

Connecting with customers: how small businesses can find their tribe



We dedicated our third small-business mini summit to the question of how to connect with customers.

Attendees discussed establishing credibility, finding the right customers and tried and tested marketing methods.



These are the top tips we talked about.



Targeted marketing pain relief

'The first thing a lot of business owners will say to me is, 'I can't do sales' [but in fact] what they can't do is marketing,' says [Doug D'Aubrey](#), managing director of business advisers Executive Training and Consultancy.



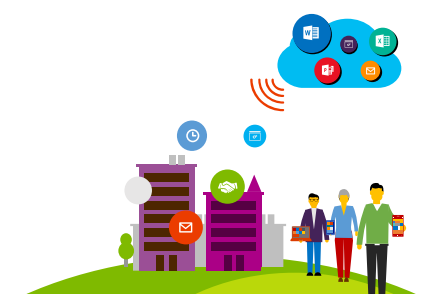
The problem is, without a tried and tested way of connecting to customers, you have no way of maintaining or increasing sales. Marketing fills the funnel with prospects, and without it, sales can be an unwinnable game.

Marketing seems intangible to most businesses, more of an art than a science, and the results appear arbitrary and difficult to track back to specific actions.

As attendee Beatriz Garcia-Martinez of [Securelybe](#) says, 'when you start something you need consistency, you need to know what you're getting into and it's time and learning. Developing a business takes up so much time that you need to handpick where you're going to put your sales and advertising actions.'

With the rise of digital media, your customers have become more accessible than ever but they're also more diffuse than ever. What you need to know is how to find the right customers in the first place and ensure the right customers can find you too.

And that's what we hope this ebook will help you do.



Talking your language

As usual, we were in listening mode at our mini summit. So we invited some guest experts to converse about connecting with customers.



[Matthew Stibbe](#), CEO and writer-in-chief at [Articulate Marketing](#).

Matthew is a serial entrepreneur, so he not only knows marketing, but also understands the pains and pleasures of running a small business from first-hand experience.

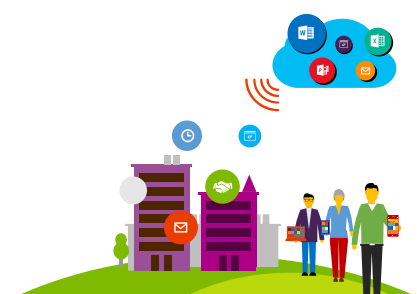
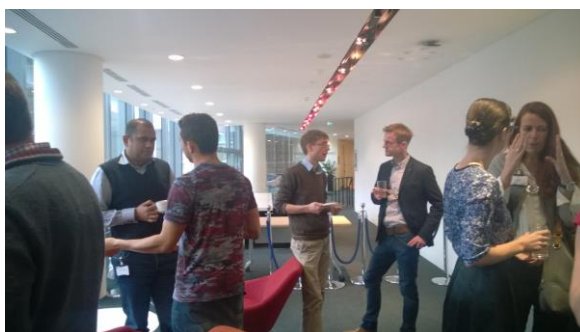


[Nadya Morozova](#) is director of business development for EMEA at GoDaddy.

According to its [website](#), GoDaddy is the world's leading domain name registrar. They also offer a user-friendly website builder, affordable hosting, security tools and more.

And of course, some of the most pertinent insights came from our attendees. Here's a little bit about them:

- Most were business-to-business services providers
- Most have a social media presence, with ten having a company Facebook page, nine a LinkedIn company page and five a Pinterest profile
- Five were already actively working to improve their search engine ranking
- Only three have held events to try and get closer to customers



The story of you

Start at the beginning. What's your story? Who are you and why should anyone be interested in what you do?

Find your why



Matthew Stibbe talked about the need to 'find your tribe': the people that will have an emotional or instinctive attraction to what your business is about. Start by figuring out your 'why'.

[Simon Sinek explains](#) that your 'why' is what's left after you strip away what you do and how you do it. It's the purpose behind your business; what drives you to do what you do and informs the way you do it.

