



20 tips for growing your small business

Start growing your customer base straight away by following these 10 easy-to-follow tips on marketing, research and networking.

1. Memorise a short business mini-pitch

Memorise a 10-15 second mini-pitch for your business that confidently and concisely explains who you are and what you provide. This is absolutely invaluable for networking at events or meeting potential customers for the first time. Remember to make it as interesting as possible and don't give everything away - answering questions enables you to build rapport.

2. Use Internet and email

Regardless of whether you're a dog groomer or a wedding planner, you need broadband Internet access and an email address for customers to contact you. Check your email regularly and make sure you respond to messages promptly.

3. Hand out business cards at every opportunity

As a business owner, you're never off-duty - take any opportunity to hand out business cards when you meet new people, regardless of whether it's after work hours. As long as you don't bombard people with a long-winded marketing spiel at the same time, handing out business cards is a great way to promote your business for almost no cost.

4. Keep on top of industry trends

It might seem like a no-brainer, but once you're in business you shouldn't stop learning about your industry and developing your products and services to meet current demand. If a new product or technological innovation is going to be a game changer for your industry, make sure you know about it before the competition. Being nimble enough to pounce on any new industry developments could future-proof your business.

5. Consider a website

Even if you don't do business online, you might be surprised to find out how many people search for you before picking up the telephone or walking through your door. An effective website doesn't need to win any art awards, but it should explain to customers what your offer, your point-of-difference and provide your contact details.



6. Clever marketing

The days of taking out an ad in the local paper and waiting for the customers to roll in are long gone. Use at least one form of social media, such as Facebook, to boost your profile. Run a Facebook competition where the winner is the person who attracts the most new people to your page, and offer a product or free use of your services as a prize. If your target market isn't online, offer a competition in your store or through flyers, or offer small prizes for people who refer new customers. Ask any competition entrants to sign up for future offers or newsletters so you have a basis for future marketing efforts.

7. Get professional with your communication

Is your general telephone demeanour professional enough? How about your emails and voice-mail messages? Always take a friendly but professional approach to any form of customer interaction including written emails, invoices and notices. If you haven't already, create an email signature with your full name, business name and contact details. This looks more professional and means customers have your contact details from the first message. If you have a pre-recorded voicemail, be as clear and professional as possible - even if this means following a script.

8. Do market research

Even if your intuition tells you that you're onto a winner, conduct some basic market research to make sure your product or services are going to sell. If you are selling wooden toys, you will most likely need to know how many families are in your area with children aged between one and ten years of age.

Conducting market research sounds expensive but you might find some of it already exists. Census data or existing publically available market research could give you some insight without having to spend a cent. Alternatively, you could distribute a basic questionnaire to potential customers to gauge market response.

9. Join business associations and organisations

Look for the groups your prospective customers belong to, and put most of your time and energy into them. Join your industry's leading trade association, or your local chamber of commerce. These groups give you an outlet to enhance your image, build your reputation and meet potential customers. As a member, you will also be able to keep up-to-date with industry trends and developments and cut your costs through association discounts.



10. Improve your public relations

Think about how you could publically promote your business by getting behind a community event or being more visible in other ways. You could offer to be a guest speaker as part of a business course, or provide guidance to people wanting to learn about your industry - it all builds profile and integrity. If you are a sporting goods retailer, offering some cricket bats to a local children's team or attending games builds credibility, which is positive for your business.

11. Stay up to date with technology

Modern technology can save you time and reduce your operational costs. Take the time to research what similar businesses are using before upgrading your systems. The most common cost savers include using Skype for calling or video conferencing and cloud-based services for document creation and sharing.

12. Keep your marketing materials current

There's nothing worse than old, stale marketing materials that make your business appear outdated and even unprofessional. Review your marketing material every 12 months and be prepared to be ruthless if it needs to change to reflect your business offering. If you are on a tight budget, focus on producing basic material that is stylish but functional.

13. Use other people's good ideas

You don't need to be original all the time – learning from others is an important part of being in business. Be on the lookout for great ideas or new ways of working from other businesses and think about how you could adapt them to your own business.

14. Implement firm credit policies

If a customer comes to you with a large order, it's easy to get carried away with excitement rather than using good judgement. Are you likely to be paid promptly, or will the customer settle other debts or generally dither about before handing over the money? For any credit orders, make sure the customer completes a credit application and decide beforehand how much risk you are willing to take, then set your policies accordingly. Make sure the amount due and terms are clearly stated on invoices and post them in a timely manner.

15. Test your marketing ideas

Before you implement any marketing campaign, test it on a limited basis and fine tune it before a full-scale rollout. If it isn't as successful as you hoped, you can go back to the drawing board without wasting much time or money.



16. Test new products

Even if you have multiple products selling well, keep on the lookout for opportunities to expand your product line and satisfy customer demand. For example, if you stock pool supplies, branch out by offering deck chairs or shade sails to go with your existing products. If you are unsure how well a product will sell, order a small amount first before placing a big order. Just remember to update your marketing material to let customers know about your new offerings.

17. Write and use a marketing plan

Taking a casual approach to marketing by producing material once in a while hardly ever works. Develop a detailed marketing strategy that covers at least one year and includes target markets, your unique selling proposition, tactics, budgets, specific tasks and expected results. Map it out on a calendar so you know exactly what you have to do and when. Continue your marketing efforts even when business is good; if you stop informing customers, your sales will eventually drop.

18. Keep good records

It's almost impossible to grow your business if you don't know what is working and what isn't. If you are selling products, keep a record of every sale and always have an accurate inventory of how much product you have stored away. If you are a serviced-based business, record contact details of clients, even for one-off business – you use this data to build a database for future marketing efforts.

19. Guarantee your products and services

If you want to build future sales through repeat customers, you need to make it clear that you stand behind your offerings 100%. A good start is to offer a money-back guarantee for any product sold, or to back up big sales with after-sales support. If you offer a service, this could mean personally calling the client after completing the work, or sending them a letter thanking them for their business.

20. Listen to your customers

Take any feedback from customers seriously and make an effort to thank them for sharing their thoughts – even if they are raising concerns or making a complaint. If you have a regular customer who isn't happy with a new marketing strategy or product line, listen to what they have to say – there's a chance that other customers might share their concerns. If someone thanks you for good customer service or for a job well done, you could ask if they would provide a reference that you can use as part of your marketing material.