



The Ultimate Guide To Taking Your Small Business Online

Description

No doubt you know very well the advantages you could enjoy by [taking your small business online](#), but as a small business owner, you could be wondering exactly where to start. The internet has become so broad, even for business purposes it can be tough to figure out what works and what doesn't.

Even worse, what works for your neighbour may not work as well for you. So with this in mind, you may be wondering if there's a golden formula to taking your small business online. The good news is that, yes, there is. The less good news is that it's not universal, you have to come up with it for your business.

What it takes is a simple understanding of what platforms are available and what advantage each offers. Armed with this knowledge, you can craft a strategy for your business to succeed. From the very beginning, you need to know who you want to reach, how you want to reach them, and how you want to convert them.

[Conversion](#) is very important because you not only want to interact with clients online. You also want your business to benefit from that interaction. So your strategy should consider every action that yields a benefit for your business. Once you know, make sure you make it easy for these actions to be completed, everywhere your business is found.

So let's take a look at what options you have to go with online and how you can take advantage of each.

Website

Your website is the absolute starting point when taking your small business online. A business website has become the definitive proof of the existence of a business. Even businesses with physical locations tend to get this vetting as well.

Once you decide on your business name, go online and pick up your domain name, secure your identity online. Immediately after that, start building a website that shows potential clients who you are, what you offer and how to contact you.

Take this further by allowing clients to leave information on how you can get in touch with them. This is referred to as [lead capture techniques](#). Even if your business intends to sell out of a physical location, a website is still very important. [97%](#) of consumers admit to searching online for local businesses before using it.

In addition, [88%](#) of those searches done on a mobile device will result in a call or visit. This clearly shows that failing to build a website for your business is as good as handing clients to the competition that does.

Google My Business is increasingly making it easy for local businesses to be found, but even this doesn't work without a website. It's important to remember that a strong social media presence does not replace the work of a good website. Relying on third-party platforms reduces your control of how your businesses can be found online.

Regular algorithm changes may consistently reduce your visibility, nullifying all your efforts. Where that network is removed altogether, as in the case of Google+, your visibility is lost altogether. With your own website, your destiny is in your own control.

SEO

[Search engine optimization](#) is the process of ensuring your business can be found on search engine results pages (SERPs). Considering how much search is influencing browsing the web, this cannot be overlooked.

Almost everyone looking for information online will start with a search. While SEO can be a bit complex with regular changes, it's still important for you to be a part of it. Leaving all your SEO work to an SEO expert would be a huge mistake.

This is because [good SEO is centred around your target user](#), and no one knows them better than you. It's important to not only make sure you are found but you are found for what you can serve. Use your unique understanding of your target market to make sure your SEO expert puts you in front of your target audience.

Remember, searching online has a high intent behind it, so misdirected SEO is not only wasted time, effort and money, but it can also damage your brand. No one wants to receive a search result with no value to them.

When you take your small business online, use search to be found where you want to be found by the people you want to find you. Don't forget to prioritise local search. It may be difficult to compete with more established brands when it comes to SEO.

Optimizing for local search makes you a priority for those searching close by. Tools like Google My Business are making local businesses a priority for search. By utilising them and providing the right information, you expose your business to more potential clients. These clients are usually ready to purchase, and your business cannot afford to miss out on them.

Blog

While a blog is a great opportunity to improve a business's SEO, it's about more than just that. Because the SEO benefits of blogging are so often spoken about, we'll not be dwelling on them. Only to say, they exist, and you should not overlook them.

Taking your small business online exposes it to a very broad audience. This is a great benefit, but it opens up a new challenge: the majority of this audience does not know your reputation. They have no way of knowing if you're as good at what you're selling as you say you are.

A blog is a great opportunity to address any doubts. If you take the time to meticulously address your market's pain points, it quickly becomes clear you could be the solution they are looking for. The trick is to make sure you're comprehensive and produce good-quality posts.

With consistent posts that are properly promoted, you'll quickly become an authority on your subject matter. This not only benefits your clients but benefits you as well. Creating quality content requires a great deal of research. This research solidifies your knowledge of your subject matter.

It may even make you aware of facts you had missed. With change being the only constant in so many industries, at the very least, you'll stay updated. Don't be afraid to blog on subject matters that help your clients do things themselves. That initial kick to get started might just be what you need to ensure a future client.

Somewhere along the line, they will need your expert opinion, only with more appreciation of it. Ask any repairman, DIY really ups the prices of repairs. That could explain why there's a YouTube video to help you fix just about anything. After you fail, you'll be willing to pay the asking price.

E-commerce

While also technically a website, an e-commerce site is a special kind that allows you to sell your products online. It goes further from just showcasing products to allowing your clients to make purchases there and then.

With tools like [Shopify](#), you can sell anything, from physical products to digital products and services. You can choose to [get assistance setting up](#), or you can [get started yourself](#).

E-commerce has become one of the fastest-growing sales channels, with large businesses already feeling the impact of failing to adapt. The South African market is expected to [grow 16.5% year on year](#) to a value of US\$3,395 million in 2019. This growth is expected to be 8.5% by the year 2023, resulting in a market of US\$4,781 million by 2023.

The global market is no slouch either [with 2019 revenue of US\\$2,012,096 million](#). Not only can your small business not afford to overlook e-commerce, but it also can't afford to miss the opportunity it presents. It not only expands your market to any geographic location, but in most cases, it removes the middleman.

When you sell online, you can sell directly to your target market, and this will help your margins greatly. This greater profitability can be reinvested into your product quality, or transferred to your clients in reduced prices. Additionally, without a middleman, you can make sure your potential clients experience the level of service quality you desire for them.