[Seth Godin](#) calls it your 'purple cow': the thing that makes you different, that makes you too good to ignore. It's not an easy thing to define, but once you have it, it's an incredibly powerful marketing tool and acts as a beacon to your ideal customers.

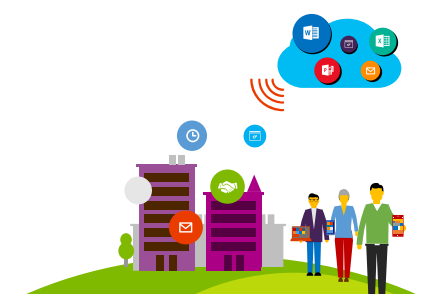
Put it out there

Once you have your story, you have to tell it. First off, develop a [tone of voice framework](#). This covers tone, language, viewpoint and the audience you're talking to. It creates a sense of consistency across all your communication with customers and should encapsulate your 'why'.

Next set up your website so you have a place to tell your story from and prove you are 'too cool to ignore,' as Nadya Morozova puts it. Be authentic and human: people relate much better to the foibles and flaws of real people than the polished perfection of carefully crafted pitches.

Hopefully the way you tell it will be powerful, genuine and different enough that you won't have to advertise or ask. Customers will be drawn to you.

As your business grows, this emphasis should shift so that you are telling your story through your customers. In other words, use reviews and testimonials that champion your customers' successes to reveal how your story contributed to that success.



The profile of a perfect match



Making a connection is much easier when you know where your customers are, what they want to talk about and how. 'Don't skimp on the research – you need to know who you're talking to,' says attendee [Chandreyi Saha](#).

The power of personas

Personas are more than an industry, job title or demographic that you're chasing. They're fully rounded characters that reveal how your ideal customers think, act and make decisions. Talk to your customers, look at the sites and publications they frequent for advice and scour social media to build up your buyer persona.

You're looking for common pain points, demographic details, level of education and responsibilities. Even if you sell direct to consumers, your product is often solving a problem or need, so tap into the experience of that problem.

You may have more than one persona that you're targeting. That's fine, but keep them to a minimum so you can really fine-tune your marketing efforts.

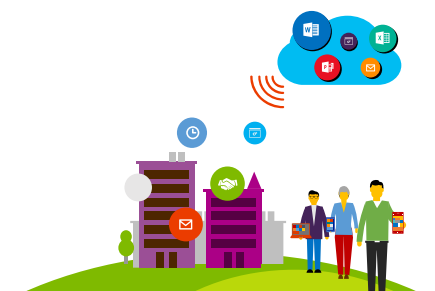
Delve a little deeper

Personas are a great starting point, but as you develop your website and marketing content, you can begin to get more insights about your customers. [Bing](#) and [Google](#) Webmaster tools tell you the keywords that people are already using to find your site. What are they coming to you for? Can you answer the questions they're asking, or have you positioned yourself to the wrong people?

Attendee experience

[Rupert Davey](#) of CTM explained how a little while after setting up their blog, they saw a spike in traffic for a post on inserting PDFs into Word documents.

'We're now expanding that into a how-to section,' says Rupert. 'It demonstrates what clients actually want and are looking for.'



A blog is a great marketing tool for bringing people to your site, showing off your expertise and adding to the telling of your story. But by monitoring which posts get the most visits and shares, you can also discover what most interests your customers, and which area of expertise offers them the most value.

Finally, once you start tracking behaviour on your website and capturing leads, be sure to put that information to good use. Say a visitor lingered on a particular product page or abandoned a shopping cart: follow up with a targeted email to try and close that sale. Nadya refers to them as 'bounceback emails', which explain what's important or beneficial about the product or service the customer was looking at and then offers an associated offer.

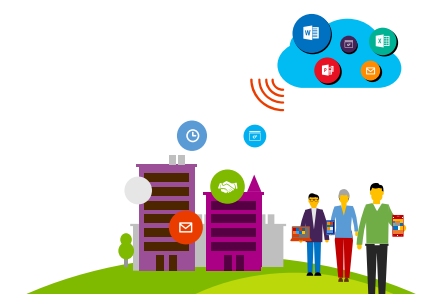


Extend your reach

Get customers to connect with you

You know who your customers are and you're telling them your story through your website. But how do you get them to your site in the first place?

