

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

MARKETING

that

WORKS

Build your customer profile, your core message, your channel strategy, and your budget – chapter by chapter.

BY JODI MOREL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR BUSINESS OWNERS

MARKETING *that* WORKS

*Build your customer profile, your core message,
your channel strategy, and your budget – chapter
by chapter.*

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DISCLAIMER

The information in this book reflects the author's experience working with small business owners. Every business is different. The frameworks and recommendations are starting points for your own thinking, not guarantees of any specific outcome. Apply judgment.

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How to Use This Book

Most marketing books are written to be read. This one is written to be used.

Each chapter teaches you something important about how modern marketing works and then immediately asks you to apply it to your own business. The activities are not optional exercises at the back of the book. They are the point. By the time you finish the last chapter, you will have built something real: a clear picture of your customer, a core message, an understanding of how people find and evaluate businesses like yours, a channel strategy that fits your market and your budget, and a practical 90-day plan.

That is the goal. Not more theory. A working foundation.

How the book is structured

The first half focuses on the environment, the customer, and the message. You cannot choose the right channels until you know who you are talking to and what you are trying to say. The second half moves into the channels themselves – radio, email, content, social media, AI, and search – and helps you decide which ones belong in your strategy.

The final chapters are about money and time. How to think about budget without a formula that fits everyone. How to build a 90-day plan that is realistic rather than aspirational.

A few things to know before you begin

You do not need to read this in one sitting. Each chapter is designed to stand on its own, but the activities build on each other. If you skip an activity, the next one will still make sense, but you will be missing a piece. Write in this book if it is printed, or keep a companion document open if it is digital. The activities require actual writing, not just reading and nodding.

There is no single right answer to any of the activity questions. The goal is clarity about your specific business, your specific customer, and your specific situation. Another business owner doing the same activities will come up with completely different answers. That is exactly how it should work.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY THROUGH EVERY CHAPTER

Does this make it easier or harder for someone to trust us?

Apply that question to everything. Your website. Your ads. Your follow-up. Your reviews. Your social presence. Your intake process. It will show you more than any audit or agency report.

Now let's begin.

PART ONE

THE GROUND YOU'RE STANDING ON

Before you can market well, you need to understand the environment, the customer, and the gap between two states. Trust is no longer a brand idea. It is part of conversion.

1

CHAPTER ONE

The Trust Shift

A large, bold, blue letter 'W' graphic that serves as a visual anchor for the first paragraph.

When information travelled more slowly, there were checks and balances. Editors filtered stories. Broadcasters were tied to reputations. Local media had names, faces, and communities attached to them. Information was carefully choreographed. Facts required fact-checking.

Misinformation through trusted media channels meant lost jobs, lawsuits, and the erosion of trust – the very currency those channels relied upon.

That environment is gone.

Today, information moves instantly, constantly, and from everywhere at once. News, opinion, advertising, reviews, AI-generated content, influencer commentary, and social posts all compete in the same stream. Authority is fragmented. Context is thin. Skepticism is high.

And your customer is navigating all of it before they ever call you.

They hear your ad, check your reviews, scan your website, compare competitors, ask friends, read comments, and make decisions in minutes. They are not simply asking, “What do you sell?” They are asking, “Can I trust you?”

This is not just a media problem. It is a business problem.

For years, marketing strategy focused heavily on attention: more reach, more impressions, more traffic, more visibility. Attention still matters, but in a low-trust environment it is no longer enough. A business can get noticed and still fail. It can generate clicks and still lose the sale. It can attract interest and still create hesitation.

Modern buyers do not respond to visibility alone. They respond to credibility.

That credibility is shaped by far more than advertising. It is built through reviews, consistency, tone, follow-up, proof, and clarity. Trust is no longer a soft brand idea. It is part of conversion.

There is an old truth in media that explains all of this better than any trend report.

The medium is the message. The channel through which information travels does not just carry content – it shapes how that content is believed. A story told by a trusted local broadcaster lands differently than the same story posted by an anonymous account. An ad

placed beside credible journalism borrows some of that credibility. A recommendation from a friend carries weight that a sponsored post cannot manufacture.

This is why the history of social media is really a story about trust being built and then systematically dismantled.

