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GROW YOUR BUSINESS

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Business Planning in Uncertain Times

The most important thing to remember as a business owner navigating uncertain times is simple: with a proper planning process in place you can have confidence. Believe that you will make it through the storm, that the clouds will part and sunshine will once again fall upon your enterprise.

Although external factors are usually ignored because they are out of our control they need to form part of our plan. But the things happening within our business are even more important.

“The barometers for measuring success are action and progress.”

Too often we focus on past mistakes and allow hindsight to overwhelm future planning. Put more energy into understanding just where you are, where you want to go and then mapping out how to get there.

When planning during uncertain times, action and progress are the

barometers for measuring success. Stagnancy will flood the boat - be quick, decisive and most importantly know your bearings. Start with the fundamentals:

1. It's the planning process, not the plan itself. Don't let unpredictable outcomes derail your ability to follow through. Your plans should innately allow for flexibility and buffers for change.
2. Review, revise, correct. Repeat!
3. Hone in on a foolproof warning system - one that monitors changes and can highlight early warning signs of trouble. Pay closer attention to every detail.
4. Tighten focus, value your lucrative clientele and watch your cash flow.
5. Improve and streamline communication strategies within the business.

Consider taking on a counter-intuitive mindset. If it seems like the time to cut down, resist the urge! Growth in times of duress has proven to promote longevity, and encourages business owners to be risk-takers who strive to survive. Well thought-out forecasts will dictate the best course for you.

If you do decide that cuts are necessary, target specifically and avoid wide-sweeping cost reduction methods.

Remove your ego from the equation - that's right, you are not expected to know it all! Knowing when to ask for help and accept advice or support is a powerful quality, both humbling and intelligent. Remember, we are experienced and here to help with specific tools and resources designed just for businesses like yours.

Positive cash flow is also the time to consider applying for lines of credit and will allow for better terms and conditions to be laid out. Take this time to also foster a relationship with your bank - you never know when you will need to count on their goodwill.

Take the time during a rough patch to beef up your core - revisit fundamentals, train staff, manage client relationships and conduct regular financial assessments. Keeping busy will help keep you focused, which is the only way to overcome the hurdles and challenges.



Ways to Use Google to Build Business

Want to find out what the biggest sea mammal is? Google it, they say. The notorious go-to for seekers of information, gleaned through the vast world of online information, Google is a household name. But how much do you know about their small business support systems?

“Get Your Business Online Week helps small businesses to run online.”

Recently Google hosted “Get Your Business Online Week” (just Google it), aimed at encouraging small businesses to get up and running on the web. Hosting free online tutorials, the support staff aimed to make the case for online business, and to assist in the creation of websites, answering questions, etc.

This kind of support has become a vital part of the brand Google has become. Their multi-layered (mostly free) suite of applications can assist even the most web-timid of small business owners.

Jumpstarting the Google-train can improve web presence, build client base and boost profits overall. So, where to begin?

Let’s start with the three A’s of the Google alphabet: AdSense, AdWords and Analytics.

In a nutshell:

1. **AdSense:** Hosting other businesses ads on your own site creates new content and diversifies web presence. In other words, make profit from displaying other people’s ads.

2. **AdWords:** Google’s answer to online advertising, allowing you to breach a new customer base by strategically placing paid advertisements. The key here is linking your advertisement to key word searches, to become an advertised search result.

3. **Analytics:** Interactive tool for tracking stats about who visits your site, and what they are doing once on your site. Think of this as the playbook at a ball game - it’s mostly stats, subject to interpretation and analysis.

AdSense and AdWords require some bucks, but Analytics is offered for free. Now why, you ask, would Google offer such an invaluable service at no cost?

It’s because they aim to create a suite of services that work integrally with each other and are best used as a team. When you buy shampoo, you usually pick up conditioner too, right?

Another app worth mentioning is Google+, slowly but surely eating its way into the die-hard Facebook fan club and converting users worldwide.

More like a combination of LinkedIn and Facebook, this social media site more directly targets audiences, allowing small business owners to specify their scope and adapt messages accordingly. It’s a welcome substitute to Facebook, which shares all information equally.