1. Quality content. 'Empower your customers with information,' says attendee Vikram Shah. Offer your expertise for free on your blog, answer commonly asked questions and address persona pain points. Offer more valuable content like ebooks and white papers in return for information like name and email address so that you can then establish a two-way connection.
2. Events. Chat to real people and offer your expertise. Online is great, but nothing beats face-to-face. [Eventbrite](#) is an easy way to set up your own event or find good things to attend that might also appeal to the customers you want to meet.
3. Listings websites. Several attendees have had success with listings websites, such as Yelp and Yell, and many are free. Depending on your business type, they can help you come up on searches that your website would struggle to beat the ranking competition on.



Know where to go

To start laying the right trails to your site you need to find out where your customers hang out. Once you find your customer communities and begin to engage with them, you'll find customers turn to you solve their problems (with your product or service) because they have come to know and trust you.

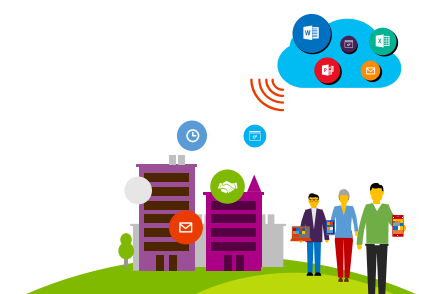
Be warned though. Going out and joining communities on or offline shouldn't be about naked self-promotion. It's about putting your business in the right context.

- Social media. Only target sites your customers are likely to frequent. For a wedding cake maker that would be Pinterest. But for an accountant, it's probably more likely to be LinkedIn.
- Speak and listen. Promote interesting, relevant, useful content and do it regularly. 'Get into a cadence of engaging,' suggests Nadya. Respond to people and pay attention to your sales prospects. Finally, be sure to drive people to your homepage or offer them another action. You're there to build connections after all.
- Email. Email marketing is important. Unlike direct mail, most emails are at least scanned or sorted, if not read. Email isn't dead, 'it's de facto,' says Nadya. 'You wouldn't expect your favourite band to ring you about their next tour, or Gordon Ramsey to text you about his new book. But you would expect an email.' Send emails from a professional account and test every email you send.
- Press coverage. Be useful, be relevant, be available. These are the golden rules to get noticed by journalist. Try to build relationships with a few key journalists that are influential in your customer community and sign up to [Help a Reporter Out](#) to offer up and publicise your expertise.

Attendee experience

San Sharma set up a private Tumblr website for [Jemima Kiss](#), head of technology at The Guardian. They sent her a password and a link to [forjemimakish.com](#) and the site contained press information and pictures.

It was different. It was engaging. It was personal. And it broke through the noise.



Paying your way



Sometimes you have to pay to reach your customers. It's best to start with small experiments in multiple avenues, then shut down those that don't produce good results and feed their budget back into the ones that are doing well until you have two or three top-performing marketing channels.

Some of your options include:

- PR. Dan Roberts [from BananaBerry](#) uses PR that pinpoints those most likely to buy from him by getting featured in editorials and interviews in industry publications. 'We've focused on who could buy from us and worked on getting into the minds of those people,' says Dan.
- Online advertising. Targeting too many keywords can be pricey, but online ads are useful for promoting a particular product or targeting a specific geography. One attendee found that back in 2006 when he was selling specific lighting products, most of his business came from online ads. Now the business proposition has shifted to offer design and support, so the business no longer matches a specific product search and he has found online advertising has become less effective as a result.
- Radio and press advertising. Don't forget old-fashioned media. Radio advertising, for example, can maintain a level of awareness about your business. As with any other channel, just be sure to regularly measure and analyse its effectiveness.

Don't just get noticed, get engaged

You've found your customers and they've found you, but don't stop there. Engage and convert.

Make sure that wherever your content is hosted, there's another way to engage with your business. Give them an action to do next. For example, visit our website for more information; connect with our Yammer group; sign up for a free trial; enter our competition.

