

Marketing during a pandemic

Thought starters for
small business owners



FREELANCE MARKETING
& OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

With the country remaining in lockdown for a few more weeks, I've been talking to several small business owners who want to press on with marketing themselves but are unsure of the best approach.

The intention of this e-guide is to walk through the basic elements of an average marketing plan, offering thought starters along the way. The aim is to help those not overly familiar with marketing, to think with some clarity about creating a marketing plan that is relevant within the chaotic context of Coronavirus.

Beginning with goal setting and brand values, the content covers considerations for core products and services, target audiences, messaging and marketing channels, and ends with thoughts for the future.

I hope you find it useful.

Sarah

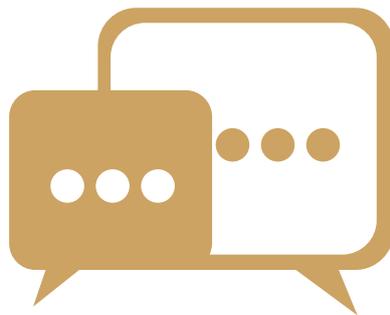


HELPING SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS
CREATE AND IMPLEMENT MARKETING PLANS

Marketing during a pandemic – the basics

As the Coronavirus continues to reach its peak here in the UK, it's become essential for the large majority of companies to re-think their marketing plans. Many have significantly reduced or even eliminated marketing budgets in an attempt to cut costs. As business owners, we are all having to adapt our marketing strategies and adjust to the realities being faced by our customers. Our customers have more than likely, all of a sudden, changed how they purchase our products and services, as well as how they consume our marketing messages.

For anyone wondering what to do with their marketing, now is not the time to go silent. For most businesses, lean times are when marketing becomes essential. With social distancing in place, online engagement is surging. More people are spending time on social media and accessing web-based resources than ever before. There's a great opportunity to reach your audience and provide them with information, interaction, products, services and positive thoughts. So where do we start?



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Goal setting

The first step in any good marketing plan is goal setting. As we start the new tax year with such a prolific sense of economic uncertainty, like me, you are probably facing some tough decisions. Can you afford to wait out the storm, scale-down and attempt to minimise losses? Or do you need to continue seeking opportunities which will provide a steady income? Maybe lockdown offers you the perfect opportunity to dedicate time growing your business? Or do you find yourself with less time now children at home need entertaining?

For businesses which find themselves in a hiatus with projects on hold, deadlines shelved and orders slowing down, this may be a rare occasion when you find yourself with time for introspection. Consumers have been given the opportunity to pause, reflect on where they are now and plan for the future. As business owners we can do the same.

Be realistic

Understandably, everyone's goals will be different and the way in which targets are set will be a personal choice. My approach is to first differentiate between what you want and what you need financially and work it back from there:

- What must your business accomplish in order to provide the financial security you need?
- Do you need to concentrate on generating a monthly income or can you afford to take a longer term view of the new tax year as a whole?
- In what timescale do you need your business to hit certain goals? How much time and money do you need to invest to reach those goals?
- Is your business temporarily closed? In the absence of selling opportunities, might you consider shifting into a 'holding pattern' of temporary objectives, such as increasing levels of brand awareness and customer engagement.
- Assuming it may not be 'business as usual' until after the summer, what results can you expect for the first five months of the tax year and how can you plan to make a comeback for the latter seven months?
- Do you anticipate being able to expand and grow, or is 2020-21 a year during which you need to focus on 'maintenance mode' to stay afloat?

Be strategic

Now is the time to make strategic decisions which will enable your business to come through the pandemic in a strong position, maximising opportunities at the back-end of this tax year. Whatever goals you set, with a situation that changes almost every day, the key is to remain agile. We need to strike a delicate balance between working within an intentional framework, whilst simultaneously remaining flexible. And of course, planning how best to make an impactful comeback when it's all over.

Irrespective of whether or not you can generate revenue at this time, hopefully opportunities remain to build your brand and strengthen your customer relationships. You can use marketing to become the go to person in your niche and grow demand for your products and services in the future, with a pipeline of new customers or quality leads.



Brand values

Now is a great time to decide what's important to you in your business. From billionaires fundraising for the NHS to the local butcher making free home deliveries to key workers and vulnerable customers, it's a good time to wear your heart on your sleeve and offer support where you can.

