# The 10 Key Steps to Successfully Market Your Business Online

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It is essential for small businesses to market their products and services online. Customers are increasingly turning to the Web to research companies, compare product features and prices, and purchase products. If you do not take advantage of the Web and email to market your business, you can lose valuable customers.

With millions of companies clamoring for attention online, however, it is all too easy for your emerging company to get drowned out by all the noise. There is no surefire way to rise above the crowd, but there are plenty of cost-effective techniques to make your Web site more visible. To help you gain exposure for your small business site, I have put together some tangible steps you can take to increase your presence online.

**1. Build a professional Web site.** Your Web site is a reflection of your business, so make sure it looks the part. Don't distract customers with flashy graphics and colors. The key to a good site is to make sure that customers can easily find what they are looking for. This means a clear navigation bar and a good "search" box. Take a look at successful Web sites and competitors' sites for inspiration.

You can take several approaches to building a Web site:

- **Templates:** There are plenty of sites that will give you Web site templates either for free or very cheaply. I do not recommend this option unless your site is extremely simple. Templates are not known for their bells and whistles. This approach is best if you are trying to quickly set up an online presence with plans to improve the site later.

- **Consultants:** There are professional site-building consultants who will custom-build a site for you — but consultants tend to exact a premium for their services. Make sure you have done your homework in terms of the image you want to present. Otherwise, you can spend time and money developing designs and a style that reflect the consultant, not your company.

- **Software:** There are software packages that can help you design a site. CNET.com is a good source for researching software costs and features. If you're not technically savvy, however, this route can prove frustrating and time-consuming.

**2. Use Social Media.** You must incorporate social media as part of your original marketing plan. This means having a strategy on Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, Pinterest, and other social media sites. And  your social media activities can be coordinated through an online dashboard like HootSuite (www.hootsuite.com).

**3. Build up your email lists.** One of the best and cheapest ways to market online is through email. But I have found that customers are becoming more and more reticent to provide email addresses because of spam and privacy issues. I strongly recommend getting up to speed on laws affecting email marketing, such as the CAN-SPAM Act (www.spamlaws.com/federal/108s877.html). Include an easy way for customers to contact you and unsubscribe from your email list. And post a privacy policy on your site describing how you will use any personal information.

To encourage customers to divulge their email address, offer incentives such as discounts or an email newsletter. Include useful content in your messages and not just promotional fluff. Customers will not only read your messages, but they will pass them along to friends and family, who may in turn become customers. In addition, it is important to test and track how your newsletters are doing to ensure you're campaign is effective.

**4. Register with search engines and directories.**  Search engines and directories constantly crawl the Web looking for new content, but you can speed the process by submitting your own site. You can notify each search site individually or use one of several free services that submit your site to multiple search engines

and directories. At the very least, register with Google (www.google.com), Yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](www.yahoo.com)), InBusiness (www.InBusiness.com), and the Open Directory Project (www.dmoz.org). For maximum exposure, hire a service that will submit your site to hundreds of search engines covering every conceivable topic.

**5. Search engine optimization (SEO).** At its most basic, SEO involves giving your Web pages accurate titles, using meta tags that describe your content, and placing key information at the top of each page. These techniques have spawned a cottage industry of companies — some more scrupulous than others — that claim to help your site show up higher in search engine results. Some of these services try to trick search engines into ranking sites higher than their content would justify. It may sound tempting to "fix" search results in your favor, but search engines constantly tweak their ranking formulas to frustrate these manipulators. I have found that two of the best places for information on optimizing your site are the Google and Yahoo Web sites themselves. Not only do they discuss tips, but they also expose tricks of the SEO shysters of the world.

**6. Search engine marketing (SEM).** One popular way to lure qualified prospector customers to your site is by buying ads that are targeted to specific keywords that a user might type into a search engine. It is important to purchase the most relevant keywords, but that is not going to pay off without compelling ad copy to entice customers to your site. Make sure to send customers from the ad to a landing page on your site that sets forth the precise product or service related to the keyword ad. Sending a viewer to your home page is generally not as effective as sending them to a specific product page.

You pay for ads on a cost per click (CPC) basis. Constantly review your CPC and the conversion of that click into buyers. If it is not cost-effective, try purchasing a different keyword. Also, try testing different ad copy and different landing pages to determine what works best for your site.

The popular companies offering CPC ad programs include Google, Yahoo, Bing, ReachLocal, and Ask.

**7. Online groups and mailing lists.** Online groups or message boards are great ways to spread the word about your business for free. Yahoo Groups is an online source for finding Web communities built around every imaginable topic. Make sure to avoid spamming, or you will make more enemies than customers. With thousands of groups to choose from, it is important to find the ones that match the interests of your audience. Do not violate a group's customs; while some groups welcome commercial messages, others strongly discourage them. If you can't find information on a particular group, try emailing the group moderator for guidelines on how to proceed.

**8. Cultivate the media.** Maintain a good relationship with the trade, business and general media and alert them about any new developments or innovations on your site — or to anything else you do that might be newsworthy. A good PR campaign can help build momentum and jumpstart critical word-of-mouth popularity for your site. Because the press is in tune with the latest trends, I have also found that a good relationship with a reporter can result in tips about the competition or about your market in general.

**9. Go offline.** Successful campaigns integrate offline and online marketing. Be sure you have a good, easy-to-remember URL and plaster it everywhere you can. It should appear on every bit of marketing collateral that your company produces, from business cards to brochures.

**10. Provide great customer service**. A satisfied customer will return to your site and will tell others about your business. So go out of your way to give great customer support and service. There will always be a few disgruntled customers. You can try to turn them around with an offer of a discount, a free product, or some other benefit.

If you have followed my recommendations and you have seen little immediate increase in traffic or sales, remember that a successful marketing campaign does not produce results overnight. For example, search engines can take up to two months even to index your site. So remember that time and perseverance remain the real keys to a successful online marketing program.