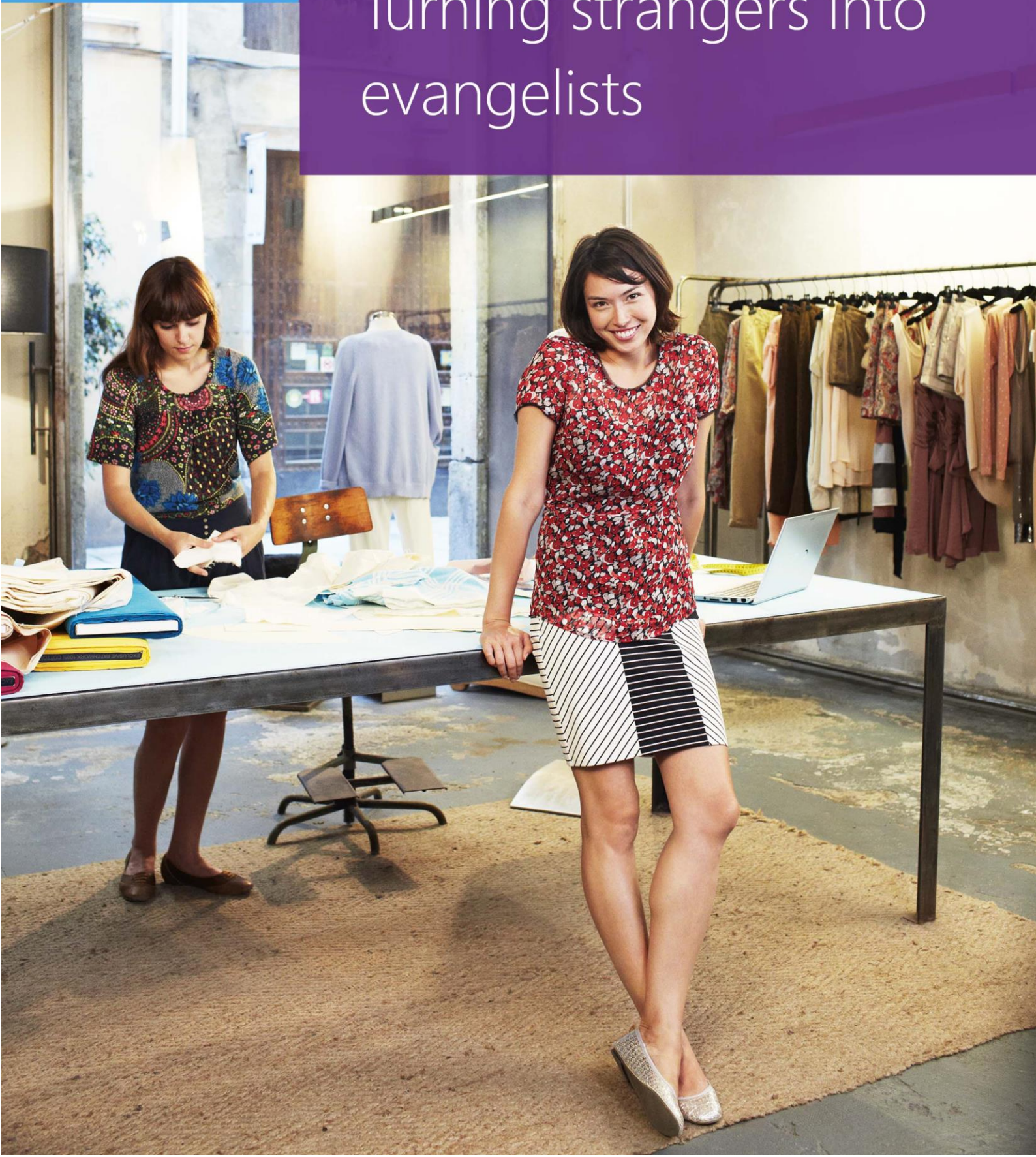


Microsoft
Small
Business

How to win more customers: Turning strangers into evangelists





Set out your stall like a pro marketer – for pennies

When you're starting out in business, it's hard to be heard above the clamour of your competitors – especially if they have more money than you! But with a little forethought and clarity about your customers and how you are going to meet their needs, you can find new clients and then both make and honour commitments which will turn each one into an evangelist.

Every business is looking to sell more; and in tough times it can feel like an uphill battle – particularly for smaller companies. The big boys have economies of scale; they seem to be on every high street, and they have the systems and budgets to make themselves heard, right?

Don't throw in the towel just yet. Small companies can sell on a level playing field, because technology has made effective marketing available to everyone. Scott Brinker, author of the [Chief Marketing Technologist](#) blog and President of Ion Interactive says "Marketing has become a technology-powered discipline. The shift in technology has been of incredible advantage to smaller businesses because they are able to represent themselves in the digital space in a way that competes legitimately with much larger companies."