Social media arrived as something genuinely different. It was friends. It was family. It was the neighbour recommending the plumber and the colleague sharing a restaurant. That early environment carried real trust precisely because it was personal, reciprocal, and not yet built around performance or profit. When a friend posted something, you believed it because you knew them.

Then the platforms discovered that attention could be measured, amplified, and sold.

Influencers replaced friends. Sponsored content replaced recommendations. Algorithms replaced organic connection. Brands moved in. Advertisers followed. The feed that once felt like a conversation became a commercial environment optimized for engagement rather than truth. Trust did not disappear overnight – it eroded gradually, deal by deal, post by post, as the environment changed from something personal into something monetized.

And then AI arrived and accelerated the collapse.

Now anyone can generate polished content at scale. A convincing post, a credible-sounding review, a fluent article, a persuasive video – all of it can be produced without a person behind it, without expertise, without accountability. The old signals people once used to judge credibility no longer work reliably in a social feed. Fluency is not expertise. Polish is not truth. Volume is not authority.

The result is that social media, as a trust environment, has weakened significantly – and that shift has consequences for every business that has built its marketing strategy around it.

Here is the part many marketers are slow to recognize: traditional media has not just survived this collapse. It has benefited from it.

Radio, regulated broadcasting, and established print still operate inside structures that social media abandoned. There are gatekeepers. There are editorial standards. There are rules about what can be said and consequences for saying it irresponsibly. There is a higher

barrier to entry — not everyone can simply buy a radio schedule or place an ad beside trusted journalism without meeting real standards. These were once seen as limitations. In a low-trust environment, they are advantages.

When everything feels equally unverified, a medium with built-in accountability becomes more credible, not less. The listener who trusts the station trusts, to some degree, what appears on it. That borrowed credibility is real and it is something no social feed can reliably offer anymore.

The medium is the message. And right now, for businesses that want to be believed, the medium matters more than it has in years.

Now AI is accelerating the problem. In a world where content can be generated instantly and persuasion can be automated, customers are becoming more sensitive to what feels generic, inflated, or hollow. Humanity, clarity, and proof are becoming more valuable, not less.

This is the shift many businesses still underestimate.

We are not operating in a marketplace where attention automatically creates trust. We are operating in one where trust determines whether attention becomes action — whether the click becomes a call, whether the impression becomes a customer, whether the ad spend returns anything at all.

That is what this book is built around.

Your Trust Snapshot

Before you read another chapter, take an honest look at where your business stands right now. This is not about judgment. It is about knowing your starting point. Rate each area as honestly as you can.

PART A — RATE EACH AREA

- | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Our website clearly explains what we do and who we help | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| Our Google reviews are recent (within the last 3 months) | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| We have more than 15 Google reviews | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| We respond to reviews, including negative ones | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| Our follow-up after an inquiry is fast and human | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| Our advertising and our website sound like the same business | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| We have visible proof of our work (photos, testimonials, case studies) | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| Our business looks current and active online | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| Our messaging is specific rather than generic | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |
| Someone who has never heard of us could understand what we do in 30 seconds | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure | <input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist |

PART B — THREE HONEST ANSWERS

1. What do you think a stranger finds when they search your business name for the first time?

2. Where do you think you are losing customers you never hear from again?

3. If a competitor looked at your online presence right now, what would they feel confident about?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

2

CHAPTER TWO

Who You Are Actually Talking To

M

ost businesses think they know their customer. They can describe demographics without hesitation. They know the age range, the income level, the general location, the household type.

But demographics are not a customer. They are a category.

What makes marketing work is not knowing that your customer is a homeowner aged 35 to 55. It is knowing what that homeowner is worried about when they finally pick up the phone. It is knowing what they have tried before and why it didn't work. It is knowing what they are afraid of getting wrong. It is knowing what story they are already telling themselves before you enter the picture.

That is the customer worth understanding.

Most marketing fails not because the channel was wrong or the budget was too small. It fails because the message was aimed at a category instead of a person. It described a service instead of addressing a feeling. It talked about the business instead of speaking to the buyer.

The difference between a demographic and a real customer

A demographic is a filter. It narrows the field. It tells you roughly who is in the room.

A real customer profile tells you what that person is experiencing, what they want, what they fear, what they have already considered, and what would finally tip them toward action.

