search algorithm, to social media network changes, to the way email hosting companies assess deliverability. For example, according to digital marketing tools provider Moz.com, Google changes its search algorithms as many as five hundred times per year. With all of these changing variables, it's essential that a digital marketer be willing and able to adapt and constantly improve.

In addition, each channel has its own set of constantly evolving rules and boundaries that have to be followed. For example, within search engine optimization there are a number of rules, or best practices, such as the use of link title tags and original content. If you break these rules or proceed against what the search engines are looking for, you'll get unsatisfactory results and you'll have less traffic to your website.

Within social media, each channel has its own rules and best practices. Whether you are on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter or any other social media channel, there are a number of terms and conditions that each of these channels has established. Their goal for these rules is to protect their customers and their businesses, and it's your job to follow their program.

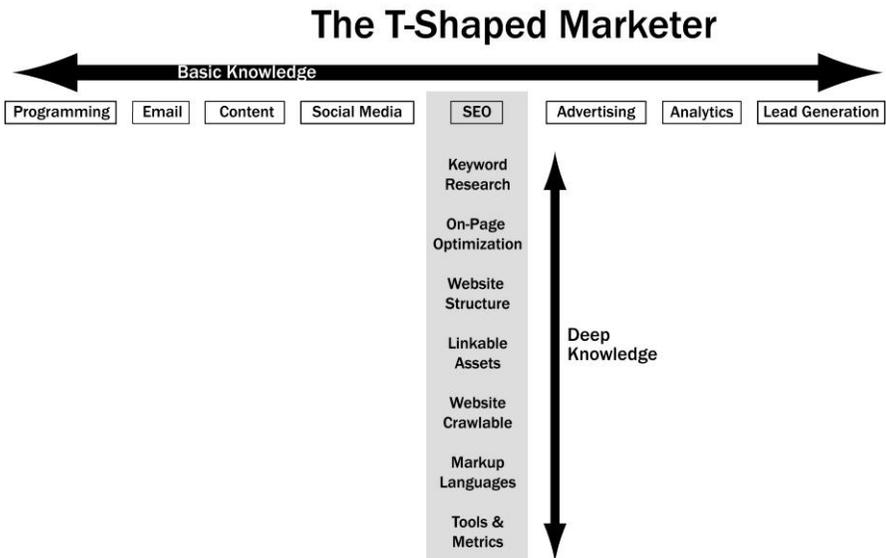
To keep up with the need for ongoing improvement in response to constant changes within digital marketing comes the need for continuous education. We have to continue building our skills and expertise to stay competitive. However, it's very difficult to be an expert in more than one area of digital marketing. And with an extremely wide breadth and depth of skills and expertise that are necessary for success, it's clear that you need a system in order to accomplish your marketing and business development goals.

### ***Who Should Manage Your Digital Marketing?***

To cope with the wide array of knowledge necessary for the role, we often use the term "T-shaped marketing skills." This basically refers to having modest knowledge in a broad array of skills, and deep knowledge or ability in a smaller set. For example, if you have extensive expertise in email marketing and copywriting, then that would be your middle "core" skill, and

you'll look to maintain a secondary amount of knowledge and information about the other topics.

However, since your core “T” strength is email marketing, you'll probably never be as versed in social media marketing, as someone is who devotes their entire career towards that topic. Likewise, a field as fluid as search engine optimization will likely be better covered by an SEO expert whose core focus is search engine optimization.



What this means for SMBs is that there's a fundamental choice each organization has to make with regard who manages their marketing. The answer to this question has to be based on the expertise and the skill set of your team, along with your budgetary constraints.

A vitally important question that has to be answered as quickly as possible is this: Can we, or should we, execute our digital marketing campaign in-house, utilize outside resources, or have a mix of both? Without a confirmed plan, your entire marketing focus could be slowed down without the right people or the right resources in place.

