

Online Marketing: Tips, toes, tricks & tools

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Date : September 29, 2015



OPEN for Discussion: What Are Your Best Online Marketing Tips?

There are a few **marketing** tactics that many can agree are important to a small business's survival. But those strategies become even more important when your business can only be found online. The need for search engine optimization and **social** media ads to be successful grows higher when you can't rely on foot traffic to draw customers to your business. But small-business owners who believe they can throw money at **Google** AdWords to boost discoverability may be in for a surprise.

"**Google** always works.' No it doesn't, and you don't want to find out after spending your entire budget on the one thing," says **Stephan Goss**, CEO of online **marketing** company [Zeeto](#). "Or some agency says, 'We guarantee you 100 percent ROI.' No, they don't. There's no magic that's going to make it 100 percent ROI."

Now that we've gotten those unreal expectations out of the way, **Rochelle Sanchirico**, head of **marketing** and analytics for online **marketing** platform [Webs](#); **Goss** of [Zeeto](#); and **Jeff Kear**, owner of event planning software company [Planning Pod](#), reveal their best online **marketing** tips.

*Pretend you're a customer and do some searches on **Google**. See where you're showing up, and if you're showing up. If you're showing up, what's there? Because there may be some really easy, fundamental changes you can do to your website to perform a lot better and get a lot more free traffic.*

How do you drive traffic to your online-only business?

Rochelle Sanchirico: We do get some **branded** traffic that comes to us directly. There are a number of other ways we draw traffic to our online businesses; the biggest one is probably through search. So we've been doing search engine optimization really heavily for a long time. We use affiliate links. There are sites that have listings of other services that are similar to ours. We also do paid search and paid **social advertising** on our main channels.

Stephan Goss: We buy traffic, and we send traffic to our own properties. Our ad spend budget for this year is roughly around \$50 million. The vast majority is **Facebook**, **Google**, MSN, direct **social**. We don't really do anything organic at all; it's all paid.

Stephan, how did you come to the decision that paid was the best strategy for your company?

Goss: I have no patience. Honestly, direct spend is the only thing that truly scales. It's really more like what will actually scale to get us to \$300 million in a few years? We went from doing about \$12 million three years ago, and we're on track for about \$66 [million] now. I don't think that would've been possible with a more organic strategy.

Jeff Kear: We sort of have the opposite in that we're pretty much mostly organic. We're a bootstrapped company; most of our traffic comes from search engines. At this point, some of the SEO work is more online PR; it's content **marketing** through blogging and guest blogging. We do a ton of **social** media **marketing**, so we've built up all our profiles in all the **social** media areas and a lot of niche parts of our industry. Most of our traffic these days comes from our content **marketing** or our SEO. We do a little bit of pay per click, a little bit of search engine **marketing**, but we've barely dipped a toe in it.

We also see a fair amount of traffic from direct entry of our company name [in search], which is [through] word of mouth. It's almost like it's an offline strategy that helps you with your online traffic, and we use a fair amount of event **marketing** for that kind of stuff.

What are some customer acquisition challenges that come with being online only, and how do you overcome them?

Kear: I see a lot of companies try to do everything at once, especially small businesses and e-businesses. They spread themselves way too thin. SEO takes time and a ton of legwork. So if you're trying to do that effectively with a small staff, it's going to be difficult for you to also build out all your online PR and do content **marketing**. A lot of small companies should first identify those one or two areas of online **marketing** that are actually most effective for you and the most effective way to reach your customer base. Focus on that first; get some momentum behind that strategy and outsource [it] before you dive into something else.

Goss: You need to have a lot of things right to begin with for things to really start working. There are a lot of basic threshold things that, if you don't have them, pretty much nothing will work. But once you get beyond that, a lot of things start falling into place.

Sanchirico: There's just not that serendipity you might get when you have a brick-and-mortar store. Somebody's not just going to wander into your store and say, "Wow, that looks really interesting." You have to make sure [you] invest in the places where people are actually going to find you, which, if

you're an online business, [is] online.

What's also challenging is establishing a relationship with people. There [are] different methods [to] developing relationships when you're face to face than when you're online—you have to be sure that you develop really strong engagement techniques when you're online.

What are the basic tools or strategies small-business owners should be using to drive traffic to their online businesses?