These are very different things, and they produce very different marketing.

A business selling home renovation services might know their customer is a homeowner between 40 and 65. That is useful to know. But the marketing that works is the kind that says: you have been putting this off because the last contractor left you with more problems than you started with. You want someone who will actually show up, communicate clearly, and finish what they started.

That message is not aimed at a demographic. It is aimed at a specific kind of frustration. And if you get it right, the person who feels that frustration will stop and pay attention in a way that a general message about quality service never produces.

Who is your best customer right now

One of the most useful exercises in marketing is to stop thinking about your average customer and start thinking about your best customer. Not the biggest account. Not the most profitable transaction. The customer who was easiest to serve, most satisfied with the outcome, most likely to refer others, and most aligned with the kind of work you actually do best.

That person is a signal. They tell you who your marketing should be speaking to.

If you can describe that person clearly – what they were experiencing before they found you, what mattered most to them, what concerns they had coming in, what made them finally reach out – you have the raw material for a message that resonates.

Psychographics matter more than demographics

Psychographics describe how a person thinks, what they value, what they fear, and what they aspire to. They are harder to measure than demographics, but they are far more useful for writing marketing that connects.

Your customer might value thoroughness over speed. They might be deeply skeptical of contractors because of past experience. They might make decisions slowly and want a lot of reassurance before committing. They might be embarrassed that they have waited so long to deal with a problem. They might be hoping to avoid a difficult conversation with a spouse about budget.

None of those things show up in a demographic profile. All of them should shape your messaging.

One customer, not every customer

Small businesses often resist specificity because they are afraid of narrowing their market. They worry that if they speak directly to one kind of customer, they will accidentally exclude another.

The opposite is usually true. Specific messaging is more resonant, not less. It makes the right people feel understood. And when people feel understood, they pay attention.

You can serve a wide range of customers and still market specifically. What you are describing is not the only person you will ever serve. It is the person whose problem you understand best, whose experience you can speak to most credibly, and who is most likely to recognize themselves in your message and take action.

YOUR TURN

Build Your Customer Profile

Think about your single best customer – the person or client who was the best fit for your business. Not necessarily the biggest. The best. Use them as the model for this exercise. Answer as specifically as you can.

THE BASICS

Who are they (general description, not just age): _____

Where do they live or work: _____

What stage of life or business are they in: _____

THEIR SITUATION BEFORE THEY FOUND YOU

1. What problem or frustration were they living with before they contacted you?

2. What had they already tried, and why hadn't it worked?

3. What were they afraid of getting wrong?

4. What finally made them take action and reach out?

WHAT THEY CARED ABOUT

5. What mattered most to them — speed, quality, trust, price, convenience, expertise?

6. What would have made them choose a competitor instead of you?

7. What did they say or feel after working with you?

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

8. How would they describe their problem to a friend? Write it in plain, everyday language — not your language, theirs.

9. What would they say about you to someone who asked for a recommendation?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

3

CHAPTER THREE

The Problem You Actually Solve

E

very business solves a problem. But most businesses describe their solution instead of naming the problem.

They lead with what they offer. They list services. They explain their process.

They describe their qualifications. And they wonder why the message doesn't land the way they expect it to.

The reason is simple. Customers do not start by thinking about solutions. They start by feeling a problem.

They feel behind. They feel overwhelmed. They feel embarrassed. They feel anxious. They feel like something in their life or their business is not working the way it should. They are not browsing a menu of services. They are living inside a frustration that they want resolved.

The business that can name that frustration clearly, in language that matches what the customer is actually feeling, earns attention that a service description never will.

The before and the after

One of the most useful ways to understand the problem you solve is to think in terms of before and after.

Before your customer finds you, what is their life like? What are they tolerating? What are they worried about? What is costing them time, money, energy, peace of mind, or confidence? What do they lie awake thinking about?

After they work with you, what has changed? What can they stop worrying about? What has been restored? What do they now have that they didn't before?

The gap between those two states is the problem you solve. And the clearer you can articulate that gap, the more powerful your marketing becomes.

Surface problem versus real problem

Most businesses solve two problems at once, and marketing tends to address only the first one.

The surface problem is the practical issue. The furnace is broken. The lawsuit needs a response. The books are a mess. The truck needs new brakes. The website looks outdated. These are real problems and your solution is real.