Build a brand

But let's start on paper. Most start-ups welcome all-comers with open arms. [Marketing trainer](#) and [author](#) Stefan Drew says that's a mistake which will lead to expensive, scattergun marketing. "Start by profiling your customer", he says, "because you'll often be surprised. I recently did some Facebook advertising for a childcare course, expecting applicants to be mainly women aged 16-19. In fact, I got a wider range of ages than I expected, and plenty of men too." If you have never identified your 'ideal' customer, or indeed tested whether your perceived ideal was correct, you're almost certainly missing business.

And to appeal to these often diverse audiences, "your brand has to count for something", says Brinker. "You can't please all the people all the time. The way things have evolved in the digital space, marketing has become utterly entwined with the customer experience, from the very first touchpoint when people are finding out about you through to using your product, through to becoming an advocate or a repeat customer, so it's more important than ever to ask what does your brand stand for and then live up to the brand promise throughout the customer lifecycle."





Talking Business



So, before you get out and pitch, decide what you're all about: price, quality, service, speed, or any other characteristic which will define what you do, which will appeal to your audiences, and which you can commit to making your top priority, every single day.

Get the message out

When you have a cursory understanding of your audience, you can begin to sell to them. This doesn't have to cost the earth, for two key reasons.

Firstly, there are plenty of ways to market free of charge; or at least where the only cost is your time and effort. "One of my clients was a landscape gardener", says Drew. "Just on-spec, we wrote an article about gardening for a local magazine. It was so well received, that the company has been commissioned to write a monthly piece for the next 12 months, and it's appearing in two magazines. That's all free publicity. Even if you can't get into the press every month, there are plenty of opportunities to build a reputation. Publish e-books or [advice sheets](#) on your [website](#), or put how-to videos on YouTube."

"Another low-cost option is to run an event – even a local meetup in a pub", says Drew. After all, if business is all about building relationships, what better way to meet customers than to get lots of them in a room. A free event can be marketed with

little more than a friendly email to a few hundred recipients."

The right low-cost strategy for your business really will depend on what service you provide, and how you have decided to differentiate yourself as discussed above. But if you're feeling overwhelmed trying to get PR, run a website or an eBay shop, and handle everything from [search engine advertising](#) to social

media, don't panic. Brinker says, "Even large corporations aren't doing everything. Audiences are fragmented. You can't do it all, so prioritise the pieces which are most relevant and effective for your customers and business. Do that subset well, and get comfortable with the fact that there will be stuff you don't do."

Refine and refine again

The second reason low-cost marketing is yours to take is that, again, technology allows you to target, measure and refine the effectiveness of every penny you spend. Says Brinker, "Good marketers are analysts;

experimenters. We have a hypothesis that a group of customers will respond better to a particular type of offer, so we run two different variants of a promotional message, and measure performance of each." [Online, of course, this A/B testing can be conducted in real-time](#), and at minimum cost. Brinker says its value cannot be overstated: "A/B is the single greatest gift that digital has given to the marketing world – it's so much easier, more cost effective and

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instantly measurable. It starts to take what was a gut-instinct driven discipline and enhance it with a provable, analytical way to determine what works best.”

If you don't believe the difference a word or two can make, Drew offers a salutary example. You may remember a long-standing government tagline: “Learn and earn with an apprenticeship”. Drew increased enquiries from an advertisement tenfold... by rephrasing it to “Earn and learn with an apprenticeship”. Hold the front page: it turns out young adults like money!

That said, you don't have to understand everything about your customers. There is a trend in enterprise marketing for what has come to be called ‘Big Data’ – using every possible fact about your clients and their habits to make ever smarter judgements about them. In fact, at a certain level of granularity, the judgements we make tend to go wrong. For example, retailer Amazon is hailed for its recommendation service which analyses past purchases and recommends other ideas. It's a triumph: but every now and then, it also falls over. If you buy a present for someone else, you can find yourself inundated with recommendations based on their tastes forevermore.

Says Brinker, “With big data, I'm more sceptical than most marketing technologists. It is more powerful to take a smaller dataset, restricted to really relevant customer interactions and use it in a more analytical and systematic fashion to improve the customer experience. You don't need big computers to do that-

a [simple CRM system](#) puts sufficient analytics in your reach to punch above your weight.”

Whether you're looking at prospects – i.e. new customer options – or upselling to existing customers; focus on improving the relationships you have with them. Instead of sales, Brinker uses the telling phrase “marketing nurturing programme”: today's customers are precious and need to be nurtured through a sales process which may begin with no more than an awareness of your existence, and which only ends when a customer is 100% satisfied. That's a big ask, and competition is hotter than ever; but the cost of getting started has never been lower.