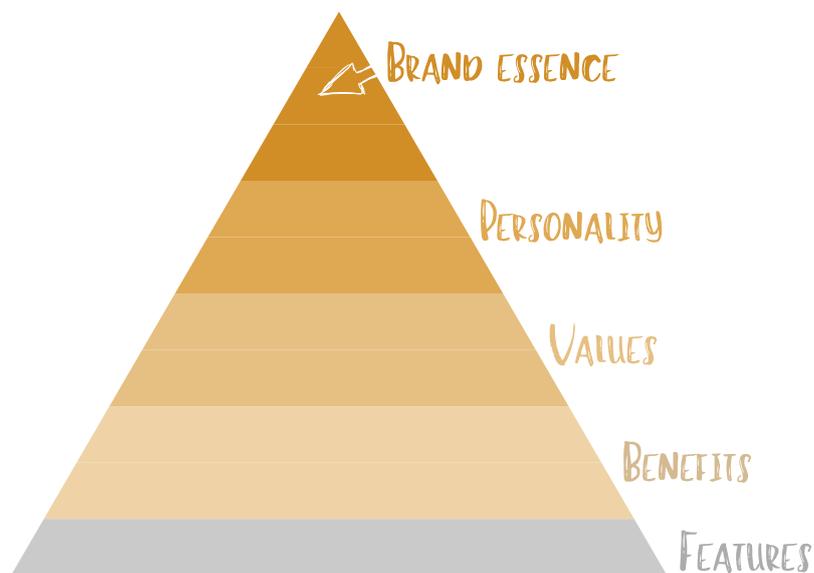
Do the right thing

By doing the right thing over the coming weeks, not only will it help people and make you feel good, longer term it is likely to strengthen your brand's equity. How people and businesses respond to the chaos caused by the Coronavirus will be remembered a long time from now and people will be looking to support those businesses which supported them. Compare how you already feel about businesses doing everything they can to make life a little easier for their customer base, with companies refusing customer refunds or insisting on staff coming to work. Right now, we all want to see business owners behaving with warmth, humanity, empathy and generosity.

Find your brand essence

Relationships with existing customers could be strengthened and new customers can be attracted simply by refining and showcasing the core values of your business. If you haven't already made a 'brand pyramid' or similar planning tool for your business, now could be a good time to sit down and make one. A brand pyramid encourages you to think deeply about your company. It provides a written summary which should remain at the heart of everything you do, informing key decisions and guiding consistency across your key messages and customer communication.

Once you're clear what your brand values are, you'll be in a strong position to communicate those values to your customers, portraying yourself, your products and your services in the best possible light.



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Your core products and services

Assuming there is a continued demand for your product or service during isolation, a solid digital strategy is likely to be essential. In order to keep trading, the internet has become our new best friend. We're having to innovate quickly and use technologies that just a month ago we didn't consider necessary to our businesses.

Obviously, if up to now your sales have relied on offline sales, face to face meetings and networking events, this turn of events will require more change than a business already set up to operate in the online space.

Check your tech

Is your business ready for life online? Put yourself in the best possible position to weather this storm by considering the following:

- Which of your products and services can easily be sold online or delivered through online platforms?
- Do you have a website or other online platform? If you do, is it intuitive and easy for customers to navigate?
- Does your website include e-commerce functionality? Is it obvious what you sell and how to make a purchase? Do you offer quick, inexpensive (and potentially digital) delivery?
- Is your website optimised for search engines when prospective customers are browsing? (Now is a good time invest in search engine optimisation - SEO.)
- Can people use your website or platform to communicate with you? Do you have a chat function so buyers have a way to quickly find answers to their questions? Can customers book virtual appointments to speak with you?
- Do you have a comprehensive and searchable FAQ section on your website or platform to help customers?

Streamline your portfolio

Streamlining your portfolio of products and services for the next few weeks would not only make your life easier, importantly it would help signpost customers to one or two 'must-haves' during lockdown:

- Examine your range of products and services to establish which ones will be most relevant to your customers at the moment.
- If you're a service provider, could your services be grouped into a couple of easy to understand 'products' at set price points?
- Does your business type lend itself to generating a steady income through monthly memberships or subscriptions?
- Could you create a passive income by selling your existing content as a course or tutorial?
- Could you focus on 'pre-sales' by selling early bird tickets to an event several months ahead or gift vouchers for future use? You could incentivise purchases of vouchers by offering a £30 voucher for £20, for example.
- What are your competitors doing and how is your offering better?

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Reward your supporters

Look for ways to be as generous as possible. During this financially tricky time for many of us, people will primarily be interested in things that are available without charge.

