5 WAYS TO MARKET YOUR BUSINESS FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

The holiday season is quickly approaching, and the time is now to make sure you get the most for your marketing efforts to help secure sales success in the coming months. Here are a few budget-friendly ideas to help get you started.

**Social Media Contests:** If your small business has a social media presence, contests on Facebook and Twitter are often a popular way to highlight your brand and engage with customers, reminding them that your product or service is available – and a potentially great gift idea. With a few rules, an incentive such as a prize or discount on your offerings, you can drum up excitement about – and draw people in to – your business.

**Extra Appeal for Your Loyal Customers:** Take this time to make your loyal customers feel extra special – it may come back to you by way of additional business and referrals. Without breaking the bank, you can provide special offers, sneak previews, free shipping or secret sales.

**Special Events or Open House:** Make your small business stand out by hosting an open house or special event at your store or restaurant. Use it to showcase holiday season gifts, menus and merchandise so customers can get a glimpse of your seasonal goods in advance. Pair the browsing with light refreshments – a mug of hot cocoa or a glass of cider – to get people in the holiday spirit. On their way out, give a special offer or coupon that invites customers back to make their purchases at a discount.

**Holiday Help:** This is a great idea from Illiana Bercovitz at *Small Business Trends*; use social media to offer helpful tips during a stressful holiday season. Consider your industry, product or service and related advice you could offer to make customers’ lives easier. “Everyone appreciates useful advice and your customers will thank you for pushing content that makes their holidays slightly less stressful,” Bercovitz says. Maintain brand awareness across platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

**E-Mail:** Although it’s often considered overused, email remains inexpensive and easy to implement when it comes to maintaining contact with existing customers. That’s a key to remember – to be effective, email marketing should be used with folks you have already done business with or who have expressed an interest in your business and have requested email from you (otherwise known as permission marketing).

Keep these tips in mind if you plan to use email to support your holiday marketing efforts:

* **Keep the e-mail short and sweet.** Link directly to the content of interest so you make the process as easy as possible for your customers.

* **Clearly state the email’s intent in the subject line.** For example, “A Special Offer Just for You. Thanks for your business in 2013.”

* **Be festive in your design.** Appeal to the sights of the season with a special design for the holidays.

For more great holiday marketing insight, check out this recent post from guest blogger, Fieva Lesonsky, “Start Now to Plan Your Holiday Retail Marketing Campaign,” and the 2012 web chat with Caron Beesley. (SBA.gov)
SBA/WASHINGTON: Small businesses can help keep their business information safe and protect their online information with a new free course from the U. S. Small Business Administration.

SBA is launching a new course, designed for small businesses, to provide an overview on how to secure business information, identify security threats and guard against cyber-attacks.

**Cyber security for Small Business** is one of SBA’s newest on-line courses to help business owners safeguard their information from computer attacks and determine their readiness against security breaches. The course available at [http://www.sba.gov/tools/sab-learning-center/training/cybersecurity-small-businesses](http://www.sba.gov/tools/sab-learning-center/training/cybersecurity-small-businesses), teaches best cyber security practices and protection against cyber threats for the nation’s small business community.

The protection of sensitive data such as business invoices, payroll records, client and employee data and other proprietary information is essential to a company’s success. A computer failure or other system breach could undermine a company’s reputation, expose it to costly recovery expenses, and disrupt the business’ overall operation.

**Cyber security for Small Businesses** will help to identify information security vulnerabilities that can put a small business at risk, and the protective tools and techniques used to measure, maintain and guard business information and systems.

Small business owners will learn the types of information that should be secured, how to protect themselves from intentional attacks or unintentional damage, guard themselves from decreased productivity caused by security breaches and evaluate the needed security tools and techniques. The course also gives useful and practical steps to take to protect a business’ operations.

**Cyber security for Small Businesses** is self-paced and also offers best practices for guarding against cyber threats, potential computer weaknesses and the corrective actions for risk management.

Course participants completing the online course can earn a certificate of completion from the SBA. The SBA Learning Center offers free courses covering topics such as Starting, Managing, or Financing a Business, and can be found at [http://www.sba.gov/sba-learning-center](http://www.sba.gov/sba-learning-center).

**MORE CYBER SECURITY TIPS FOR SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS**

(By NGORIEL, Community Moderator/SBA)

Small businesses are becoming a larger target for criminals seeking to access sensitive data because attackers are well aware that small business have limited resources or personnel dedicated to information system security. In an effort to combat cyber-attacks, the Department of Homeland Security established October as National Cyber Security Awareness Month to educate the public about cyber security and to prepare the nation in the event of a cyber-incident.

