What a digital marketing strategy means for your business

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### I. Introduction

Technological advancements such as mobile devices and applications have facilitated numerous aspects of conducting business. What's more, consumers are increasingly using their smartphones and tablets to purchase from and reach out to merchants and companies. For this reason, firms have had to reassess and update their marketing and advertising efforts - which used to predominantly consist of traditional techniques such as direct mailings, television and radio commercials, as well as print ads - in order to make their outreach more relevant to modern consumers.

With the emergence and continued development of new technology and the internet, small business owners can now choose from a plethora of tools for promoting their companies. These new digital marketing tactics are giving entrepreneurs the chance to expand their marketing efforts like never before by reaching out to larger audiences, creating more relevant and engaging content, and pinpointing exactly what customers want from their firms. That said, as with any operational strategy, digital marketing should be given much consideration. Small businesses will need to analyze and research the needs of their customers, and customize their outreach initiatives by incorporating company-specific goals. Knowing these aspects and gaining further insight into the world of digital marketing will result in the best possible operational strategies.

### II. Why a digital marketing strategy is important

There are many reasons as to why effective digital marketing has become a necessity for small businesses these days. According to BusinessZone, digital marketing is the marketing of the future. While the traditional methods used for advertising and promotion can still be successful in this day and age, the fact is that the world is more connected online than ever before. This is leading to an increase in digital strategies, which could one day completely replace the more traditional approaches. As more consumers begin to adapt to technological devices, they will likely expect businesses to do the same.

Digital marketing methods allow small businesses to reach out like never before and empower them to interact with the audiences they want to target but were previously unsure how to approach. Washington Technology states that along with their high digital expectations, customers also want to see online content that fits what they are looking for. "Today, people want to see examples, hear smart people talking to them in videos and learn about how you've helped solve problems they can relate to," the news source writes.

Additionally, as more small businesses move into the digital realm, owners who want to keep up with or stay ahead of competition stand to benefit from online marketing efforts, reports Smart Insights. Startups that have yet to establish a solid reputation within their industry or attract a loyal customer base may find that taking an online approach is especially helpful. Competition, coupled with the recent economic recession, has made digital marketing strategies more vital than ever before.

Now that the importance of digital marketing efforts is becoming increasingly known, the owners of small companies may be left wondering what their options are and what exactly these new methods entail.
III. Types of digital marketing

Fortunately for small businesses, there is no single correct way to develop a digital marketing strategy. Passion Digital states that methods should depend on the needs of companies, as well as the wants of consumers. Businesses can choose how many digital aspects they want to incorporate, and may even elect to implement several initiatives at once then fine-tune their efforts based on feedback and metrics.

Digital marketing is also known as "inbound marketing" and is almost wholly internet-based. By utilizing web, social and mobile technologies, businesses can provide value to prospects at every stage of the buying cycle. Companies and customers are able to more effectively interact with each other across digital channels, giving small businesses additional insight into how their marketing programs are performing. Owners who are looking to get started should be aware that there are many different aspects of inbound marketing, and each of these should be considered to determine which work best for operational goals.

One of the most important aspects of digital marketing is the website. While small businesses and merchants work hard to maintain their brick-and-mortar locations, it is also vital that they have updated, informative websites. Jeremy Girard, Director of Web Design and Development for Envision Technology Advisors, states that the website should be the start of any digital marketing initiative. Since that website acts as the hub that all other avenues will drive traffic to - from social media to search engines and even traditional marketing campaigns - the website needs to be the best that it can be. This means it should be easy to use and attractive, with relevant, timely content. It also needs to be unique to companies' individual goals and the needs of their audiences - something an off-the-shelf template-based website will rarely deliver.

The rise of mobile devices, from smartphones to tablets and more, is another aspect that is critical to the success of a website. An effective website will need to support a wide range of devices and respond to various screen sizes with layouts and content suited to the needs of mobile users.

Once the design and development components have been mapped out, the next step is for small business owners to turn their attention to what type of content will be included on their websites. Also, companies should be thinking about how their messages will be broadcasted and viewed by audiences. Firms will want to create and frequently upload industry-related information to draw in potential clients who display an interest in their brands and services. Two elements that owners need to understand are search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM). Smart Insights writes that there are more than 3 billion searches conducted every day using Google, and approximately 80 percent of users access the organic content that appears in the results. For this reason, businesses will want to ensure their content is being generated by this search engine and others like it when internet users run searches in pursuit of information.

