

LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD



Productivity@Work series

Your Small Business Can Compete with the Big Guys. The 23 million small businesses in the United States represent a huge piece of our economy, but there's no disputing the struggle many face when going up against their larger competitors. Think about the impact a big box retailer opening has on local hardware stores, for instance. It's tough to overcome the brand awareness, marketing spend and technology investment these bigger players have.

Tough, but not impossible.

There are eight things you can do to move your business into the big-time where you'll be able to compete for customers on a level playing field.

1. Build outside expertise

When you first started out, you were probably the sales team, accountant, marketer and IT person all wrapped into one. As your enterprise grows, you'll want to work smarter – not harder. To keep your business competitive with larger entities, you have to take a long hard look at where you spend your time.

Not everyone is an expert at everything. Growing your business is also about learning to trust others and knowing when to outsource. It's challenging to let go, but having the experts involved will make your

business stronger and more successful. Accountants are particularly important as they can help you navigate the complicated world of taxes and payroll.

You should also think about assembling an advisory board that can counsel you on critical issues. Your informal board of directors can help you navigate difficult circumstances, be an honest voice, support you as you take a leap to the next level or just be a sounding board.

The most effective advisory board will be a group of professionals who bring a wide range of skills, experience and diversity to your company.

2. Embrace and communicate the unique aspects of a small business

Your bigger competitors may have sales forces, fulfillment capabilities and a huge catalog of products.



But, your business likely has a secret weapon that a large firm cannot match. According to Steven Strauss, a columnist at *USA Today*¹, you can compete and beat a larger competitor by:

- **Providing exceptional service.** Make service a living and breathing part of your business. Going out of your way to treat people exceptionally well brings great rewards and it's not something that many big companies can easily sustain.
- **Offering something unique.** Find the exclusive products that your larger competitors may not have; appeal to your customers' need to feel special; offer customizations which are more difficult for larger businesses to do.
- **Creating multiple profit centers.** Relying on one big customer is a recipe for disaster. Just as a stock trader would never own just one stock, you should never have just one big client. Cultivate as many different, varied customers as you can to protect yourself, your employees and your business.

3. Become a master marketer

Most business experts say that the single most powerful tool a business owner can have is a marketing plan. This can be a simple document that specifically answers who you are, what you do, who needs what you offer, how you plan to get customers, when you plan to do it and how you should pay for it.

This type of outline lets everyone in your organization, network and client base clearly understand your strategy and approach. When building your plan be sure to:

- **Narrow your market focus.** Look at who you're currently doing most of your business with and figure out why they do business with you. Write a single paragraph that describes what they look like and what motivates them to buy. You might learn that you're currently trying to be all things to all people. This first step can help shape your market where you will be more successful in reaching your core audience.
- **Position your business.** What do you do best? Once you figure out what your target market longs for, tell

them that you do it like no one else. Call some of your clients and ask them why they do business with you.

- **Write your core messages.** It is critical that you learn how to consistently talk about your business. Do you know your 30-second elevator speech? You should be able to concisely say what you do, how you do it and why you do it and excite people at the same time.
- **Create your marketing materials.** Using your core messages, your materials should reflect what you do as a business to showcase what sets your company apart from your competitors.
- **Expect referrals.** Create a referral marketing engine that turns happy clients into a referral network.

4. Take stock of your image



¹ The Small Business Bible, Steven Strauss, 2012



Assess what your business looks like. If you haven't recently evaluated all of your customer-facing materials, it's time to do so. Take your website, business cards, brochures, flyers or anything else you may distribute and put them side-by-side. What do you see?

Is it clear what products or services you provide? Does your company brand shine through? Is your brand clear and consistent across all the pieces? Do your materials set you apart from your competitors? And, finally, is your message and image memorable?

Even better than doing this brand audit yourself, assemble a small group of honest customers, friends or associates and ask what they think. It may be time to refresh or even restart on your company's image.

It's the details that will set you apart from your competitors. At many big companies that invest in a brand, there is typically a document that serves as a "brand bible". Be sure to create your brand guidelines to insure a consistent "look" across the company by everyone that has a role in communicating your brand.

5. Build an online and smartphone presence

Even if you're not selling products online, having a website and a smartphone app will impact potential customers' decision to do business with you. It's a fact — smartphones are projected (Deloitte Research) to influence 19 percent of total store sales by 2016,

amounting to \$689 billion in mobile-influenced sales. Consumers now research online before they decide which law firm to use, which gas grill to buy or even which doctor to entrust their medical care to.

Yet, only 58% of small business owners have a website².

And a lot less have their own smartphone app.

It's imperative to at least have a website. And be sure to link it to your social media channels. Many small business owners put off developing a website because they think it's too complicated, time-consuming and expensive. They worry about their ability to refresh and update content and are afraid of the complexities of coding it themselves. And many think they can't afford to pay for a third-party service provider to handle all the design, hosting and content management.

But, with everyone using search engines and social media, if you don't have a site, you're not fully in business. With competition getting tougher — and margins thinner — it's critical to take the time to establish your business' web presence. Even the smallest of small businesses, including your competitors, can access free easy-to-use web sitewebsite building tools that take just minutes to master. Don't be one of the 42 percent that are behind the game! See the **Comcast Business Class paper to Building a Website** for more details.