**9 Cyber-Security Tips for Small Business Owners**
1. **Use the FCC’s Small Biz Cyber Planner to create a cyber-security plan.** The Small Biz Cyber Planner is valuable for businesses that lack the resources to hire a dedicated staff member to protect themselves from cyber threats. The tool walks users through a series of questions to determine which cyber security strategies should be included in the planning guide, and generates a customized PDF that services as a cyber-security strategy template.

2. **Establish cyber security rules for your employees.** Establish rules of behavior describing how to handle and protect personally identifiable information. Clearly detail the penalties for violating cyber security policies.

3. **Protect against viruses, spyware, and other malicious code.** Install, use, and regularly update antivirus and antispyware on every computer used in your business. Such software is readily available online from a variety of vendors.

4. **Educate employees about safe social media practices.** Depending on what your business does, employees might be introducing competitors to sensitive details about your firm’s internal business. Employees should be taught how to post online in a way that does not reveal any trade secrets to the public or competing businesses. This type of safe social networking can help avoid serious risks to your business.

5. **Manage and assess risk.** Ask yourself, “What do we have to protect? And, what would impact our business the most?” Cyber-criminals often use lesser-protected small businesses as a bridge to attack larger firms with which they have a relationship. This can make unprepared small firms a less attractive business partner in the future, blocking potentially lucrative business deals.

6. **Download and install software updates when they are available:** All software vendors regularly provide patches and updates to their products to correct security problems and improve functionality. Configure all software to install such updates automatically.

7. **Make backup copies of important business data and information:** Regularly backup the data on every computer used in your business. Critical data includes word processing documents, spreadsheet, databases, financial files, human resources files, and accounts receivable/payable files. Backup data automatically if possible, or at least weekly.

8. **Control physical access to computers and network components:** Prevent access or use of business computers by unauthorized individuals. Laptops can be particularly easy targets for theft, so make sure they are stored and locked up when unattended.

9. **Secure Wi-Fi networks:** If you have a Wi-Fi network for your home business make sure it is secure and hidden. To hide your Wi-Fi network, configure your wireless access point or router so that it does not broadcast the network name, known as the Service Set Identifier (SSID). In addition, make sure that passwords are required for access. It is also critical to change the administrative password that was on the device when it was first purchased. *(Source: FCC’s Cyber Security Tools for Small Business)*


**SOCIAL MEDIA 101: A SMALL BUSINESS GUIDE**
The stats don’t lie: small businesses that use social media in a planned, strategic way see an increase in business leads and traffic to their website. Nearly 80% of active U.S. internet users visit social networks and blogs, according to the SMB Group’s 2012 SMB Social Business Study. This explains why social media marketing is commonplace and effective for most large companies. At the same time, only 28% of small businesses using social tools identify themselves as applying social in a “planned,” strategic way.

Social Media can give a small business the boost it needs to advance to the next level. In fact, 42% of small businesses using social media reported an increase in leads or traffic to their website. Check out these social media best practices from Co-founder of the SMB Group and small business expert Laurie McCabe at: http://www.gbsbdc.com/013/10/social-media-101. (Resource: America’s SBDC Gateway)

THREE ESSENTIAL WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR WEBSITE

By Curt Hanke on inc.com, 10/29/13

Your website is often the first impression a prospective customer has of your business. Regardless of who you are or what you sell—and notwithstanding the increasing importance of social media—your website matters a great deal.

Need proof? Trying to grow your consumer e-commerce business? Smart move, consumer e-commerce is growing at a rate twice that of all retail (Forrester data). Looking to drive sales in your retail establishment? In 2012, over half of all retail sales in the U.S. were influenced by the web (also Forrester). Or trying to drive B2B buyers for your business? 78 percent of prospects start by searching the web (G3 Communications).

Bottom line, your website isn’t just a website—it’s a first introduction, the digital lobby to your business that more than ever influences whether or not you’ll get an invitation to the dance. And failure to win here, or at least play at parity, means a world of prospects and customers that will never move from your lobby into your showroom.

- 46% of people say a website’s design is the number one criterion for discerning the credibility of a company.
- 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual—and visuals are processed 60,000 times faster in the brain than test (3M Corporation). So it’s no surprise that people respond to visual information—in other words, design—better than plain text.
- Videos -- adding videos to your website: consumers are 85% more likely to buy after watching a video. Engaging video content when possible can be tremendously beneficial for your business.