E-commerce stores are more adaptable than physical ones. Businesses that run e-commerce stores can merchandise faster, give personalised rewards and enrich the shopping experience. The ease of collecting data online means businesses can better apply personalised experiences that the modern consumer craves. Electronic stores are dynamic, offering consumers what they want when they do. Their physical counterparts are far from this, and your business should take advantage.

Directories

The internet has taken over the use of the phone book. It didn't render it obsolete, it merely changed its medium, and increased its functionality and value. Local directories still serve a purpose for businesses online.

Because they get indexed so fast, they may actually be the means by which customers find you for a while. In addition, because some people are still old school, they will go to directories to search for businesses and products.

What is important is to make sure the business is listed on reputable directories that won't come across as SPAMMY. A directory registration should add to the trust factor of your business, not detract from it.

Business directories now serve an even greater purpose, reviews. [93%](#) of consumers admit to reviews influencing their purchasing decisions. For this reason, you need to make sure your clients have a platform to share the wonderful service they receive from you.

This will extend your efforts and help you get new clients. Even negative reviews can be a benefit for your business. It gives you the opportunity to address disgruntled customers and preserve the brand name, as opposed to them airing their grievances unknown to you.

It also provides a learning experience, allowing you to better serve clients in the future. Just be sure to address every review, positive or negative. Online directories are also great for local SEO. They have great filtering capabilities and can make you more visible locally.

Business directories incorporate so many aspects that they are great tools for brand building. The information they carry may put your business in front of clients even before they're aware of your brand.

Social Media

While it can be agreed that [organic reach](#) on social media is continuously dwindling, its value cannot be overlooked. Social media is still great for building an online community and getting a better understanding of your target market.

Social share can give you a better understanding of what resonates with your audience. This understanding can help you better tailor your brand to your target market. Conversely, it can help you better understand the market that exists for the brand you have tailored.

One thing remains though, an engaged social media community is the quickest way to build brand ambassadors. Social media adds an added layer of support and communication with clients. It's a means to quickly know what challenges clients are facing.

This is because clients may find it easier to inform you via social media, where they spend a lot of time anyway than to, say, open a support ticket. With a good social media presence, you are always within earshot of customers.

Finally, it's important to remember it's not all doom and gloom. Though the numbers aren't as good as they used to be, social media [still experiences some organic reach](#). That little makes a

difference, considering most platforms are free.

As a small business, you can not overlook any free marketing, even one with limited reach. On some platforms like Reddit and Tumblr, businesses still enjoy about as much reach as personal accounts. In addition to this little organic traffic that may lead to sales, social media still carries a little SEO benefit.

Not to mention, it improves the trust factor for your business. This is because, in addition to some offering a review function, they give the opportunity to showcase your expertise. Regularly talking about your industry soon establishes your brand as an authority.

Paid Advertising

Here's the truth: SEO is tough, and it takes time. Organic social reach, on the other hand, is continuously decreasing. The answer to getting more brand awareness, leads and sales may be paid advertising.

No digital marketing strategy is complete without a good paid advertising plan. It's important to note, however, that paid advertising is no substitute for seeking organic reach for your business.

While SEO may take time and effort, over time it has a great return on investment over paid advertising. Even in social media, your [organic reach has some advantages over paid advertising](#).

[Pay-per-Click advertising](#) can, however, help you reach clients faster while your organic growth is brewing. In addition, because you only pay for particular actions, it's not as expensive as offline advertising. It can be fine-tuned to get you the best possible leads, giving it a great return on investment.

You can advertise on social media, search engines like Bing, or around the web on websites your clients visit. It's important to have a strategy that not only shows where you'll advertise but also what you want clients to do once you reach them.

Unlike traditional advertising, PPC can let you laser target who your adverts reach, for better results. You cannot choose who sees your billboard on a highway, but you can choose who sees your banner on YouTube.

Make sure you have the infrastructure to collect and analyse data that can make you better place your advertising. If you don't know how to, consider investing in a [good consultant](#).

[Email Marketing](#)

Email is most likely already part of your business, but it's an important channel when taking your small business online. It's free and enjoys the [best conversion rates](#) of any digital channel, save for direct visits.

With email, you can control when and what the recipient views. This control over timing and message could go a long way in explaining [why email is great at getting desired actions](#). When it comes to email, it's important to make sure you are communicating with people who want to hear from you.

With people receiving so many emails, your unwanted email will most likely just end up being ignored. This will skew your data and you'll struggle to understand how email is helping your business. Even worse, your emails will just get relegated to the junk folder, leaving your domain associated with SPAM.

Instead, resist the urge to buy email addresses, and keep your lists fresh. Take the time to go into your email lists and trim and prune to remove those that have grown stale. Use the other channels in your online strategy, like your blog, to get emails that'll actually work.

You should also be mindful of how frequently you communicate. Only communicate when there's something the recipient would want to hear, and just often enough that they don't get tired of hearing it. Keep your emails professional, and use an email marketing tool like [MailChimp](#).

It will help you send well-designed emails that follow mass emailing rules. Taking your small business online without email would be severely lacking because this is the medium you'll use to finally close those leads you painstakingly worked to get from all the other mediums.

Conclusion

If your business is not online, you are missing out on many opportunities. As the web develops further, it becomes increasingly easier to be online. In this day and age, there is simply no excuse, or reason, why your business shouldn't be online.

[Taking your small business online](#) opens up a broader market. It doesn't matter the size of your business, you can sell to anyone, anywhere. With the ease of tracking online, you have an even better understanding of these markets, even without physical contact. Moreover, it gives you an instant advantage over your competition that misses the opportunity.

Speaking of competition, online, there is no small guy. If you position your business well and use all the assets available to you, you'll slay the giants. Taking your small business online levels the playing field in a lot of ways. Online, a small jewellery seller on Etsy can cause headaches for a national jewellery chain.

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