HOW MICROSOFT CAN HELP

[Microsoft Office 365](#) brings together online versions of the best communications and collaboration tools from Microsoft. Subscribe to web-enabled tools that let you access your email, documents, contacts, and calendars from virtually anywhere, on almost on any device.

[Windows 8](#) is reimagined to support different working styles. It's more intuitive so you can find what you need faster and easier. The new look of Windows and the new app model make it easier for businesses to create their own line-of-business apps to help improve productivity.





Eyeful Power!

Based in Leicestershire, [Eyeful Presentations](#) make presentations work. When you only have fifteen minutes – or even less – to make an impact, a stream of drab bullet points or badly-constructed arguments just won't do. Global brands like Unilever, the BBC, Coca-Cola, and Visa come to Eyeful to get their key presentations structured, designed and optimized for maximum effect.

The company now delivers to clients in the US, the Netherlands and Russia; and has deployed [Microsoft Dynamics CRM Online](#) with [Microsoft Office 365](#) to cope with a 50% year-on-year growth in the business.

“Prospecting for clients is only the start”, says Simon Morton, Eyeful Presentations’ Managing Director. “Many growing businesses lose revenue because they lose track of their hot prospects – and that’s the worst possible outcome: you have gone to all the expense of marketing, only to fall at the last hurdle.”

Morton says that salespeople, particularly in growing ventures, need a reliable and easy-to-use view of all their dealings with customers; both to keep them looked after and also for accurate financial forecasting and target setting. “Our previous system was complicated, so it wasn’t updated regularly”, he says. “That means that not only were the sales team compromised, but monitoring

performance became complicated too.”

The ideal CRM system is also available anywhere, particularly on the road, as salespeople are constantly out of the office. Thanks to the Cloud, and access from smartphones, connecting to base from anywhere should be a given. Indeed, a new Eyeful office was online in a matter of days: “Our office in Russia was online through the cloud within days of signing the contract with our newly appointed representative”, says Morton. “Before, this would have taken weeks to organise.”

With Microsoft Dynamics CRM Online, each Eyeful user has a familiar, personalised workspace which meets their unique role and information needs. Because sales is a collaborative process, client records can be properly shared as each prospect progresses through from first contact to design and delivery. Everyone can be involved in keeping standards high and clients confident. Managers, meanwhile, have a clear and forward-focused view of the business which supports not just sales but also finance, resource management and all the other day-to-day decision-making which too many companies are still effectively conducting blind. As Morton says, “Now I can access data and make instant decisions from anywhere.”



eyefulpresentations



Talking Business



A five point plan for smarter sales

No sales, no business. It's as simple as that. And today's tough economy is particularly unforgiving. Yet, most people who start their own business are not natural salespeople. Builders become builders because they're great at building, not selling. Luckily, there are some well-trodden paths which work for almost everyone.

The following five-point plan is a distilled generalisation from the work of hundreds of sales advisors around the world. Follow it, and you are sure to bring in more sales from less effort. In fact, if you can put even a tiny proportion of this advice into action, you'll already be improving upon the 'blind good luck and a following wind' which represents most small business sales.

product. So, before you even pick up the phone, work out what you stand for, and how you will be different from your competitors.

- Find your 'niche'. This is what branding is really about: working out the values which run through your business like a stick of rock.
- It's not just about price: think convenience, service, quality, reliability, speed, kindness etc.
- Small businesses think everyone with a need is their customer. They're not. Stick to your niche, and you'll earn more, faster, from fewer sales.

2. Open the doors

Now it's time to find customers – what's often



1. Set out your stall

For every Rolls Royce, there's a Mini. For every Harrods, there's a corner shop. And corner shops do very nicely, thank you very much. People want different experiences from their suppliers – even for the same

called 'prospecting'. If you've done Step 1 properly, this will be much easier, because you have a clear message: 'We're the most reliable couriers', or 'We're the Indian restaurant in Truro where you can bring your own wine'. The best way to find customers



depends entirely on your business, and you may need to try a few different methods before settling on the ones which work best.

- Online is worth the effort for the majority of businesses – [get a website](#) and check out [search engine marketing](#).
- Never underestimate the power of face-to-face networking or a bit of public relations. Get your name known, even if it's only in your local area.
- Institute a [Sales Pipeline](#): a simple list where prospects load up the hopper at the top, and only pop out at the bottom when a sale is made. Many small service businesses lose custom because they are disorganised and simply lose track of prospects.

3. Pick your customers wisely

Now to the stage which professionals call 'qualifying'. You don't want to waste effort on timewasters and 'tyre-kickers'. Qualified customers need what you offer, have the right money to pay for it, and want to do a deal in a reasonable timescale.

- The number one skill for qualifying a customer is listening – and that's good news for the less confident salesperson! Resist the temptation to babble through your offer. Instead, keep quiet and listen. Find out what they need, and why they need it (the problem they want solved), and when.

