

## **5 Free Ways to Build Your Small Business Brand and Boost Your Credibility**

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You can feel it, an ever so slight sigh of relief that maybe the worst of the recession is behind us, visibly still nipping at our heels but promisingly in our hind sight. Both anecdotal evidence and key economic indicators point to the nascent signs of recovery. One of the most telling signs is the Consumer Confidence Index, which rose to 54.1% in August, a full six points above economists' prediction of 48%. Combine that with the good news in manufacturing, growth after more than 18 months of contraction<sup>1</sup>, and small businesses have the sign they've been waiting on for more than a year.

Yes, for the small businesses who have survived, they are anxiously reading the signs and looking for their own place in the coming upturn. However, it's one thing to be waiting but are you preparing while you wait.

If not, you should be because if there's one lesson most of us learned during this "Great Recession," it's that you must make the most of every dollar; there is no room for waste. Even though Ben Bernanke, Fed Chairman, has weighed in saying the recession is officially over, he also warns that there is still an uphill climb and economists predict that the recovery will be slow and involve numerous ups and downs before we are completely out of the woods. As small businesses, if we read between these lines, we can glean that there are some consumer and business customers starting to reappear but caution reigns. Those customers remain worried about their overall financial health and still want to spend their money wisely.

The question is how to get them to spend their hard earned dollars at your place of business. For that answer, we just need to think about where most people choose to spend their money - in places they trust, where they know who they are dealing with and with those who give them confidence that they know what they are doing. Your job is preparation, preparation for the upturn. It involves building your small business brand and boosting your credibility as a trusted and reliable vendor, so that customers do choose to spend in your place of business.

For many business owners, there is one very large obstacle standing in the way of this preparation and that's the number the economy has done on budgets; marketing dollars are in short supply. Have no fear, there are many affordable ways to achieve your goals and at least five free, yet very practical, ways to build your brand and boost your credibility. Taking advantage of one or more of these ideas will help you benefit from every up in the coming recovery and save every dollar possible during the expected valleys within that recovery.

### **1. Write Articles in your Field of Expertise:**

Writing about what you know is much easier than writing about any other topic, which is important to keep in mind if you don't view yourself as a writer. Narrow your topic to information that your customers need or are looking for at the moment and explain it in laymen's terms. For example, if you're an HVAC Contractor, consider writing an article about HVAC energy efficiency, maybe the pros and cons of tuning up an old system versus buying a new one. Keep in mind that the goal of article writing isn't necessarily to

sell a particular product or service, it's to educate the reader and emphasize your knowledge and expertise in the field.

#### ***Where to Publish:***

- First and at a minimum, post your article on your business website and send an email link to your customer mailing list. This is a great way to stay on their radar and be seen as a helpful provider of information.
- Second, post your article with online article depositories. There are many out there, including [www.articlefeeder.com](http://www.articlefeeder.com), [www.triond.com](http://www.triond.com), [www.selfgrowth.com](http://www.selfgrowth.com), [www.ezinearticles.com](http://www.ezinearticles.com) and more. Each has its own niche or target reader. Do some research to determine which sites best fit your article topic and target audience and publish there.
- Third, consider submitting your article to industry specific publications to build your credibility within your industry. Building a name among competitors or related suppliers can help boost your credibility. Check the publication's website for the editor's name and address for article submissions.

#### ***Helpful Tips:***

- Length: A good rule of thumb is between 500 to 2,000 words, as long as you've provided enough detail to make it a viable article and you've been succinct and compelling enough to keep their attention from beginning to end.
- Format: Use headers, bullets, text boxes or tables to help break up straight text.
- Tone: Approachable yet informative.

## **2. Blog Daily About What you Know**

Shorter in length but greater in frequency, blogs are an effective vehicle for gathering followers and driving traffic to your website. You still need to provide helpful information in your posts but you should also pepper it with some of your personality. For example, share something outside the realm of your business but relevant to your topic. The same general rule applies to blogs as to articles – the goal is not to specifically sell a product or service through the post. Instead, with blogs, it's to help customers and prospects get to know you better, engendering their trust and eventual willingness to buy from you at a later date.

