

When your marketing freeway becomes a carpark

Written by Warren Harmer

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19 September 2014. Not so long ago Yellow Pages was the place for small businesses to advertise. Remember those thick books that were so heavy you could use them as a door stopper? Ten years ago I had clients spending \$80,000 per year in those tomes. For that investment, you had the privilege of fighting for attention with a small box or bold line advert, against multinationals with serious budgets and big colour ads. It was the marketing equivalent of traffic gridlock: expensive and slow but nowhere else to go. Eventually we cancelled yellow pages because every new customer from that source was a net loss.

Enter Google Adwords, who opened up a new marketing freeway: barely any traffic, fast, so much cheaper and the jobs were profitable. Advertising budgets were gleefully slashed, new metrics were available and we had a lot more control. As the months and years passed, more traffic started using the new freeway, costs crept up and (sure enough) the freeway is now a carpark. The Google budget is now pushing the old Yellow Pages budget so we are looking for new sustainable alternatives.

For small business marketers, this is a pattern that happens over and over. Exciting new marketing channels open up a new marketing freeway that gradually get more and more crowded until they become gridlock. In the end costs challenge profitability and messages get lost in the noise. Facebook has reached saturation too, with too many promotions and questionable returns. Traditional forms of marketing reached gridlock a long time ago.

It would be easy to throw your hands in the air, but vigilance is essential to push through and keep your marketing evolving. Getting back to marketing basics is key to success (and sanity: a strong brand, strong relationships and a real understanding of both market position and client base. Planning all of your activities proactively and knowing your returns are key elements, since ultimately you will incorporate the gridlocked channels in your marketing mix

To get yourself moving again, consider these:

- * build a community around your business in every way that you can, incorporating new technology and old fashioned customer service
- * work on developing your brand so it cuts through the noise and your market know and feel your values
- * build marketing value into your product by making your offering rave-worthy
- * use as many cheap and free methods as you can, so you can afford to be present in as many channels as possible
- * analyse your marketing spend and return with great diligence - there is great power in making decision armed with information
- * watch the trends - they will keep changing..
- * don't be reactive - make a plan and stick to it
- * keep learning, so you know what is happening in the marketplace and how your business should respond to it
- * get help if you need it, but be knowledgeable yourself so dont get ripped off
- * be wary of clever salespeople offering 'instant' success or seemingly unbelievable results.

The next marketing freeway is under construction right now, even if we don't know what it is yet. Be ready to take that exit when it opens, because first movers get a better ride for a while.

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In the long term, your big picture marketing will see you to success.hen

‘Small business insights with Dr Warren Harmer’

Dr. Warren Harmer

Business planner and small business consultant

I am a cultivator of great small businesses. I have a Ph.D in science but fell into the world of small business by accident and discovered my passion. My experience owning and consulting to small businesses now spans over 17 years. I like to solve problems using a scientific approach; looking objectively at businesses to see what is happening and applying first principles. In small business, outcomes reign over theory.

Practical, hands-on advice for small business owners is sorely lacking, since most ‘experts’ have never owned one. Most business information is targeted to big business and their employees.

My objective is to offer instructive, ‘how to’ information to make business ownership easier, less stressful and more enjoyable.



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