If your organization has people within their selected skill sets who have an interest in digital marketing or maybe even a background in marketing, it's

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important to ask the right questions to identify whether or not they might be a good fit for digital marketing. The digital marketer has at least six major qualities that are necessary to be a good fit for the role. These qualities include:

1. Have an analytical sense.
2. Are very well rounded.
3. Are perseverant.
4. Are disciplined.
5. Enjoy constant improvement and evolution.
6. Can manage adversity.

These questions will help you identify potential candidates for digital marketing. Whether it's the business owner or the most junior member of your team, these qualities are exceptionally important for successful digital marketers.

As we've talked about, digital marketing is a dynamically changing and rapidly growing part of any business. Having the wrong person involved within your digital marketing team can lead to a lack of success and a great deal of frustration.

In addition, this is not an area of business that is typically defined by a clear roadmap. A digital marketer has to be able to not only have a pragmatic approach to all things marketing, but they also have to be extremely creative.

This begets the question of whether a left-brain or right-brain individual is a better fit for digital marketing. It's my opinion that the rare person who is nearly identical left- and right-brain is typically the best fit in this position, especially for the SMB where the marketing team must wear many hats. That's not to say that an analytical or a creative person can't be a successful digital marketer. But for a small and medium-sized business organization that typically requires team members to manage multiple areas within digital marketing, there's a need for those who are both creative and numbers driven.

## *Always Follow the Data*

One of the great benefits of digital marketing is the ability of the business owner to keep score and to measure the impact made on the organization's bottom line. Before the availability of digital marketing tracking and metrics, a frustrating element was the inability to measure much of what was created or produced. Business owners often gauged their success primarily by the bottom line success of the organization, which was also impacted by nearly every other business unit within the organization.

With the help of digital, marketing has gone from being a complementary segment of a company to a primary driver of the business. It's gone from being a supporting part to having a starring role.

Digital marketing has become an essential component of any sales and marketing program to the point that all businesses have to use digital channels to find prospects, turn them into leads, and then convert them into customers. If they don't, their competition will.

Having the ability to measure everything from a click in an email, to the time a lead spends on your website, to the source of where a lead has come from, allows the marketer to utilize this data to calibrate a highly defined and highly effective program. Knowing what is working and what doesn't not only makes for much more effective marketing but can also allow small and medium-sized businesses to grow the efficiency of their marketing programs and their return on investment.

Since every activity and interaction is now trackable, nearly every component of your digital marketing program should be constantly tested and its performance improved. Testing is a fundamental marketing tactic that allows you to optimize everything you manage.

For example, within email marketing, we can test multiple subject lines, changes in copy, images, and even when the messages are sent. We'll send these tests to a smaller segment of the mailing list, which will then give feedback on which version should be sent to the rest of the list to be most effective.

This test-first methodology will exist across all of your digital marketing channels. You'll use similar testing techniques within paid digital

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advertising, search engine optimization, and social media as you will use within email marketing.

And the great part of all this is that these failure/success metrics are quickly and easily available. You can conduct multiple tests within a day, which would often take weeks with other traditional marketing channels that have a much longer execution cycle.

One of the hardest and most humbling aspects of digital marketing is the fact that testing nearly always wins over experience. You may think you know your market and your audience, but you most likely don't know how they'll react when they visit your site. That's why testing is vitally essential.

Yes, there are certain agreed upon rules that all landing pages must follow, such as limiting navigation, isolating on just a single offer, and keeping your primary call to action above the fold. However, beyond a few simple truths, what works for you must be developed by trial and error.

To prove that point, check out a website called “Anne Holland’s Which Test Won – A/B Test & Multivariate Testing Education for Marketing Professionals” (it’s at [whichtestwon.com](http://whichtestwon.com)). The site shows you two different versions of a single landing page with subtle differences in the copy, images or layout. You select which page you believe had the better conversion percentage; after you “vote,” you see the results. You’ll almost always be surprised by the outcome.

