

50 Bootstrap Marketing ideas for startups

Your new business will live or die by its sales. You can have the best product or service in the world, but if someone won't give you money for it, it's worthless.

And to drive your sales you need good marketing. You need to find a way to attract people's attention to your business and its products, and help them make a conscious decision to purchase from you.

If you're on a budget, that can be tough. It's possible to spend a small fortune on marketing.

The alternative is to bootstrap it. This means marketing your new business on a very small budget. It's about using creativity rather than cash to shout about what you're doing.

Bootstrapping has practically become a culture, as a way to build and market a business without risking a huge amount of cash. There are websites and free books dedicated to it.

Here are 50 free bootstrap marketing ideas from Bytestart

50) Give your knowledge away: The stuff you "just know" in your business is potentially valuable information to others. With the exception of trade secrets specific to your company, freely give knowledge away. Write articles on your website or approach content sites such as Bytestart. Tell people exactly how you will help their business and don't be afraid to reveal tools of the trade. Only a handful will steal that knowledge and try to do it themselves, and they'll never do it as well as you. Education marketing is powerful.

49) Run topical themes: Steal this idea from retail outlets. Have themes that hook into events that are happening and how people feel about them. In winter, give free hot chocolate away. In summer, build a beach in your office. Watch out for event movies and cash in on their marketing spend. Try to relate themes to your business.

48) Offer a discount card: These are the cheapest way to reward your existing customers for their loyalty, as you only give free product away to your very best customers. When they buy your product five or six times, they get the next one free. What a great way to say thank you. Copy big companies; Café Nero and McDonalds have stamps and tokens when you buy coffee, to encourage you to drink there regularly. Remember to ensure your tokens aren't easily forged, and that your loyalty card stamp is locked away every day!

47) Have outstanding customer service: Nothing attracts customers more than positive word of mouth from other customers. Customer service is your biggest weapon against

rivals, especially those run by big corporations. Make it a central part of your business. If it's important you are seen to answer the phone quickly, promise to do it within three rings or your service is free. You'll soon make that a priority when you start losing money!

46) Launch a competition: It's cheap for you to give your services or products away, so do it regularly. Plug the competition on your website. Or better still, contact the relevant media that talks to your potential customer base and ask if they'd be interested in a giveaway. Be aware many media outlets have a minimum competition stock value.

45) Stuff your website with new content: Glossing over all of the complicated Search Engine Optimisation guidelines, Google broadly rewards websites that consistently do two things: keep the content up-to-date, and add new content regularly. You don't need lots of specialist knowledge about search engine marketing. Just keep adding new pages with fresh content. Make a commitment to adding one new page a week and you will be surprised by how much extra traffic you get after a few months.

44) Blog: If you can't think of articles to write for your website, why not blog. It's a simple way to get relevant content onto your site. A good blog can help to brand you and your business as experts in the field. Much of the most popular blogging technology, such as Blogger or WordPress is free.

43) Use the back of business cards: Ever found a business card given to you a few months before, which says "Bob Smith, director, Bob Smith Associates".. and wondered what Bob Smith does? Use the empty space on the back of your business card to list your services or position your business. It's cheap and will attract clients.

42) Use your stationary: Same with your letterheads and compliments slips – use them to get your marketing message across. And get your message on the envelopes too.

41) Get on YouTube: The video website gets a huge amount of traffic... and best of all, it's easy and free to get on! Getting noticed on YouTube is often more about creative ideas and executing them well than just spending money. Don't forget to put the video on your own website.

40) Invest in credibility: If there are accreditation schemes or professional qualifications for your industry, spend the money on them. They might not be cheap but as a long-term investment, can help to make sure your business is the automatic choice for years to come.

39) Get them sold on hold: If you put callers on hold, make sure they are listening to a sales message rather than Beethoven's Fifth.

38) Give away unusual freebies: Pens with your logo are boring and forgettable. Thanks to powerful digital printing techniques, there are literally thousands of things that your logo can go on. Would potential clients better remember an underwear company that

gave them an edible gingerbread man with tiny pants to remove and keep? Maybe, maybe not, but it's different and people will talk about it.

37) Seek and use testimonials: People feel more confident reading about other customers who have had a good experience.

36) Give a guarantee: If you truly believe in your product or service, guarantee it. Offer money back if they're not 100% satisfied. Yes, a few people will abuse your guarantee, but you'll attract more business in the first place.

35) Get friendly with local radio DJs: Send them free stuff. Ring in to take part in their competitions. Text replies to their on-air questions. Be nice to them but not sycophantic, and you will get on-air mentions.

34) Answerphone message: If someone calls in after hours, your answerphone message is a chance to sell. Instead of "we're not here, leave a message", how about "we're so exhausted from giving great customer service we need a little sleep. Leave your number and we'll call you back at 9.05am exactly."

33) Set up a referral programme: If your suppliers and clients are happy to give you work, why not formally thank them for it. There's nothing better than getting a £50 voucher as a thank you for referring a new client.

32) Campaign to change something: What's annoying people in your marketplace? Start an awareness campaign. If your business is part of the solution, even better.

31) Dress differently: If you have a very relaxed office, why not have a dress up Friday. If you run a retail outlet, get your team to wear themed costumes. This fits in well with suggestion number 49.

30) Do a talk: Seek out the networking groups where your potential customers meet, join them, and offer to do a free talk at some point. It may take some time to get a slot, but you will effectively brand yourself as an expert. Don't be too worried about being a polished speaker; concentrate on great content

29) Network everywhere: Wherever potential customers or referrers meet, be there. Good networking is about farming contacts not hunting out deals... don't expect results on day one. You need to work at it and be seen regularly.