What advice and support can you offer your customer base? If you can give freebies during this time when many aspects of life are uncertain, as we come through the other side of the pandemic, you may find yourself with a whole new group of loyal paying customers:

- Could you offer 'limited time' free access to your content or resources, particularly any content you have which may be relevant to communities in crisis?
- Might you be willing to give 30 minutes of free advice to the first 10 people who sign up to your newsletter, for example?
- Can you introduce or extend a free or discounted trial period?
- Is free local delivery an option?



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Target audience

We all know it's far easier and less costly to keep a customer than it is to find a new one. If you can, it may be worth putting any new business drives aside for the next few months and instead focusing on developing strategies to retain your existing customer base.

If you have a database or list of existing and potential customers, break it down into three groups: existing customers; warm leads (those people who have shown an interest but not yet made a purchase); and cold leads (those with whom you have no relationship).

Focus on your existing customers for now

Taking your database or list of existing customers, think about the best ways of segmenting them into target audience groups. How you group your customers largely depends on your product or service and how you envisage reaching them:

- Is there a specific range of benefits your product or service offers? Could you group customers by which benefits are most likely to appeal to them?
- Does your product, service or content appeal to specific groups of people? Would it be appropriate to split your audience by basic socio-demographics such as gender, age, marital status and/or family size etc? Or maybe distinguish between different psychographics - values, personality traits, interests and opinions?
- Does your product or service seek to change the behaviour of your customers in some way? Could you group your customers by their current behaviour or situation?
- Do you have an idea of what stage of 'readiness' to purchase your customers might at? Does that help you group them?
- Which marketing channels do you anticipate using? Does it make sense to group your customers depending on how you plan to reach them?
- Do you want to run locally relevant marketing campaigns? If you have a national or regional database of customers, would it make sense to group them into smaller geographies?

Once you know who you're talking to, you're in a strong position a) to decide which marketing channels to use and b) what type of content you want to develop for each of those channels.

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Create loyal advocates

When you understand who your loyal customers are, you can think about ways to invest in them over the coming weeks so that they might help you attract new customers later down the line. If you get it right, your key customers will become your best advocates.

Think about things you can do to encourage your existing customer base to talk about the great service they received from you and recommend you to their friends and contacts within their business networks:

- What could you do to ensure customers know you value them and their previous purchases?
- Do you reward purchases with a loyalty program? Could you double the rewards?
- Can you thank your existing customers in some other way? What benefits would they value?
- Could you provide content, or run a special offer, exclusively for existing customers?
- Could you call some of your customers to ask them how you could help them?
- Do you have happy customers who are influencers? Perhaps in a professional capacity or maybe as a journalist, blogger or social media influencer.
- How can you encourage people to share their experience with other potential customers?
- Do you give people reasons to share your social media posts and other content?
- Do you incentivise reviews on Google, Yelp and Facebook? Can you easily share positive reviews and testimonials?



Your marketing message

Perhaps one of the most important things to be doing at the moment is adapting your marketing message. Everyone in the country is focused on one thing and, depending on the marketing channels you use, it can be difficult to be heard. Assuming coronavirus is impacting your target audience, most likely their priorities have shifted significantly and your marketing messages may need updating to remain pertinent.

Let people know you're open for business

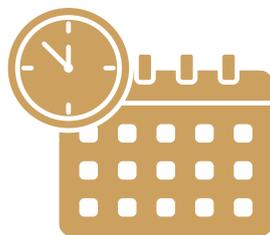
Ensure your customers are aware you're available and interested in doing business. The first priority is letting your customers know if and how the lockdown is impacting your product or service offering:

- Are you still operational? Are your business hours different? Be sure to share these details repeatedly and consistently across all your touch points.
- What products and services are you currently offering? Is it easy to buy them?
- What's not available right now? Can you tell people when they will be back on sale?
- What's the best way for people to contact you?
- How are you adjusting the way you do things? Reassure people that if they interact with your company or employees, appropriate precautions are in place.

Adapt your content calendar

If you have any content pre-scheduled to go out, perhaps via social media or as part of an email marketing campaign, have a good read through it to see which elements still make sense to promote to a country in lockdown:

- How much existing content can you use? What tweaks are necessary to make it relevant?
- Is there any content you should postpone?
- How often do you want to communicate? (Less may well be more at the moment.)
- Do you have gaps in your editorial calendar which require you to generate new, more relevant, messaging?
- Can new content be written in large batches or does it make more sense to take it one week at a time for now?
- Do you need a new campaign schedule?



You may need to continue reviewing your content calendar on a weekly basis during these uncertain times when the situation is continually changing.

