



A FOUND. HANDBOOK FOR BUSINESS OWNERS

# The Business Owner's Guide to Marketing That Actually Works

A practical handbook for founders and decision-makers who want to invest wisely, prioritize correctly, and use marketing as a real driver of growth — not just an expense.

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# What Marketing Actually Is

Marketing is not advertising. It's the system that connects what your business offers to the people who need it — consistently, and at scale.

Most business owners equate marketing with ads, social posts, or a nice-looking website. In reality, marketing is the entire process of understanding your customer, shaping how your business is perceived, and creating consistent paths for people to find, trust, and buy from you. Advertising is one tool inside marketing — not the whole discipline.

A useful way to think about it: **sales closes the deal marketing already set up.** If no one knows you exist, trusts you, or understands what you offer, sales has nothing to work with. Every touchpoint a prospective customer encounters — your website, your reviews, what shows up when they search your name — is part of your marketing, whether you're actively managing it or not.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Marketing ≠ advertising — advertising is one channel inside a much larger system.
- Marketing shapes perception before a customer ever talks to sales.
- Every touchpoint is part of your marketing, managed or not.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Treating marketing as "the ads budget" and nothing more.
- Assuming no marketing means neutral — it usually means a competitor is shaping the narrative instead.

## Action Steps

- ① List every place a potential customer currently forms an opinion of your business (Google, website, reviews, social).
- ② Identify which of those you're actively managing versus leaving to chance.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**If you're not actively shaping how customers find and perceive you, someone else already is.**

# What Marketing Actually Brings to a Business

Marketing is not a cost center — it's a growth input with measurable effects across the entire business.

Done well, marketing touches nearly every part of business performance, not just top-line sales:

- **Revenue growth** — more qualified people entering your pipeline.
- **Lead generation** — a predictable flow of interest, not just word-of-mouth luck.
- **Brand awareness** — being the name that comes to mind first.
- **Retention & trust** — consistent communication keeps existing customers engaged and reduces churn.
- **Positioning** — how you're perceived relative to competitors (premium, affordable, specialist).
- **Differentiation** — the reason someone picks you over an equally competent competitor.

**Example:** two accounting firms with identical service quality — the one that consistently publishes helpful content and appears professional online will out-compete the one relying purely on word-of-mouth, simply because more people find and trust it first.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Marketing's effects compound across revenue, retention, and reputation simultaneously.
- Differentiation often matters more than being "the best" — being the clearest choice wins.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Judging marketing only by immediate sales, ignoring trust and retention effects.
- Copying competitors' positioning instead of defining your own.

## Action Steps

- ① Pick one metric per area (leads/month, repeat purchase rate, review count) and start tracking it now.
- ② Audit how your business is positioned versus your top two competitors.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**Marketing's value shows up in revenue, but it's built through trust, visibility, and positioning first.**

# What You Leave on the Table Without Marketing

Not investing in marketing isn't neutral — it's a slow, compounding loss.

When marketing is neglected, the damage is rarely obvious immediately — it shows up as symptoms owners often misdiagnose:

- **Lost revenue** — customers who would have bought, but never found you.
- **Missed market share** — competitors fill the visibility gap you leave behind.
- **Higher acquisition costs** — with no organic pipeline, every sale relies on expensive, one-off effort.
- **Lower retention** — no consistent communication means customers drift to whoever stays visible.
- **Referral dependence** — growth caps out at the size of your existing network.
- **Competitive risk** — a competitor who invests consistently compounds their advantage every year you don't.

**Realistic scenario:** a local service business relying purely on referrals grows steadily for years — until a competitor invests in a real online presence. Within roughly 18 months, that competitor becomes the default search result, and referral volume alone can no longer keep pace.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Referral-only growth is capped and fragile — it depends entirely on existing relationships.
- The cost of inaction is invisible until a competitor closes the gap.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Assuming "things are fine" because revenue hasn't dropped yet.
- Waiting for a competitor to force the issue before investing.

## Action Steps

- ① Estimate what percentage of new business currently comes from referrals alone.
- ② Search your own business and service category online — see what a prospective customer actually finds.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**Standing still in marketing means falling behind — competitors don't wait for you to catch up.**

# Marketing and Business Growth

Marketing rarely produces overnight results — it compounds, like interest.