- Empathise with your prospects. By listening, you can understand their challenge, and offer advice on their situation which presents you as a sympathetic and reliable provider of a solution. Again, this will tease out whether you're the right person for the job. If not, you can extract yourself and move on while retaining their respect.
- This is also where you can establish your credentials. If you have experience ('we've done exactly this sort of thing before – let me introduce you to one of my previous clients'), qualifications or awards, this is the time to slip those helpful facts in.

4. Do the deal

This is the part which scares non-salespeople. But if you remember that you're solving a problem for someone, you need never be embarrassed about asking for money. Here goes...

- Reinforce in the client's mind, and yours, that you're going to help them solve their challenge. Itemise not the great features of what you do, but the benefit of those features to them in the context of the problem they face. Now you're looking indispensable!
- And now you can also feel comfortable talking money. The value of any product or service is not the cost of making or doing it, but the value of having it done in the eyes of the person who needs it. And if





you've listened and learned from the client, you'll have a good idea of what to charge.

- ...which brings us to closing the deal. If you've got the price right, based on value, the close will be little more than a handshake or a signature on a contract. If you really find this hard, embed the close in a fuller process: perhaps a signature and a discussion of start dates or a bit of customisation.

5. Keep them coming back

Finally, remember that it costs only one sixth as much to sell to existing customers as it does to prospect for new ones. A first purchase is a dive into the unknown for any customer, subsequent purchases are your chance to build a strong and enriching relationship with clients so that they won't want to go anywhere else.

- Relationships take effort. Stay in touch with [newsletters](#), the occasional offer or just a friendly call to see how they're getting on. Then you won't be forgotten.
- Client retention is also about great service. Even if you sell paperclips, reliability and quality are highly-prized: every customer appreciates a friendly voice at the end of the phone. Go the extra mile during the sale, and it will be warmly appreciated; go the extra mile in after-sales and you'll be a legend in your clients' eyes.

- Take the opportunity to upsell. A basic [analysis of your clients](#) will show that people who buy one product often also want another. If you buy an electronic gadget from an online retailer, for example, they will suddenly ask if you might like to buy batteries, too. Take some time to work out what your customers might need – and keep accurate records in your sales pipeline to remind you to chase them up later. Upselling can add 25% to your profitability for no investment beyond a bit of discipline.





Talking Business



Love me, tender!

Ben Ward, National Sales Manager at Tender Management Consultancy Ltd.

www.tendermanagement.co.uk

Many smaller businesses shy away from tendering for public sector work, because the process is unfamiliar and has a reputation for being complex.

I think, instead, that there's never been a better time to investigate it. In austerity Britain, it's hard to grow a business organically, so all options should be open. Plus, banks will love you, because public sector clients are reliable debtors and, better still, award long-term contracts. Indeed, one of my own clients went from the last-chance saloon – literally win or bust – to doubling his turnover; including an unbroken run of six contract wins.

If that sounds attractive, start with [TED: Tenders Electronic Daily](#). It lists the majority of tender opportunities for the whole EU, and is updated daily. The design of the whole process is based on the principle that public sector procurers have to be seen to be fair and transparent, so these tenders are always in the public domain. Therefore, don't be fooled into paying for an opportunity sourcing service – finding them is easily done without cost (TED allows you five free searches per day).

That fairness and transparency continues through the bid process. Unlike the private sector which can make its decisions in total privacy, public sector procurement managers make their selection criteria very clear – and stick to them. They're looking for 'MEAT': the Most Economically Advantageous Tender.

That means the right person for the job based not just on price, but a selection of criteria which will give citizens the best deal. Typical criteria beyond price include experience and track record, technical skills and management quality, including fiscal competence. And each criterion will be visibly weighted too, so price may count for 60%, technical and management skills 20% each, for example.

This means not only that you can see what's required, but also make a judgement as to your chances of winning. I always advise you to have clear bid/no-bid discipline, to ensure that you only put effort into contracts you can reasonably be expected to win.

This leads us to the bid document – the part which puts so many small businesses off. It's not easy first time round and you should engage the assistance of a consultant who knows the ropes to help you get your approach right. But when you've been through the pain barrier once, it's an open door to contracts which competitors are simply missing out on.

Think of the required documentation as a hamburger: there's bread on the top, bread on the bottom and meat in the middle. For any industry, you can prepare your bread first – all your policies, certificates, standards etc. - in what we call a tender toolkit. That leaves you with only the 'meat' to customise for each application; and the format of these is fairly standardised. Again, get it right once, and you'll have a process to follow.

Finally, win or lose, always ask for feedback from the procurement manager. They will gladly give it as part of their commitment to openness and transparency, and this invaluable knowledge will allow you to fine-tune your blueprint for next time.