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Make your message relevant

Whilst many business owners are working hard on what they say to customers, some brands are continuing to push their same content, barely paying lip service to the havoc being wreaked by the Coronavirus. It's a delicate time and it could be damaging if you're seen to be tone-deaf in the middle of a pandemic. Whilst nobody wants to dwell on the doom and gloom, it's important that the message coming from businesses acknowledges what we're all experiencing. You can't afford to sound like you're 'simply selling' at a time like this.

When it comes to re-shaping your marketing message, it's all about making subtle tweaks:

- Acknowledge what is happening out in the world without making it all about Coronavirus. Try weaving in references to the realities of life at the moment, such as isolation, difficulty accessing goods and services, working from home, home schooling, time management, missing friends etc. Just be careful not to drone on about 'life with the Coronavirus'.
- Empathy is key. Nearly everyone is worried about something related to the Coronavirus or the current lockdown; keep the health of others front of mind.
- Bring to life how your product or service can fit into what has quickly become the new normal.
- Mention how your business is supporting customers during the pandemic situation.
- Bear in mind your content doesn't have to be about the virus or the 'current climate' in order to be relevant. There's enough narrative about Covid-19 already out there. If you're creating content about a completely unrelated topic, let it stay that way.

Use a content marketing approach

You maybe already use content marketing as a tactic to engage your audiences. If you do, that's great. If you don't, now is a good time to start. Content marketing is something I recommend to almost everyone.

If you're unfamiliar with the term 'content marketing', it generally refers to providing content which is not overtly promotional, instead providing value and information to the person reading it. It's about taking the time to build compelling content which goes way beyond a sales message. Instead you become a storyteller, entertaining, inspiring, educating and informing your audience.

The focus of content marketing is to create and maintain an ongoing relationship with your target audience. Copywriting is a real skill and, if you get it right, it will enable you to make true connections with your audience. It's an approach you can use during these weeks of lockdown to give you a way to stay in touch, then adapt once the pandemic has passed.

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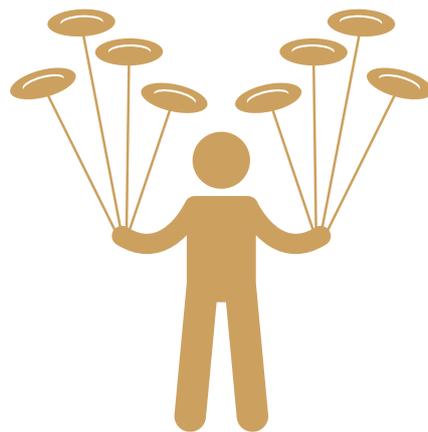
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Get straight to the point

For many of us, our previously busy lives have become even busier during the lockdown. Whole families are at home together, children want entertaining and elderly relatives need caring for; meanwhile our full-time jobs still require the bulk of our attention. The demands on the time and attention of your target audience are likely to be intense as we all navigate this crisis period. Lots of people won't have the time nor the energy to engage with your message, no matter how great your product or service.

Now really is the time to keep your marketing communication short and sweet. Everything from your web pages to your literature, your emails, blog posts. Consider 'how few words can I use to tell this audience what I want them to know and what action I want them to take'.

Wherever possible, edit, edit and then edit again.



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Marketing channels

By this point, you know what you want to achieve, you've defined your brand values, you're clear on your core products or services, you have a specific target audience in mind and you know what you want to say to them. Now you just need to decide which channels you're going to use...

The lockdown has obviously greatly impacted our lives, our routines and, of course, how we shop and consume media. As small business owners, we may need to review our marketing mix, switch gears, think of alternative marketing channels and redistribute budgets.

Consider how best to meet your goals

When it comes to selecting your mix of marketing channels, it's hard to avoid clichés: 'less is more'; 'fewer bigger better'; 'biggest bang for your buck' etc.

As you review your marketing mix, ask yourself three main questions :

- What goals do I want each channel to achieve?
- How will my target audience receive my marketing message when delivered in this way?
- What 'call to action' will I use to encourage my audience to respond?

Keep front of mind what success looks like to you and make sure each and every activity you choose to do is helping take you there. Ideally everything you do should be measurable in some way, so you can decide whether or not it has worked. And if you're not sure how something will contribute to your goals, my advice would be not to do it.

Opt for channels most likely to open a dialogue

Many businesses are reallocating budgets to digital strategies. Seek out marketing channels which will spark interaction with as many people as possible. Where possible, look to create a meaningful dialogue with your customers that goes beyond the simplistic engagement of likes, comments and shares.