The importance of testing and optimization means that any organization that employs a hypothesis or guess within their digital marketing is not properly utilizing the power of this technology. Because the data on what works or what doesn't work is readily available, there should never be guesses for any component of digital marketing.

Ignoring this information and going with an outside opinion, without testing those opinions, is not an effective strategy. Yes, there can be certain circumstances where you may create a campaign or program that provides solid results, but it could damage the brand itself. For example, if you created a provocative or racy banner ad that produced a fifteen percent click through rate, that campaign may be effective in the short term, but it could harm the brand in the long term and may not produce conversions

into sales. To ignore data as your primary decision resource is to take a big gamble.

## ***Organization and Time Management***

With such a diverse breadth and depth of skills and expertise required, the role of a digital marketer could be compared to a plate spinner whose objective is to keep multiple plates balanced in the air without letting them drop. The skills and information required to become world-class in any one of area of digital marketing is a major challenge, let alone eight areas. However, someone has to be able to keep all of these plates in the air.

The key to managing a digital marketing program within a small and medium-sized business is to create a systematized approach. Keeping things organized and creating processes so that each of these various components is effectively conducted the way a small team or even a single person can manage digital marketing and get the most impactful, optimized programs.

Time, or a lack of it, is often the greatest challenge within digital marketing. Learning new skills, testing new approaches, and staying up-to-date on all of the changes present a consistent challenge for digital marketers. Whether you're working as a one-person sole proprietor or within a marketing department with hundreds of people, you have to be able to manage each aspect of your marketing. That typically means creating a process to deal with each marketing channel so it's constantly optimized and providing the most bang for the buck.

Having a time management process will allow you and your team to effectively use limited resources in the areas that are most appropriate. Spending time on marketing components that produce lesser impact will cause your organization and its performance to see diminished results.

It's a good idea to create an optimization task schedule that allows a digital marketer or digital marketing team to successfully and accurately allocate time and resources to each of the various components. Knowing what is happening when, and what needs to change, will often dictate how you spend your time.

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However, as with all organizations, unexpected challenges will pop up on a fairly consistent basis. Having the flexibility to deal with these challenges while still helping the marketing group meet its goals is essential.

When assembled properly, all of your digital marketing channels should complement one another. In addition, these channels should complement your off-line channels. Your email marketing should complement your display advertising. Your social media marketing should complement your event marketing. That's why it's essential for a digital marketing campaign to include all digital and off-line components so that they can assist one another in managing the customer journey of each lead and help the organization develop and manage its business.

One major component of this that we'll discuss in a future section is building paths or email workflow tracks to assist your customer on their journey. This proactive approach of assisting your customer while utilizing your expertise to provide them with a clear roadmap is a key feature of some of the marketing automation tools now available within digital marketing. The parts of the customer relationship that were exclusively managed by a face-to-face or verbal dialogue are now often enhanced within the digital realm.

If the key asset within your organization is your expertise, then your challenge is to provide that expertise across the entire length of the customer buying cycle. What this means is there can be a significant amount of knowledge transfer before someone even becomes a lead.

This is extremely important for digital marketing where knowledge transfer and thought leadership are key indicators of success. Taking the approach of helping people solve their problems by utilizing your expertise will be a key strategy as we take a deeper look into the individual components of your digital marketing programs.



## About the Author

Walter Lis is a digital marketing consultant, writer, conference speaker and small business owner with a passion for creating and executing successful online marketing strategies. His core technical expertise includes search engine optimization, digital advertising, email marketing, social media marketing and web analytics.

Prior to starting his own marketing consultancy, Walter gained over 20 years of experience working for businesses ranging from multi-billion-dollar companies to sole proprietorships. Walter has held senior management positions for The Chicago Tribune Media Group, sports information provider STATS, LLC and investment management firm Attain Capital Management. He's worked with companies in a wide variety of industries including media, publishing, telecommunications, manufacturing, local government, information technology, construction, and finance.

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