28) Write a white paper: Sounds dull, but it's a great way of stating your expertise. Put white papers on your website and make it easy for people to download them to read at their leisure.

27) Increase prices: Increasing prices will help your customers perceive you as a premium provider. Yes you may lose a little business, but you will make more profit

from a slightly smaller customer base. And many businesses find that it is the lower value clients that are the most hassle.

26) Start a newsletter: Use a regular email newsletter to keep in touch with your existing clients (and upsell or cross sell to them), plus as a way to keep your business front of mind with potential customers. Printed newsletters are more likely to get past gatekeepers such as PA's and reach the bosses of big companies.

25) Change how you answer the phone: Give your staff freedom to experiment with exciting ways to answer the phone. They'll enjoy it and your customers should too. Just remember that the phone can be the first contact with a business; be aware of answering the phone in such an odd way that it puts callers off

24) Use promotional people: You can hire good promotional temps at very low cost to hand out flyers or otherwise spread the word. Dress them well, make sure they know your business inside out and ensure they are well motivated not to just dump the flyers and bunk off!

23) Cross promote products and services: What else could your customers buy from you? Once they have bought from you once, they are in a relationship with you, and are much more likely to buy something else.

22) Sell gift tokens: Everyone loves picking their own gift; if you sell products to consumers make sure you do this. The best news for you is that £1 billion of vouchers are never used.

21) Do something unexpected: How amazing would it be if your supplier rang to say they had dropped their prices by 10 per cent, for no reason. Or the owner rings to say thanks for your continued business. In the internet age, business can be so anonymous, that even picking up the phone now and again can be seen as unexpected.

20) Send out a press release: A bootstrap marketing essential. A press release with a good story suggestion could get you valuable free publicity in your target media. That in turn will boost your reputation and could even generate sales leads.

19) Join organisations: Get involved with local networking and business groups, trade organisations, and even consider joining your local Round Table.

18) Sell on your invoice: If you sell to small businesses, it could be the decision maker who deals with the paperwork. Why not get a rubber stamp made up with a marketing message, and stamp every invoice? Your stamp could even be as simple as "thanks for your business, we look forward to payment".

17) Issue a catalogue: A classic way to reach people who are interested in browsing your products. To keep costs low, print colour pages from your website, or look at professional digital printing, which can give you small quantities of catalogues at a high quality.

16) Pick up the litter: Or clean the windows of the local charity shop. Or donate something to the Scouts. Get your business involved in the community. And use company clothing plus press releases to ensure everyone knows you're doing it.

15) Use case studies: Just like testimonials, case studies demonstrate expertise and happy customers. Well-written case studies are also ideal ways to position your people as experts in dealing with specific kinds of clients or solving certain types of problems – perfect to promote your most profitable work.

14) Do some fun guerrilla marketing: Leave sandcastles on the pavements with little flags promoting your summer sale. Or beam your logo onto the council building at night. Just be careful not to go too far.

13) Write to your local paper: Small newspapers often struggle for decent letters. Get in the habit of buying the local paper regularly, and write to the editor about issues you genuinely feel passionate about. If they are problems your business can fix – perfect.

12) Focus on how your staff represent your company: People will judge your business on the people within. Use mystery shoppers to work out what the experience is like. Incidentally, a member of your family can't be a mystery shopper. They are too close to the business even if they don't work in it.

11) Do what the others can't or won't: Analyse your competitors and pick the things you think customers demand but no-one delivers. They will probably be hard to execute, but should be worthwhile (and it's because they're hard that no-one does them). Talk to customers to find out what they really want.

10) Take a holiday: If you work on your business 18 hours a day, 6 days a week, 50 weeks a year, you will burn out. And you'll stop thinking subjectively about the business. Incidentally, if you can't take a holiday, you need to understand The E-Myth.

9) Do a publicity stunt: Do something to attract attention both from the public and the media. It should be related to your business in some way.

8) Use online business forums: If you sell through your website, online business forums can be a powerful way to build reputation and drive traffic. Put at least an hour a week aside to read posts and reply with relevant comments. Be wary of spending more time on forums than working on your business.

7) Text message your customers: How cool would it be to get a text from your dentist reminding you about your dental appointment that afternoon? It's so easy and cheap to text customers, every business should be doing it. Use automated SMS systems to make it easy. Remember to give customers an easy to opt out of further text messages.

6) Reduce rates for repeat business: Buy more, pay less. Make sure customers understand that simple rule and keep repeating it. They will respond to it.

5) Have a spring clean: Clear your desk, premises, website, anything. A spring clean gets rid of the clutter and brings a new freshness. Customers will notice.

4) Support a cause: This is known as cause-related marketing, and is a powerful way to get your business noticed through its support for a relevant charity or organisation. Pick your cause carefully, commit to it in the long-term (better still form a partnership with them), and shout about everything you do to help it.

3) Tell your story: Even big companies benefit from the stories of their founders. Look at Richard Branson and Alan Sugar – they personify the companies that have made them very wealthy. Don't be afraid to build your company around you; people like buying from people.

2) Pick up the phone: The phone is the cheapest marketing tool you have. Don't waste it on cold calling. Use it to phone leads or contacts, rather than just email them. In a world swamped with electronic communication, this is a great way to stand out.

1) Never lose your enthusiasm: The most important thing you can do to stand out it... something. Businesses that do something regularly tend to perform better than those that do something brilliant now and again.