Make it easy and fast: Like it or not, we live in an increasingly impatient world where ubiquitous voice and instant gratification have led to a very discerning shopper. With website consumption continuing to migrate onto phones and tablets, it is important to have a thoughtful approach for your website on desktops. 91% of smart phone users agree thy will click away from a website if they don’t quickly find what they need (Forrester). More information at http://www.inc.com/curt-hanke/3-ways-to-improve-your-website.html.

TAXPAYERS SHOULD ACT NOW TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IRS CHANGES

Published on October 29, 2013
Unlike last year, tax planning for 2013 is not hampered by uncertainties over a looming fiscal cliff. Unfortunately, there is always some uncertainty and a few expiring provisions to warrant special attention by taxpayers. Managing income taxes at years end involves techniques designed to address three issues:

- **Accelerating or deferring income**: If a taxpayer expects to be in the same or a lower tax bracket next year, it’s best to defer as much income as possible until after the year end.
- **If a taxpayer's overall tax rate is the same in both years**, accelerating deductions achieve tax savings this year rather than waiting for those tax savings to materialize next year.
- **Take advantage of tax provisions** scheduled to expire at the end of 2013.

Tax planning begins by projecting income and deductions for the year to determine your tax bracket and income thresholds that trigger higher and/or additional taxes, or limits the effectiveness of deductions. One of the impacts of the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012 (ATRA12) is the reintroduction of the Pease limitation, which can greatly limit itemized deductions. Once a taxpayer knows what his or her income taxes will look like, it’s time to evaluate which techniques will help the most.

**Strategies to accelerate or defer income:**

- **Adjust your elective deferral plans at work**: Taxpayers who participate in 401(k), 403(b), most 457 plans, or in the Thrift Savings Plan can defer up to $17,500 this year. Taxpayers age 50 and older can defer up to $23,000.
- **Harvest capital gains or losses**: Long-term capital gains are taxed at 0 percent for taxpayers in the 15 percent bracket. Capital losses can be used to offset capital gains and reduce other income up to $3,000.
- **Use the IRA**: Taxpayers age 59 ½ and older can accelerate IRA distributions in 2013. Contributions may be deductible depending on your income level and whether you are covered by a retirement plan through work. Taxpayers under age 59 ½ can convert traditional IRAs to Roth IRAs to accelerate income.
- **Health-care assistance**: People with health savings accounts – available with some high-deductible health insurance policies – can save up to $3,250 tax-deferred for an individual and $6,450 for a family. Those who are 55 and older can save an additional $1,000. Flex spending contribution limits are capped at $2,500 this year.

**Strategies to accelerate or defer deductions:**

- **Medical expenses**: The Affordable Care Act (ACA) raises the income threshold this year to 10 percent of adjusted gross income for taxpayers under age 65. The threshold remains at 7.5 percent for those 65 and older. Taxpayers may need to prepare or defer medical bills to lump expenses in a single year to get the deduction.
- **Gifts to charities**: Use a donor advised fund (DAF) to maximize the tax savings from charitable giving. A DAF makes gifting appreciated securities easier. The DAF can be funded in tax years when the deduction will have the most impact. Distribution to charities can be made at any time without tax consideration.
- **Qualified Charitable Distribution**: This year only, taxpayers age 70 a/2 or older can choose to direct up to $100,000 of their IRA-required minimum distribution to charity. By doing so, the
distribution does not show up as taxable income, which can lower taxation of Social Security benefits and help reduce other threshold levels to further minimize taxes.

ATRA12 extended – but did not make permanent—several tax incentives for individuals. Taxpayers should consider whether they can benefit from these incentives this year and plan accordingly. The following provisions are set to expire on December 31st unless extended again:

- **Deductions for teacher expenses:** Eligible educators can deduct up to $250 for any unreimbursed expenses.
- **Deduction of mortgage insurance premiums:** Payments of Private Mortgage Insurance premiums can be treated as deductible home mortgage interest in 2013.
- **Discharge of principal residence indebtedness:** This can be excluded from gross income this year.
- **Qualified Charitable Distribution:** Taxpayers can make tax-free charitable donations from their required IRA distributions.

2013 is certainly an exciting year for tax planning. Start now in order to minimize your tax bill in April.

(By Rick Rodgers, Certified Financial Planner (www.RodgersSpeaks.com)
(http://www.susansolovic.com/2013/10/taxpayers-should-act-now-to-take-advantage-of irs...)

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