Goss: One of the basic [pieces of] advice I usually give is to—especially in the beginning—do a lot of it yourself. If you're an online-only business, **marketing** is your core competency, or it has to be. If it's not, you're probably not going to go all that far. So understand the basics [and] really get your hands dirty. It's annoying, and it's a lot of work, but it's especially hard to hire good people. It's really challenging to find the right consultants, and, to find the right strategies, you have to know what you're doing.

Kear: If you have an online business, your main responsibilities are **innovation** and **marketing**. Somebody needs to start out learning the basic skill sets of online **marketing**. A couple of places you can do that? Lynda.com has great videos for learning about online **marketing**, search engine **marketing**, online PR. There are online sites like Moz.com, which is a great place to get tools for helping you optimize your site but also for learning more about what **marketing** entails. Google Analytics is sort of required, just so you can look at traffic and see what's going on. From there, you can use HubSpot if you want to automate a lot of those processes. I use Hootsuite for scheduling all my scheduled posts for **social** media; I curate content with tools like Digg Reader and Scoop.it. I use Twitonomy for how to grow our **Twitter** following. It's almost like you have to cobble together your set of go-to tools based on the tactic that you've found is starting to work for you.

Sanchirico: I always recommend people be curious and not turn a blind eye to how your business appears to people. Pretend you're a customer and do some searches on **Google**. See where you're showing up, and if you're showing up, what's there? Because there may be some really easy, fundamental changes you can do to your website to perform a lot better and get a lot more free traffic. With small businesses, a lot of times even if you're online only, people would rather work with someone who's local. So you want to make sure you're showing up in local directories. That's an example of a way to get good, strong, free traffic.

Is organic traffic an illusion at this point? Is it just a pay-per-click existence for online-only businesses?

Sanchirico: Organic can be huge. There are things you can be doing that are not paid, that have more to do about building up content and networks. Not only do you get a link to your website which is really helpful for SEO purposes, but you're also getting good, local traffic from people.

Goss: I totally agree. Especially if you work on the B2B side, organic is absolutely key. If you're not ranking for some of the terms that you're working on, it's really, really hard to get anywhere. It's hard to buy traffic on the B2B side. For me on the B2C side, it's different, and we've always focused on paid, but I agree, there's huge amounts of traffic—and very qualified traffic—to be had from organic sources.

Kear: I'm finding that I used to get a lot more organic traffic from **Facebook**. **Facebook** has become almost a pay-to-play the way that they've rigged their algorithm these days. But there's a lot of potential in **Twitter** still, especially if you get added to lists. If you get some people with a lot of traffic to add you to their "Industry Innovator" list or something like that, you're going to get picked up and followed by a lot of their followers.

I've also gotten a lot of traffic from LinkedIn Groups. You can join up to 50 groups, and I've maxed it out. I post daily to groups in my industry. The people in those groups are in the industry, it's already so well-targeted, and we probably get more traffic on LinkedIn than we do on any other **social** media portal.

What mistakes should small-business owners avoid at all costs when it comes to building successful online-only businesses?

Goss: These things never work if you're impatient. If you're spending \$5,000 and thinking you should make \$10,000 off of that, you're entirely wrong. A lot of times people ask me similar questions, "Oh, where can I go and spend \$10,000 and make a profit?" I'm like, "Well, if it were that easy, everyone would be doing it." People run into that and they get frustrated, like, "I spent \$5,000 and only made \$300 back." Well, yes. You need to do that 10 times over, and then maybe you'll find one traffic source that is actually working.

Kear: *(Laughs)* Stephan, that's funny, because I've had that exact experience when I launched our first online business back in 2000. It was more of a B2C type of business. I remember we spent \$7,000 on **marketing** in my first week and got \$800 back in revenue. And it was like, "OK, we spent our **marketing** budget for the next six months. What are we going to do next?" It was a tough lesson, but it was a good lesson because I learned it. I don't need to rank #1 for a lot of these paid search terms. I can rank #3 and #4 and make the margins start to look a little better, or I don't bid on certain terms that are too broad. It made me understand more about longtail search **marketing**.

Goss: We spend a ton of money on this. We are still just as bad and hoping that something will work out as we used to be. It's not something you can get great at. You can't just look at things and say, "This is going to work." But this is a continuous problem—you're always the new guy. It's just a matter of testing, not giving up and also not investing your entire six-month budget in one place.

Photos: Getty, Courtesy of Zeeto, Webs and Planning Pod