***Publishing a Blog:*** Two of the most popular tools for creating blogs are also, quite conveniently, free. They are [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) and [www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org). With either of these you can have your blog up and running within a very short period of time.

#### ***Helpful Tips:***

- Length: Keep it short, 100 to 500 words.
- Frequency: Publish 3 to 4 posts a week and in the beginning it may take more frequent posts to build up your following.
- Sharing personal information: Always make sure you are comfortable with customers having the amount of personal detail that you share in your blog. Beware of TMI that would turn off potential buyers or even existing customers.
- Links: Make sure you link your blog to your website and vice versa. You want people to be able to find you either way.

## **3. Publish Press Releases**

A great way to build up your brand is to get your name and your business' name in print – either newsprint or virtual print. The easiest and cheapest way to do that is to publish a press release and distribute it to local and online media outlets. Just remember, that the goal of any press release is news because that is the only way that publications will pick it up and publish it within their pages.

***Where to Publish:***

- Send your release to the business editor of your local newspaper as well as to smaller, community publications which are always receptive to good local business stories.
- Distribute your press release online for free at such sites as [www.free-press-release.com](http://www.free-press-release.com), [www.prlog.org](http://www.prlog.org), and [www.l-newswire.com](http://www.l-newswire.com).
- Post a copy of your press release on your website and if you have a customer newsletter, include a link or recap of it there.

***Possible Topics***

- An anniversary or business achievement.
- A special promotion or contest.
- The introduction of a new product or service.

For more information about [press releases](#), read The WordSlingers July, 2009 article located at [www.TheWordSlingers.com](http://www.TheWordSlingers.com).

**4. Network Online**

Networking has always been a big part of marketing yourself and your business but until a few years ago, you were limited to connecting with people in your local market or at trade-shows, conventions and the like. Now, you can network literally within any of the 24 hours in a day and with anyone, anywhere in the world. Web 2.0 has made this possible and the explosion of social networking sites provide the venue to connect with past contacts and make new ones. If you're new to social networking, keep in mind that this is not the place for a cold call or hard sell. Rather position yourself as a helpful expert willing to provide advice and tips to your connections. There are both general and niche social networking sites and the list grows every day which can make this an overwhelming task. Simplify it and make the most of your time by picking the few sites that attract your target customer and concentrate your efforts there.

***A Small Slice of the Business Oriented Social Networking Sites:***

- [www.Linkedin.com](http://www.Linkedin.com)
- [www.fastpitchnetworking.com](http://www.fastpitchnetworking.com)
- [www.Entrepreneur.com](http://www.Entrepreneur.com) and their E-Connect Community
- [www.biznick.com](http://www.biznick.com)

**5. Create and Publish a White Paper**

White Papers are a great way to showcase your expertise in your area and to help show customers, especially business customers, how your product or service solves a particular problem. The general outline of a White Paper should identify the problem, explain the possible solutions to it and then position your product or service as the best solution.

***Where to Publish:***

- Post the White Paper on your website and let customers know it's there either through word of mouth, your company newsletter or the blog you've just set up.

***Industries and Products/Services that Lend Themselves to White Papers***

- Software development
- Technology-related products
- Products and services that create efficiencies for business

Finally, there is one additional, bonus idea, that is still free and has stood the test of time. Its being a professional, approachable ambassador for your business no matter where you go. This is especially true for small businesses because typically the owner has actual contact with its customers. That is to your advantage because customers form a personal connection. It doesn't cost any money to make the best impression every time you interact with customers, it just requires motivation and a friendly, yet professional, attitude.

As we sit at the plateau of this immense downturn and look upward, all small business owners want to ride the tide of recovery. Try one or all of these free ideas to build your small business brand and boost your credibility. The result will be that your name comes to mind when customers' cash flow eases and they are ready to spend once again.

<sup>1</sup> Norbert Ore, Chairman of ISM Manufacturing Business Survey Committee