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Social media

Now is a great time to be using social media for your business. Even if you're closed, there's still a role for social media, including paid-for content. Make sure the information across all your social media channels is up to date and pin anything important to the top of your page if you can.



Email marketing

Anecdotally, my inbox is bursting at the seams right now. It seems businesses are all turning to their mailing lists. Before planning a marketing email, ask yourself: 'Will people on my mailing list want to hear from me right now and is email the best way to communicate what I want to say?' If the answers are yes, keep it short and sweet and place the key takeaways upfront in the body of your email.



Pay Per Click (PPC)

If you don't already have a PPC online advertising campaign to pull in prospective customers looking for your product or service, now is a good time to make this happen. Google AdWords is the most popular PPC option, but there are also opportunities to advertise on Yahoo, Bing and other search engines.



Online advertising

With everyone moving their lives on line at the moment, online advertising is a great marketing channel. When considering where to advertise, the possibilities may seem endless. It could help to use Google Analytics to see where most of your website traffic is coming from before deciding on the best websites to reach your target audience.



Podcasts

Lockdown may have granted you the gift of more time. If so, you might be considering launching a podcast. For professional quality audio, I would advise you invest in a microphone before getting started. Listeners would usually expect your content to 'drop' weekly or more, on a certain day/s of the week - it's a good idea to record and schedule content in batches so that your episodes are ready to go.



Blogs and Vlogs

The more relevant blogs and vlogs you can publish, the better. Focus on content which enables you to share your key messages and will ultimately help you achieve the goals you have set for yourself. You may also be able to use the weeks of lockdown to prepare a calendar of content for use in the future.



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SMS etc.

Depending on the type of relationship you have with your customers, you might communicate using texts, WhatsApps, Messenger, Insta DMs etc. Bear in mind your message may be easily overlooked during lockdown as people's inboxes will be full of messages from friends, family, school etc. To be effective, keep messages short and snappy with a clear call to action.



Public Relations

If PR forms part of your marketing strategy, now more than ever it's important to make sure what you're writing in your press releases is newsworthy. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone to a couple of journalists you know to ask what type of content would be most useful to them right now. Ask their opinion on the best way to secure high value press coverage. Target journalists who don't specifically cover breaking news. And look for requests from journalists. If there are industry alerts you can subscribe to, make sure you're on the list.



Events

Although for the most part trade shows, conferences and networking events are cancelled or postponed, there are lots of virtual events popping up. If events form part of your marketing or your networking, consider whether you can adapt and move on-line. The number of participants and type of event will inform which channel(s) you use and, if successful, you may discover that virtual events can out-live the lockdown and become something you build into your longer term strategy.



Sponsorship

Many sponsorship deals are currently in limbo. If you're considering a new sponsorship opportunity either in the on-line or off-line world, as well as ensuring the organisation or product being sponsored aligns with your brand, look at it in three more ways. Will it help you meet your goals, does it have scope for you to share your message(s) and will you be able to leverage it across all your other marketing channels for maximum results?



TV, Radio & Outdoor Advertising

With car journeys and commuting presently at a minimum, now is probably not a good time to run either a radio or an outdoor campaign. Conversely, it may well be a good time to secure a discounted deal on a future campaign. If you're currently running any TV advertising, check the time of day at which you're advertising, the message and the programming you're advertising within, is still appropriate.



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Planning ahead

We all need to avoid being so drawn in by ways of working during this temporary lockdown that we forget to plan for life on the other side. Within your marketing plan, think about including a staged approach for returning to normal.

None of us can realistically plan against a rigid time-line at the moment. Instead, try approaching your marketing plan in three stages:

- 1 **Now**
- 2 **Post-coronavirus**
- 3 **Longer term**

Consider how your marketing will evolve. Simply reverting back to your previous ways of working, using your regular tone of voice might not be appropriate. Maybe you want to include in your marketing plan a period of time when your messaging acknowledges us all being 'post-crisis'.

Finally, give some thought to how you want to emerge when this is all over. Have you been able to use this period of lockdown as a time for reflection? Perhaps you've resolved to take your business in a new direction. Maybe you've decided your priorities need to be different. Or maybe you'll simply be glad to live safely through this chaos.

Whether you're looking forward to getting back to business as usual, or you want things to be different, we're hopefully just a few weeks away from being able to resume a normal-ish life.





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sarah@sarahhowitt.com

www.sarahhowitt.com

[f @FreeAgentUk](#)