



6 TRENDS THAT SMALL BUSINESS SHOULD FOLLOW

Staying informed on the latest trends in small business is crucial to maintaining relevance in the ever-evolving world of commerce.

2016 is a promising year for small business owners and entrepreneurs. The development of modern business technology gives small businesses the opportunity to develop low-cost, enterprise-quality products and services.

BY ADAM TOREN

Social media, Internet marketing and ecommerce empower your business to reach potential customers in untapped markets all over the world. Staying informed on the latest trends in small business is crucial to maintaining relevance in the ever-evolving world of commerce.

Here are six small business trends you should be aware of in 2016.

1. Millennials

With its oldest members now entering their early 30s, the millennial generation is reinventing the way businesses manage the workplace and its employees. A report published by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce describes the social and economic impact posed by the people born between 1982 and 1999.

Millennials demand comprehensive leadership and opportunities for growth within every position they fulfill. Transparency, collaboration and a seamless work-life balance are vital not only to their comfort, but also to their success within the workplace. Millennials also effortlessly adopt new technologies as



they've announced, therefore erasing the awkward adjustment phase every previous generation of offices has endured after a computer and equipment update.

In regards to millennials' relationship with technology, brands and services — "what used to be a one-way conversation is now multifaceted, 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week dialogue between brands and their customers." In return for improved products and services, 86% of millennials are willing to provide insight on their consumer habits and decision-making processes, often through the use of online surveys.

For entrepreneurs from the millennial generation, the ability to rapidly spread information is key to successful marketing. Millennials are also more conscious about the social responsibility exhibited by their employees or employers. In an effort to maintain that impeccable work-life balance, they actively seek workers and workplaces with shared ethics and ideals.

And because millennials place so much value on quality and ethics, they prefer to use technology to take care of the busywork — online meeting and web conferencing services such as ClickMeeting and Huddle (both virtual communication platforms), as well as workflow optimization and project management platforms such as Memit and WorkflowMax are just a few tools millennials rely on for collaboration and productivity in the workplace.

2. Web presence

The availability of Internet-based technology gives small businesses more control over brand development, marketing and customer engagement. While tech start-ups traditionally benefit most from these services, Internet tools provide affordable and attainable

counted print-out shipping label services and other valuable online resources are available to Internet users for free or for minimal cost.

Business owners can also choose to outsource labor they struggle with or don't have time for. 99 Dollar Social posts fresh content to a business's social-media pages daily, and Hootsuite delivers advanced social-media optimization tools like the ability to schedule posts across multiple platforms within one unified dashboard.

All-in-one services like Infusionsoft, which generates personalized marketing software for small businesses, and Yodle, which maintains a business's online presence, help small businesses with everything from appointment-setting to social media.

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solutions for small businesses in every industry.

The Independent We Stand (IWS) campaign reports that 97% of Internet users conduct online research on local products and services before committing to a purchase. Reviews and testimonials, a business's website and other public information play important roles not only in a customer's decision to buy a product but also in whether they share that product with others online.

Despite this, Local Search Association Insider (LSA Insider) reports that nearly half of small business owners' websites are not accessible via mobile, and Hibu reports that 45 percent of small businesses don't have a website at all.

Now is the best time to make a change. Small business owners on a budget can build clean websites with programs like Wix and Squarespace, which even support online storefronts and integrated messaging services. Various social-media platforms, dis-

3. Ecommerce

Online storefronts, which allow for the movement of electronic commerce, draw Internet users to the Web in masses. Retail spending is on the rise in the U.S., and shipping fees are driving factors in customers' decision processes.

When presented with offers for free shipping, 58% of consumers say they are willing to add items to their virtual shopping carts to meet the free-shipping threshold. Simply offering a perk for shopping at your online store can mean more money in your pocket.

You can create and develop your business's ecommerce platform with a vast selection of Internet tools, such as Magneto and Shopify. 3dcart is a great solution for small business owners who need to develop an online storefront on a tight budget. Vend, a leading point of sale system, generates a cloud-based mobile optimized online store for your business in a matter of minutes.

Other developing areas of ecom-

merce include mobile commerce — or mcommerce — as well as social e-commerce. Because many consumers can now make secure purchases using their smartphones, mobile devices are becoming the most used platform for looking up information on goods and services. According to a report conducted by Forrester, mobile payments in the U.S. alone will generate \$142 billion.

4. EMV payment security

EMV, or “Europay, MasterCard, and Visa,” is vital to business security in 2016. The national migration to EMV payment standards (popularly recognized as microchip debit and credit cards) is virtually guaranteed to safeguard small businesses and their customers against fraud over the next year. As of October 2015, merchants in the U.S. are liable for any fraudulent transactions processed without EMV-enabled terminals. The government-mandated requirement was expedited as a result of large-scale data breaches and an influx of counterfeit cards in the U.S.

Protecting the security of your business and its customers should be your number-one priority. According to Creditcards.com, while only 25 percent of U.S. debit cards are currently chip-equipped, and an estimated 12 million point-of-sale terminals still need to be upgraded to support EMV, small businesses accepting antiquated swipe and sign payments are “held 100% liable for claims of fraud or wrong-doing” according to Finance Magnets.

If your business still accepts face-to-face transactions without EMV, not only are losing credibility among your customers, but you’re facing some serious

financial risk as well.

5. Online lending

A Harvard Business School paper titled “The State of Small-Business Lending” analyzes one of the most significant trends for small businesses — online lending. This innovative trend in small-business lending is driven by the “simplicity and convenience of the application process, speed of delivery of capital and a greater focus on customer service.” While traditional banks view small business lending as high-risk, many online lenders award funding exclusively to small-business startups.

A few different online lending models are available for small businesses. Peer-to-peer lending platforms connect institutional investors to your small business through services such as Lending Club and Prosper. Fundera and Biz2Credit connect borrowers with alternative and traditional lenders through comprehensive online marketplaces.

As a result of the Jumpstart Our Business Startups (JOBS) Act of 2012, the trend in online lending has shifted toward investment crowdfunding opportunities. You can launch your own campaign through a variety of popular crowdfunding websites, including AngelList, Indi-

egogo, Kickstarter and Fundable.

6. Business Intelligence

Business intelligence (BI) software gathers fragmented data sets and translates it into information you can use to improve your business. BI has historically been used by large enterprises to curate, store and visualize what’s known as big data. The growth of Internet technology and big-data solutions make it possible for small businesses to take advantage of BI solutions.

Leading business dashboards like Cyfe deliver advanced analytics, monitoring and tracking your business’s data in real-time, through a dashboard which integrate with almost every platform. This includes marketing automation, sales, search engine optimization and even a dashboard for social media analytics. Small businesses require more simplified solutions to BI than those required by large enterprises.

With so many changes coming to the entrepreneurial world in 2016, standing apart from other small businesses can be both exciting and challenging. Most of the services listed in this article offer free trials and tiered pricing plans to help your business get its foot in the door. ❖

INSIDER PROFILE

Adam Toren is a serial entrepreneur, mentor, investor and co-founder of YoungEntrepreneur.com. He is co-author, with his brother Matthew, of “Kidpreneurs” and “Small Business, BIG Vision: Lessons of How to Dominate Your Market from Self-Made Entrepreneurs Who Did It Right” (Wiley). He’s based in Phoenix, Ariz.