6. Getting people to take notice...and talk about you!

Of course your website becomes one of your primary marketing tools, but there are other things you should consider to expand your reach. You may be doing many of these now. Focusing on a mix of marketing strategies will spread your name quicker and more effectively than simply doing one thing. But again, it's important to be consistent throughout all of these efforts. You know the big companies are.

- **Public Relations** – Get to know your local or trade reporters. Share important company milestones or news with them so you get coverage in the newspaper

² According to a survey by Google and Ipsos, a global market research firm, 2012



or trade publication. Submit an op-ed or letter to the editor if you have a strong, compelling opinion on something in your industry. Use keywords and hotlinks in your press releases so that when issued through a service like PRWeb (www.prweb.com), your news will rise higher in the Google searches — driving more people to your site.

PR provides terrific potential “third-party” coverage that can help to position your company, products and services in a way that can have a great impact on your target audience. Reading an article about a doctor in the local paper carries much more weight than a paid advertisement.

- **Events and Trade Shows** – Make sure your booth, hand-outs and even what you wear clearly portray your brand image. Carry your colors, logos and taglines through everything.
- **Sponsorships** – Identify possible events and organizations that you can sponsor in order to gain face-to-face visibility with your customers and prospects. Many speaking opportunities come along with a trade show sponsorship package, for instance.

It may really be worth that investment if it puts you in front of the right people.

Make sure your company name, logo, company colors, tag lines and other clearly identifying items are evident wherever you touch a customer. It’s a simple way to reinforce your brand. Consider:

- **Caller ID** – especially important for home businesses. Make sure you have a business line established that is identified with your company name, not your last name.
- **Website URL** – Use your company name if you can. You want your customers to find you easily.
- **Yellow Pages listing** – Include your logo, website address and a tag line if you have one.
- **Business cards and stationery** – Make sure everyone in your company has the same cards and uses the corporate letterhead.

See the **Comcast Business Class paper on Building Your Brand Image** for more details.

7. Establish strategic alliances

According to consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, strategic alliances are sweeping through nearly every industry and are becoming an essential driver of growth in the small business sector.

Alliances range in scope from an informal business relationship based on a simple contract to joint ventures for legal and tax purposes. For small businesses, strategic alliances are a way to work with others towards a common goal while not losing individuality. Alliances are a way of reaping the rewards of team effort.

A strategic alliance is essentially a partnership in which you combine efforts in projects ranging from getting a better price for supplies by buying in bulk together to building a product together with each of you providing part of its production.

You can use a strategic alliance to...

- increase market penetration
- enhance competitiveness
- develop new business opportunities through new products and services
- diversify
- create new businesses and
- reduce costs among other things.

Strategic alliances are becoming a more and more common tool for expanding the reach of your company without committing yourself to expensive internal expansions beyond your core business.

8. Leverage technology to grow your business

Technology can be an extraordinary tool for entrepreneurs trying to streamline their businesses, increase productivity and just make their lives easier. And it is the one thing that can really help to put you on par with your larger competitors.

Getting a handle on your business' requirements is the first step toward creating a technology solution that best suits your needs.

Consider the following activities as a worthwhile investment in the future of your business.

- Read the technology sections of a few small business magazines on a weekly or monthly basis. Or, subscribe to free online newsletters that discuss small to mid-sized business technology. Two good choices are www.entrepreneur.com and www.smallbiztechnology.com.
- Keep in touch with your tech advisor that you appointed to your "Board of Directors." Tell him that you want to be informed about the technologies that could help you grow your business.
- Take advantage of free or low-cost technology seminars offered by your local Chamber of Commerce, SCORE or another business organization.



- Prioritize your needs. Think of your IT plan as an extension of your business plan.
- Develop a technology plan to help you invest in the right technology for your business at the right time. Technology you will likely need includes:
 - > Web-conferencing through a service like GoToMeeting. Plans are flexible and it's a highly professional and efficient way to share information and save on travel expenses.
 - > Reliable Internet and phone that can be tailored to meet your needs.

- > Many small businesses leverage Microsoft Communication Services, a productivity suite that includes Microsoft Outlook® and Windows SharePoint®. Having access to these powerful tools rivals what the big companies are using — at a more affordable price.

Windows Sharepoint is a web-based collaboration system. In its simplest application, it allows you to set up a site to store and share files where co-workers can access them from anywhere they have Internet access (office, client site, home, hotel, airport, soccer game...). It can even automatically notify users when a file is added or updated — no more wondering if that email attachment is the latest version of the file. You don't need to worry

about having to maintain expensive in-house servers and your files are automatically backed up offsite.

With Microsoft Outlook your employees can send and receive e-mail as well as share and synchronize calendars and contacts. With these tools, you can manage documents and processes, and most importantly, improve communications with co-workers, partners, vendors, and customers — on the go from anywhere you have Internet.

As you can see, it will take time and energy to compete against the big companies in your market. But it is worth it if you can add customers and grow your business.