Short-term marketing (paid ads, promotions) produces fast, visible, but temporary results — turn off the budget, and the pipeline dries up. Long-term marketing (content, SEO, brand, reputation) builds slowly but keeps generating value long after the initial effort — an old blog post or review can still bring in customers years later.

**Simple example:** a business investing €1,000/month consistently in content and search visibility for 24 months typically ends that period with a compounding base of traffic, leads, and trust that a competitor starting today can't quickly replicate — regardless of budget.

The businesses that grow fastest over a 2–3 year window are rarely the ones with the biggest single campaign — they're the ones that stayed consistent.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Paid = fast but temporary. Organic and brand = slow but compounding.
- Consistency beats intensity — steady monthly effort outperforms sporadic bursts.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Expecting long-term channels like SEO to perform like ads.
- Stopping consistent activities right before they start compounding.

## Action Steps

- ① Split your marketing plan into "always-on" (compounding) and "campaign" (short-term) activities.
- ② Commit to at least one compounding activity for a minimum of 12 months before judging results.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**The businesses that win aren't the ones who spend the most — they're the ones who stay consistent the longest.**

# How Much Should You Invest in Marketing?

There's no universal number — but there are reliable benchmarks to start from.

A common, defensible benchmark is **5–10% of revenue** for established SMBs focused on maintaining position, and **10–20%** for businesses actively pursuing growth or entering new markets. Startups and early-stage businesses often need to invest at the higher end since they're building visibility and trust from zero.

- **Mature, stable business (protecting position):** 5–10% of revenue.
- **Growing SMB (actively expanding):** 10–20% of revenue.
- **Startup / new market entry:** 15–25%+, treated as a growth investment, not a cost.

Adjust **up** when entering a new market, launching a new offer, or facing new competition. Adjust **down** (not to zero) when at capacity and the priority shifts to retention and operations.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Budget as a percentage of revenue, not a fixed number — it should scale with the business.
- "We'll invest once we grow" is backwards — investment is usually what enables the growth.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Treating marketing budget as the first thing to cut when finances tighten.
- Setting a budget with no connection to growth goals.

## Action Steps

- ① Calculate your current marketing spend as a percentage of revenue.
- ② Compare it against your growth ambition — are they actually aligned?

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

Your marketing budget should reflect your growth ambition — not just what's left over.

# Internal Team vs. External Agency vs. Hybrid

The right model depends on your stage, budget, and how specialized your needs are.

- **Internal team** — full control and deep product knowledge, but higher fixed cost, and hard to cover every specialism (SEO, design, ads, content) with one or two hires.
- **External agency** — broad expertise on demand, easier to scale up or down, no hiring risk — but requires clear briefing and less day-to-day control.
- **Hybrid** (most common for growing SMBs) — one internal marketing lead who owns strategy and coordination, supported by an agency or freelancers for specialized execution.

**Guidance:** under roughly €2M revenue, or with no dedicated marketing hire yet, an agency or hybrid model is usually more cost-effective than a full internal team. Once marketing needs are large and constant enough to fill two or more full-time roles, a larger internal or hybrid team starts to make sense.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Few SMBs can afford — or need — a full in-house team covering every discipline.
- Hybrid models offer the best balance of control and expertise for most growth-stage businesses.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Hiring one generalist and expecting expert-level results across every channel.
- Choosing an agency on price alone, without checking reporting and communication fit.

## Action Steps

- ① List the marketing disciplines you actually need: content, ads, SEO, design, strategy.
- ② Decide which you need constantly (internal) versus periodically or specialized (agency).

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**Match your model to your needs, not your instincts — most SMBs grow fastest with a hybrid approach.**

# Understanding Modern Marketing Channels

You don't need to master every channel — you need to know what each one is for.