'Open a door and ask questions,' says Beatriz Garcia-Martinez. Follow up, offer more, lead them through the sales funnel and keep them engaged up until and after they become a customer.



Improve your credibility

Finally, the best way to encourage customers to connect with you is to establish yourself as credible, trustworthy and knowledgeable. Build trust and you'll get client recommendations and attention in your customer communities.

Give away your knowledge for free

Prove your expertise for free. Attendees gave several examples of how they'd done this:

- Publish an ebook
- Attend and speak at an industry event
- Write informative blog posts
- Guest post on another's blog
- Write an editorial in an industry magazine
- Become a regular contributor to a network such as a LinkedIn Group

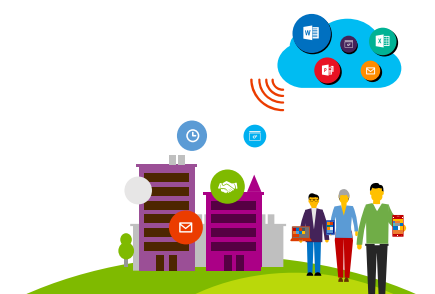
The secret is not to sell, but to simply be informative and useful.

Show don't tell

Matthew Stibbe recommends open book project management as a marketing tool. It promotes trust and transparency and encourages more engagement from your customers. It also proves you do what you say.

Offer fast and reliable customer support and get proactive about resolving bad reviews and complaints. Again prove your worth, don't just boast about it.

Get customers to provide quotes, testimonials and reviews. Don't be British about it – just come out and ask. If you've got a good business, you'll likely get a good review. Beatriz Garcia-Martinez even went so far as to hire a former customer as a walking, talking testimonial.



Keep your site visitors secure

Nadya talked about website security, and specifically SSL certificates. These offer a business identity check and prove to your customers that your site is run by a legitimate business. Deploying SSL certificates across your site also encrypts any information exchanged between your visitors and your site server, better proving you value their custom.

Once you have SSL certificates you can display Trust Marks on your site, and Nadya recommends also adding any industry accreditations or payment methods that you accept: 'wear your badges,' as she says. For more information on SSL certificates you can visit the [GoDaddy](#) website (although there are of course other certificate authorities to choose from).

Top tech tips and useful resources

It's hard to include all the useful information that came out of our mini summit in one little ebook, but we didn't want you to miss out, so here's a condensed list of the top technologies and tips that emerged during the event.

- [Sidekick](#) tells you when someone opens and clicks on the links in your emails so helps you track client relationships.
- [Heatmap](#) shows you where visitors are clicking most on your site and helps you figure out the most popular parts.
- [Seth Godin](#), [Enterprise Nation](#) and [MarketingProfs](#) are great sources of information and advice
- Keep a watch on [MeetUp](#) and [Eventbrite](#) for networking events, groups and to promote your own events.
- [Fancy](#) shows really well how companies display their products. It's similar to Instagram, but for professionals.
- [Buffer](#) lets you schedule you social media posts all on one go, then publishes them through the day.
- [MailChimp](#) or other email automation providers are good for setting up workflows to nurture leads if you're not quite ready for full-blown marketing automation like [Marketo](#) or [HubSpot](#).
- If you have a bricks and mortar store, register on Bing and Google maps.



How Microsoft helps you connect to customers

And of course, there are a few things that Microsoft can do to aid your quest for customers.

An [Office 365 subscription](#), for example, gives you everything you need to get going:

- A reputable, business email address
- The ability to quickly and easily create and [launch a website](#)
- Access [to Lync for online meetings](#), screen sharing, video calls and even remote support
- [Yammer](#) lets you set up a private social networking group for your customers to let them connect and help each other. (They'll tend to share the same pain points after all).

And if you're a little bigger, Microsoft Dynamics offers [great CRM](#) and [social listening](#) tools to help you keep on top of your lead nurturing and customer relationships.



To get more tips and insights, look for our hashtag #ModernBiz on Twitter.

Join our [Talking Business Yammer group](#) and be kept in the loop for future networking events as well.