This can be accomplished by incorporating keywords into website posts and other media. However, this doesn't mean these words should be jammed into every possible place on the page, regardless of context or appropriateness. This can lead to information seeming sloppy and boring, with the keyword integration coming off as forced. To avoid this from happening, content must be engaging and informative. Website visitors need to be able to quickly find the information they are looking for rather than become bogged down by reading too many keywords. The messages included on websites need to be meaningful and interesting in order to help establish a trust.
Other components of digital marketing include logo and brand design. By using graphic design to create attractive logos, small businesses can give themselves a helping hand when it comes to standing out from competition. Graphic design is also an important element in companies' efforts to develop their digital marketing strategies.

**IV. Trends in digital marketing**

To gain a greater understanding of the importance of digital marketing and how it will impact them in the future, business owners may want to look at current trends and expectations. The usefulness of the internet is already widely known, as nearly everyone these days has some type of online presence. That said, entrepreneurs should keep their eyes on the newest trends coming to the forefront -  marketing via mobile and developing mobile-optimized websites.

Marketing Land cites a study by Shareaholic that found mobile website views account for more than 16 percent of overall web traffic. This number is expected to increase by 27 percent in 2012 alone. Research from Google revealed that when it comes to accessing businesses' websites through mobile devices, more than two-thirds (67 percent) of surveyed consumers stated they were more likely to buy from companies with mobile-optimized sites. What's more, 61 percent said they would leave a page that wasn't mobile-friendly.

As for the future of inbound marketing, it is anticipated that more businesses will be implementing such strategies into their operations over the coming months and years. For this reason, the owners of small companies must focus on including these methods if they want to stay ahead of their competition and stand out from other companies in their field.

Inbound marketing has a higher rate than its outbound equivalent when it comes to converting leads into customers. SEO and SEM methods have a 15 percent close rate, compared to the 2 percent generated by traditional tactics. Additionally, inbound marketing techniques tend to cost considerably less than traditional efforts. The average cost per lead for digital is around $135, while outbound can cost approximately $346 per lead, according to HubSpot.

With these numbers - and the expectations that they will significantly grow over the next few years - it is easy for small businesses to see why they should implement digital strategies now in order to stay ahead of the game and proactively reach out to their target audiences.

**V. Is investment in digital marketing worth it?**

Once digital marketing strategies have been put in place, small businesses must focus on how to best measure their impact. Owners do not want to go through implementing well-thought-out strategies only to learn down the line that these are not working as well as anticipated. Analyzing and measuring the return on investment (ROI) from inbound methods is an effective way for companies to analyze how their initiatives are performing and whether changes or updates should be put in place.
According to an ROI Research white paper titled "The ROI of Digital Marketing," businesses need to look at how digital channels are performing in correlation with the goals created for each in order to gauge the ROI of their marketing efforts. For example, website strategies may not have been launched with the same mission as mobile methods, so these need to be looked at in terms of whether they met the specific milestones set. In addition, efforts must be put forth to effectively analyze website, mobile and other metrics. Most of the time, these numbers and figures are not as easy to read as they seem, so owners need to make sure they understand what everything means when it comes to ROI.

Firms also need to be aware of the importance and value of customers in terms of marketing ROI. Vic Drabicky, writing for Marketing Land, argues that when businesses are analyzing their returns, they do not place enough emphasis on consumers. Client data, such purchasing behaviors and retention, should be looked at to determine exactly how valuable individual customers are and how they are being reached by inbound marketing efforts. Companies that adequately leverage this information can use their findings as a good indicator of how their digital marketing strategies worked, and whether improvements need to be made. For this reason, small businesses should not forget to incorporate the research from customers' actions, Drabicky notes.

Many small businesses might learn of free or discounted solutions for their digital marketing needs. While these options can seem enticing at first, owners should know that these tools often do not provide the same functions as more costly, but more effective, resources. If developing companies truly want to expand their inbound marketing techniques, then they must be willing to spend the money on the systems that produce the best results and help propel their operations into the digital world.

**VI. Conclusion**

Outbound techniques can still be used by small businesses to create awareness of their brands and get the word out about their products and services. However, these methods have a tendency to quickly become expensive and may not produce the tangible results that owners are hoping for. This is where inbound strategies come into play. As more firms make the transition into the digital age, meeting the needs and wants of online consumers can only benefit small businesses in the long run.

Merchants will need to stay ahead of competition, as well as offer elements that help them stand out from others in their industry. By implementing inbound marketing efforts, companies are well-positioned to meet all of these goals by connecting more frequently with target audiences. The savings and advantages offered by efficient inbound marketing campaigns can help small businesses more effectively create and promote their brands in an increasingly digital world.

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