<b>Website</b>	Your digital storefront. If it's slow, unclear, or dated, every other channel underperforms.
<b>Content Marketing</b>	Builds long-term trust and visibility by answering customer questions before they ask you directly.
<b>SEO</b>	Being found when people search. Compounds over time and doesn't stop working when you pause spending.
<b>GEO</b>	Generative Engine Optimization — being recommended by AI tools like ChatGPT and Gemini, not just ranked by Google. Increasingly important as search shifts toward AI-generated answers.
<b>Paid Advertising</b>	Google, Meta, LinkedIn Ads. Fast, controllable visibility — effective for immediate leads, but stops the moment budget stops.
<b>Email Marketing</b>	Highest-ROI channel for retention. You own this audience directly, unlike a social media following.
<b>Social Media</b>	Builds familiarity and community. Best for brand and relationships, rarely a direct sales channel alone.
<b>Marketing Automation</b>	Lets a small team behave like a bigger one — following up and nurturing leads without manual work.
<b>Artificial Intelligence</b>	Practical uses today: content drafts, research, ad optimization, customer service — still requires human judgment and brand oversight.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- Each channel plays a different role — comparing SEO to paid ads is comparing a savings account to a paycheck.
- Owned channels (website, email) matter more long-term than rented ones (social platforms).

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Chasing every new channel or trend instead of doing two or three well.
- Neglecting owned channels in favor of rented ones.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**Pick the channels that match your goal — then do them consistently, not all of them at once.**

# How to Prioritize – and What to Do at Each Stage

With limited time and budget, sequence matters more than volume.

<p><b>1</b> <b>Foundation</b> Website, Google Business Profile, clear offer. Nothing else works if this is broken.</p>	<p><b>2</b> <b>Visibility</b> SEO, content, GEO. Compounding, lower cost, slower results.</p>	<p><b>3</b> <b>Acceleration</b> Paid ads — once foundation and visibility can convert the traffic.</p>	<p><b>4</b> <b>Retention</b> Email, automation. The cheapest growth: keeping who you already have.</p>
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**Rule of thumb:** fix what's broken before you promote it, and build owned visibility before renting attention through ads.

	Small Business	Growing Business	Established SMB
PRIORITIES	Website + Google Business Profile + reviews	SEO + content + one paid channel + email	Full channel mix + GEO + brand positioning + retention systems
BUDGET	10–15% of revenue, mostly time + small paid tools	10–20% of revenue	8–15% of revenue (efficiency focus)
TEAM	Owner-led, freelancer support	One marketing hire or agency partner coordinating specialists	Internal lead + agency / specialist mix
GROWTH EXPECTATION	Steady local visibility within 6–12 months	Compounding lead flow within 12–18 months	Defending and expanding market position

### KEY INSIGHTS

- Sequence beats simultaneity: foundation, then visibility, then acceleration, then retention.
- Budget percentage naturally shifts down as revenue grows, even as absolute spend increases.

### COMMON MISTAKES

- Running paid ads to a broken or unclear website.
- Trying to do every channel at once with a one-person team.

### CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**Do the right thing at the right stage — not everything, all at once.**

# How We Apply These Principles at Found

Every principle in this handbook is one we use ourselves, with our own clients, every week.

When a new client comes to us, we don't start with channels — we start with foundation: is the website clear, is the offer obvious, is the Google Business Profile accurate. Only once that's solid do we layer in visibility (SEO, content, increasingly GEO) and, where the business is ready to convert traffic, acceleration through paid ads.

Budgeting follows the same logic as Chapter 5: we recommend a percentage of revenue tied to growth ambition, not a fixed retainer regardless of stage — a business protecting its position gets a different plan than one entering a new market.

On team structure, we operate as the hybrid model described in Chapter 6: we act as the specialist execution layer, while the business owner — or their internal lead — stays the strategic owner of the relationship.

**Example:** a client in professional services came to us relying entirely on referrals. Following this exact sequence — foundation, then visibility, then acceleration — they moved from referral-only to a predictable monthly lead flow within roughly a year, without ever running paid ads until their foundation could actually convert that traffic.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- This framework isn't theoretical — it's the same sequence we apply with every client.
- Discipline in sequencing matters more than any single tactic.

## COMMON MISTAKES

- Looking for a shortcut that skips foundation.
- Judging a marketing partner on tactics alone, not on whether they follow this kind of sequencing.

## Action Steps

- ① Apply Chapter 8's framework honestly to your own business today.
- ② Revisit this handbook in 90 days and reassess your stage.

## CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

**Good marketing isn't a secret formula — it's disciplined prioritization, applied consistently over time.**

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