But beneath the surface problem is usually a deeper one. The fear of being cold and having no one respond. The anxiety of not knowing what legal exposure looks like. The shame of not having the finances under control. The worry that customers are silently judging the business. The frustration of watching competitors look more credible without clearly being better.

Marketing that speaks only to the surface problem is complete. Marketing that also touches the deeper problem is memorable.

You do not have to be heavy-handed about it. You do not have to manufacture emotion or dramatize the situation. You simply have to show that you understand what is actually at stake for the person in front of you.

Your solution is not your positioning

Many businesses make the mistake of using their solution as their positioning. We install furnaces. We do bookkeeping. We handle personal injury claims. We build websites.

These statements are accurate. They are not positioning.

Positioning is what makes your solution the obvious choice for a specific person with a specific problem. It answers the question: why you, over everyone else who does what you do?

That answer is almost never found in the service itself. It is found in how you deliver it, what you understand about the customer that others miss, the specific frustration you eliminate, the specific outcome you reliably produce.

The contractor who calls you back is not positioning on the service. They are positioning on the frustration every homeowner feels when contractors go silent. That is sharper, more memorable, and more convincing than any description of their work.

Specificity is a form of credibility

When a business is vague about the problem it solves, it sounds like every other business in its category. When it is specific, it sounds like it actually understands the customer's world.

Specificity requires courage. It means choosing a clear lane instead of trying to appeal to everyone at once. It means naming the exact frustration instead of speaking in generalities. It means sounding like an expert in one thing rather than a provider of many things.

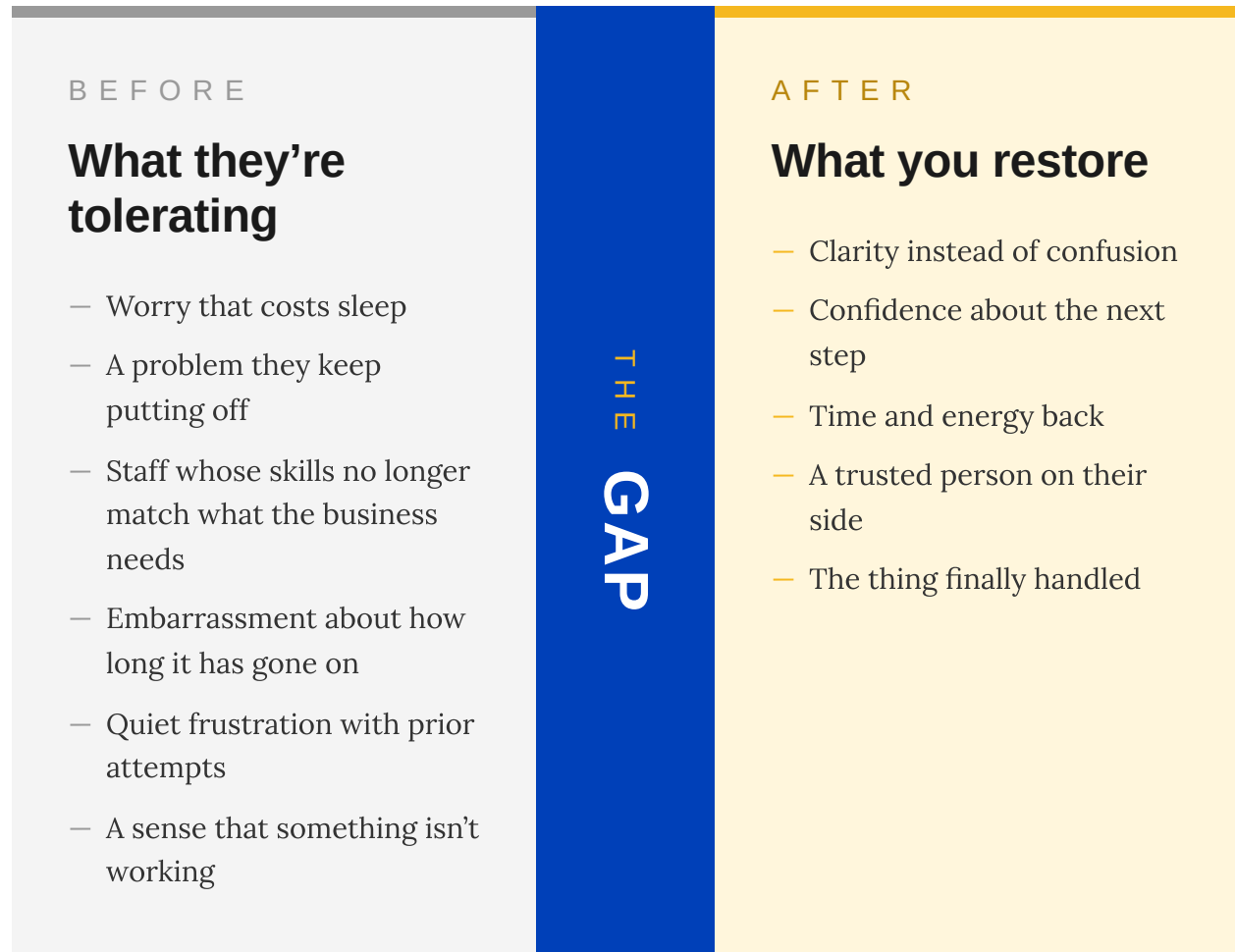
For small local businesses, specificity is a competitive advantage because most local competitors are not specific. They are general. They describe services and list qualifications and say things about quality and service that could belong to anyone.