Other supplemental app’s worth checking out: Google Offers, Google Places for Business, Site Search, Blogger and YouTube.

But we’ll save them for another time.



5 Website Mistakes Small Businesses Should Avoid

“Your website is your opportunity to showcase the value of working with your business, as an employee or as a customer. It also allows for you to project your product offerings and messaging exactly as you wish them to be seen.”

Eek, sounds important! It is important, and it's worth the investment to build up a website that represents your mission, gathers potential clients and propels the business to a new level.

One of the biggest mistakes that small-business-owners-turned-web-entrepreneurs make is trying too hard. Simplicity is a value here, making sure pertinent information is clear, concise and easy to find.

Other than that, there are some pretty common complaints when it comes to first-time sites. Don't fall victim to the dreaded 'Back' button and make sure you keep people on your page by avoiding these mistakes:

1. Too much content. Both visually confusing and over-complex, filling the site with text is a no-no. The

'back' button is the web equivalent to flipping the page - keep it relevant!

2. Not being mobile friendly. Essentially, this means that any time a user attempts to view your site on a tablet or smart phone they are not getting the full experience. There are businesses devoted to converting your site to be mobile-friendly. Just look around - not being accessible via tablet? That eliminates half your potential client base!

“You have less than 30 seconds before clients leave the site.”

3. Burying the lead. In this case, your contact info! This should be the most prevalent information, not some after-thought stuck at the bottom of the page. Reorganize with the idea that you have less than thirty seconds to get your customer to contact you, before they get frustrated and click 'back'.

4. Failing to utilize Search Engine Optimization. Snazzy sites are not really that snazzy if they do not drive

you any business. Make a list of the 25 best industry buzz words or phrases that relate to your business and go from there.

5. Too many gadgets and gizmos - most importantly, logos or banners that flash, spin, sing, dance or any other of these obnoxious unnecessary elements.

Nitpick and be precise. People dislike typos, grammatical errors and misspelled words. It implies that you do not care enough to take time to edit for perfection. What does that say about your brand or your product?

Stale content, dead links, outdated or sparsely filled calendars are also deal breakers. They are simply signs to potential clients that you lack follow through and attention to detail and may be in turn the way you handle your clients' affairs.

Ever heard of KISS? Keep it simple, stupid! A commonly uttered phrase, KISS is important when things start to get a little bit too complicated. With small business website design, KISS is paramount.



Social Media Tool Kit

That's right, these days social media management is calling for its own set of tools! A carpenter with their hammer, a doctor with their stethoscope and now the small business owner and their kit of social media tools...

Some experts will say that before you begin to hone in on your 'tools', savvy business owners will always ask themselves why and what; why do you wish to employ a social media platform and what do you want to gain from it?

There is no point in making a huge social media effort without a plan to substantiate progress.

Be prepared, social media is an investment and a commitment, so have the time to dedicate to the endeavor.

What should be in the kit?

The ideal social media tool kit should consist of four 'compartments':

1. Blogging
2. Social Networking
3. Multimedia Tools
4. Online Reviews and Opinions

Each compartment should be analyzed independently. However, the most ideal tools will provide a synchronicity between them, creating fluid transitions.

There are a lot of options out there, a seemingly endless list of management tools purporting to make your social media life easier. So how to select which items will remain in your kit?

“Social media is an investment and a commitment.”

Consider these four factors:

1. Affordability - how much is this really costing you?
2. Scalability - can this grow with you?
3. Cover the trinity? Facebook, Twitter and Linked In - does it post to all three?
4. Update posting assistance - does it allow for post scheduling?

Four ticks? Means this tool may be worth it.

Ready to check out some options? Start with HootSuite, VerticalResponse, Sprout Social, Sendible, or Postling.

TWO TO-DO'S

The To-Do list - it sits there, silently mocking us at the end of the day, the concrete reminder that there will never seem to be enough time in the day. Eliminate to-do shame by creating two To-Do lists. The first is the real deal, arranged by project/task size: small or big, short or long term. The second list should comprise only of tasks that you can expect to realistically accomplish in one day - that list should be the goal, allowing for a sense of completion at end of day.



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