BUILDING YOUR SMALL BUSINESS DIGITAL PRESENCE

Building your business' digital presence can seem like a daunting task. With so many accounts, terms, and changing trends, staying on top of it can be a full-time job. Most businesses are online in some fashion, though not all take full advantage of the benefits that digital presence can offer. No matter your industry, having an online presence is vital to your long-term business success. Below we've laid out the first steps you need to take as a business owner.

The benefits of a robust digital presence

When customers want to learn more about a business, the first place they turn is to the internet. If your business does not have a robust digital presence, you will miss out on converting these potential customers.

But more so, a digital presence can help your business:

Reach new customers

Build trust as a legitimate business

Deepen relationships with existing customers

Reinforce a brand identity

Your first steps

If your business has a limited digital presence, below are the first steps you should take to transition online.

Understand your customers

Understand who your customers are and which online platforms yield the most engagement. For example, product-based customers may be more active on Instagram, while others want to see your business posting on LinkedIn. Knowing what your customers are looking for will help you as you develop a digital presence strategy.

Develop content guidelines

Before hiring a consultant or marketing professional, do your homework and outline the steps you'll need to take to build your online presence. Be sure to understand your customers' personas and where they interact in digital and physical spaces. Start small with development of content guidelines; for example consider whether your tone is informative, playful or opinionated. Set your principals for engagement, including how frequently you'll post, a color palette (if applicable), when and how to engage with users.

Design and develop content

Once you set your content guidelines, you're ready to create monthly content plans. Consider social media tools that allow you to schedule posts in advance so that you can streamline your digital presence process. Only after you understand the successes and failures of your digital presence, it may be helpful to hire a consultant or marketing professional to help scale your online brand. Remember to consult with your finance team and review your budget before bringing in outside help to build your online presence.

Track and analyze online engagement

Many tools can help you track who is viewing your content and how successful it is. Be sure to utilize these tools (e.g., Google Analytics), so you can track your progress. Be sure to set measurable goals (X number of website visits, X number of likes per post), so you can see what type of online engagement is working for you and your customers. Additionally, be sure to allow customers to provide feedback via surveys and emails.

Reflect and refine your digital presence

The online space is constantly changing, so be sure to set aside time on a quarterly basis to reflect on successes and failures. Don't be afraid to refine and revise your digital presence to meet changing trends or take user feedback into account.

The essentials

When developing your digital presence, you'll need to make sure you have the following tools in your digital tool belt to ensure a successful plunge into the digital space:

Modern website

Your website is the essential part of your digital presence, serving as your home base online. Many online tools make designing a website user-friendly. You can always hire a web designer or create the website yourself, but the premade tools are the most cost-effective, efficient approach when starting. Regardless of whether you use a web builder or build the site from scratch, be sure to think through the following promising practices:

- **Include contact and location information:** Make it as easy as possible for people to find you and contact you! You want customers to engage with you and your business.

- **Choose a relevant and catchy domain name:** Be sure to be thoughtful about your domain name. You want it to be short enough and memorable that your customers can enter it organically or share the domain name with other potential customers. To help potential customers find your website, buy similar domain names to route them to your main page.

- **Host an updates/news page:** Depending on your business, you may want to host an updates/news page on your website to inform potential customers or clients about a new product or service, press features or an upcoming event.

- **Include images of your products and business:** People respond well to visuals so be sure to include well lit high resolution product shots if you own a product-based business. Most online advertisers require photos of products in use so plan for photoshoots with live models. Service-based businesses should consider using high-resolution stock photos or personal photos that tell your brand story and build trust. Having these images help give potential customers a visual understanding of your business.

Ecommerce platform

Depending on your business, you may want to include an online marketplace or payment system so customers can purchase directly from your site. Although there are many options out there, this guide provides a clear overview of potential platforms.

Social media platform

Potential customers may be active on social media and they use it to learn about your business, products, and specials. Depending on the business, some social media platforms may be more valuable than others. Be sure to keep these accounts active with new content and post as much as you can. Below are some of the common platforms that businesses use with the best uses for each.

- **Facebook:** Useful for most businesses to provide information about the business. Your Facebook page can be used similarly as your business website
- **Instagram:** Great for retail/product-based businesses who can post about new products/sales
- **LinkedIn:** Ideal for service-orientated businesses or businesses that interact with other businesses
- **Twitter:** Perfect for short updates about the business and any new sales/deals upcoming.

Third-party verifier

When someone wants to learn more about a business, customers will often use a search engine or a third-party verifier site, like Google or Yelp, when deciding about a product or service. These sites are critical to your business success and are reasonably easy to set up. Be sure to monitor customer reviews on these sites and respond to feedback or any issues. When setting up your account and creating your listing, be sure to populate every field and add pictures when possible. Listed below are some of the most popular third-party sites.

- Google My Business
- Yelp for Business
- Facebook for Business
- Bing places for business
- Foursquare for Business

Promising practices

Building your online presence as a small business is a process and will take time to master. Below are some important promising practices that successful small businesses employ to build their online presence.

Be active

Successful businesses are active online. Create a content calendar that plans out when and what you will post. Posts don't need to be complicated or time-consuming. Sometimes small posts can be the most effective. Being active online will help your business develop a following and keep it top of mind for potential customers.

Encourage your customers to share about their experience online

When customers start posting and tagging your business, it will organically grow your network and reach online. Encourage customers to share and post their experiences with your business. Depending on the business, this might be taking pictures of your products or services or sharing a short video testimonial. Some businesses create incentives and contests to encourage customers to share and post online.

Evaluate peer businesses digital presence

Investigate what other peer businesses are doing online and what types of posts they are making on social media or the look of their websites. It will give you a good sense of what works for other businesses and what could work for your business.

Vary posts and don't be afraid to show personality

When posting on social media, you'll get more engagement online when you vary your posts. Not every post must be overproduced or overdone. It can sometimes be as simple as sharing a quick update as you're prepping to open up for the day. People appreciate it when they feel like they know someone online and feel like they can relate to them. Showing your personality as a business helps customers better understand who you are and connect with your brand. Showing your personality will help your business cut through the noise online and on social media.

Optimize your digital presence for mobile

Most customers will use their mobile devices to look up your business and engage with your business on social media. Review what your posts and website look like on a mobile device to optimize the experience for your mobile customers.

Creating and expanding your digital presence is critical to long-term business success. As the world continues to be more and more online, taking full advantage of this online activity will help your business grow and reach new customers. For additional information and resources on starting, maintaining, and growing your business, visit the Small Business Resource Center for the 50+ at www.smallbizrc.org.