The business that names the problem clearly stands apart from the noise.

FIGURE 3.1

The Problem You Actually Solve

The gap between two states is the problem your business resolves.



*The clearer you can articulate that gap, **the more powerful your marketing becomes.***

YOUR TURN

Define the Problem You Solve

This activity connects directly to your customer profile from Chapter Two. Use what you wrote there to help answer these questions.

- 1. What is the surface problem your customer comes to you with? Describe it in one or two plain sentences.**

- 2. What is the deeper problem underneath that? What are they actually worried about, embarrassed by, or afraid of?**

- 3. What does life look like BEFORE they work with you? Be specific and honest.**

- 4. What does life look like AFTER they work with you? What has changed, been restored, or been resolved?**

- 5. What do most businesses in your category get wrong about the customer's problem?**

6. Complete this sentence: We are the only business in our market that

7. Write one sentence that names the problem you solve in the customer's own language – not yours.

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

PART TWO

WHAT YOU'RE SAYING

A clear customer profile is only useful if it leads to a clear message. The next three chapters help you find the words your customer is already using, and turn them into something that sells.

4

CHAPTER FOUR

Why Story Still Sells

f information alone sold, every brochure would work.

Every detailed website would convert. Every product page filled with features would be irresistible. Every business that could explain itself clearly would win. But that is not how people actually decide. They decide through a mixture of logic, memory, emotion, timing, identity, trust, and the stories they tell themselves about what a purchase means.

People rarely buy a product or service in isolation. They buy what they believe that product or service will change. They imagine a future with less pressure, more clarity, better outcomes, restored confidence, smoother days, stronger results, or fewer regrets. They do not respond only to information. They respond to meaning.

That is where story becomes indispensable.

Researchers Woodside, Sood, and Miller established in their foundational work on narrative persuasion that story-driven communication creates stronger memory, greater emotional engagement, and more durable belief than feature-based messaging alone. People do not just remember a good story. They absorb it. It becomes part of how they think about the subject.

That finding has direct implications for how you market your business.

The difference between a claim and a story

A claim says: We provide excellent service.

A story says: When people call us in a panic, we answer the phone, explain what happens next, and help them feel less alone.

A claim says: We care about quality.

A story says: My father taught me to finish the part of the job no one else would ever see.

Claims ask to be believed. Stories make belief easier because they let the audience see the pattern behind the promise. They supply texture. They create a mental picture. They reveal motive. This is why so much marketing feels empty. It is filled with statements and almost devoid of lived detail.

The customer is already in the middle of a story

One of the most useful ideas in Donald Miller's StoryBrand framework is deceptively simple: the customer is the hero, not the brand. The business is the guide – the one who helps the hero solve their problem and reach the outcome they are seeking.

This matters because most businesses instinctively make themselves the centre of their own marketing. They talk about their founding story, their values, their achievements, their team. All of that may be true and even admirable. But the customer who does not yet know you is not looking for a brand to admire. They are living inside a problem they want resolved.

Good marketing enters the customer's story at the right moment. It names what they are experiencing, shows that you understand their situation, and positions your business as the thing that helps them move forward. The shift is subtle but powerful. You are no longer asking the customer to be interested in you. You are showing the customer that you are already interested in them.

Story signals character

Story is not a decorative layer added on top of the real business. It is one of the clearest ways a business reveals character.

What does the business notice? What does it care about? How does it speak about customers? Does it sound inflated and self-impressed, or grounded and useful? Does it make itself the hero, or does it understand the customer's struggle?

A good story does not merely communicate what you sell. It communicates how you see the world. That is one reason story and trust are so tightly linked. Story gives values a visible form.

Story builds memory across channels

People remember what they can picture. They remember tension, contrast, rhythm, voices, and moments that feel human. A memorable story gives the mind something to retrieve later.

That matters because most marketing works long after the first exposure. Someone hears your ad on the radio, sees your name in a search result three days later, mentions it to a spouse, and only then begins to take action. Story makes those later moments easier to connect. Without it, many businesses rely almost entirely on repetition. And as Roy Williams observed in his work on advertising and memory, repetition has power — but only if what is being repeated is worth remembering.

Story matters more now, not less

In a noisy environment where customers are overexposed to ads, posts, offers, headlines, and AI-generated content, story matters more because it forces specificity. It asks what changed, for whom, because of what, and why that matters. It strips away inflated language and demands something more concrete.

Story is not a soft skill. It is a discipline. And in a market full of businesses that sound interchangeable, the one that tells a true and specific story about a real customer's real problem stands apart from everything around it.

A story everyone already knows

To see how a story arc actually maps to a customer journey, it helps to use one almost everyone has already absorbed. Consider *The Wizard of Oz*.

Dorothy is dropped into a strange land. She didn't ask for this. She has accidentally caused a problem (a witch is dead under her house), she is overwhelmed, and she wants to go home. Notice that the story never makes her stand on stage and announce her problem. The audience feels it before anyone names it. That is exactly how good marketing works. Your customer recognizes their own situation in your story before you ever say *here is what we do*.

Then someone credible arrives. Glinda doesn't fix anything for Dorothy. She acknowledges what just happened, names it, and points the way. She gives Dorothy something concrete — the slippers and a direction — and sends her off down the road.

This is your role as the business. You are not the hero of your customer's story. You are the guide. You have done this before. You can be trusted. And you hand the customer a plan.

What happens next is the part most marketing misses.

The road is not just a road

Walking the yellow brick road, Dorothy meets the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. These are not strangers. They are not separate people whose problems she has to solve along the way. They are versions of Dorothy herself.

The Scarecrow thinks he isn't smart enough. That is the part of Dorothy that wonders if she is smart enough to find her way home. The Tin Man feels nothing – rusted in place, avoiding the work in front of him. That is the part of Dorothy that has gone quiet, not because she doesn't feel the problem, but because feeling it for too long has made her look the other way. The Cowardly Lion is afraid to commit, afraid to be seen trying, afraid to fail in public. That is the part of Dorothy that wants to turn back.

Every customer brings these same three parts to a decision. The doubt. The avoidance. The fear. They show up at different points on the road and you, as the guide, will recognize different ones in different moments.

A customer who has been calling around to four contractors before they reached you? You are talking to the Scarecrow. They are second-guessing whether they are even capable of choosing the right one. Your job is not to oversell. Your job is to make the next step feel obvious and survivable.

A customer who has lived with the same broken thing for three years? You are talking to the Tin Man. They have lived with the problem so long they have chosen to avoid it. The work is not to scare them. The work is to make addressing the problem feel manageable again – to lower the weight of looking at it.

A customer who has said yes but keeps delaying the start date? You are talking to the Lion. They are afraid of being seen trying and failing. Predictable communication, simple steps, and steady follow-through are how courage gets easier.

The reveal

When Dorothy finally reaches the Wizard, she discovers there is no magic. The Wizard cannot do what she came for. What she needed was already with her – the slippers were on her feet the whole time, and the courage, heart, and clarity she went looking for were already inside her too. The journey, with the help of the guide, is what revealed them.

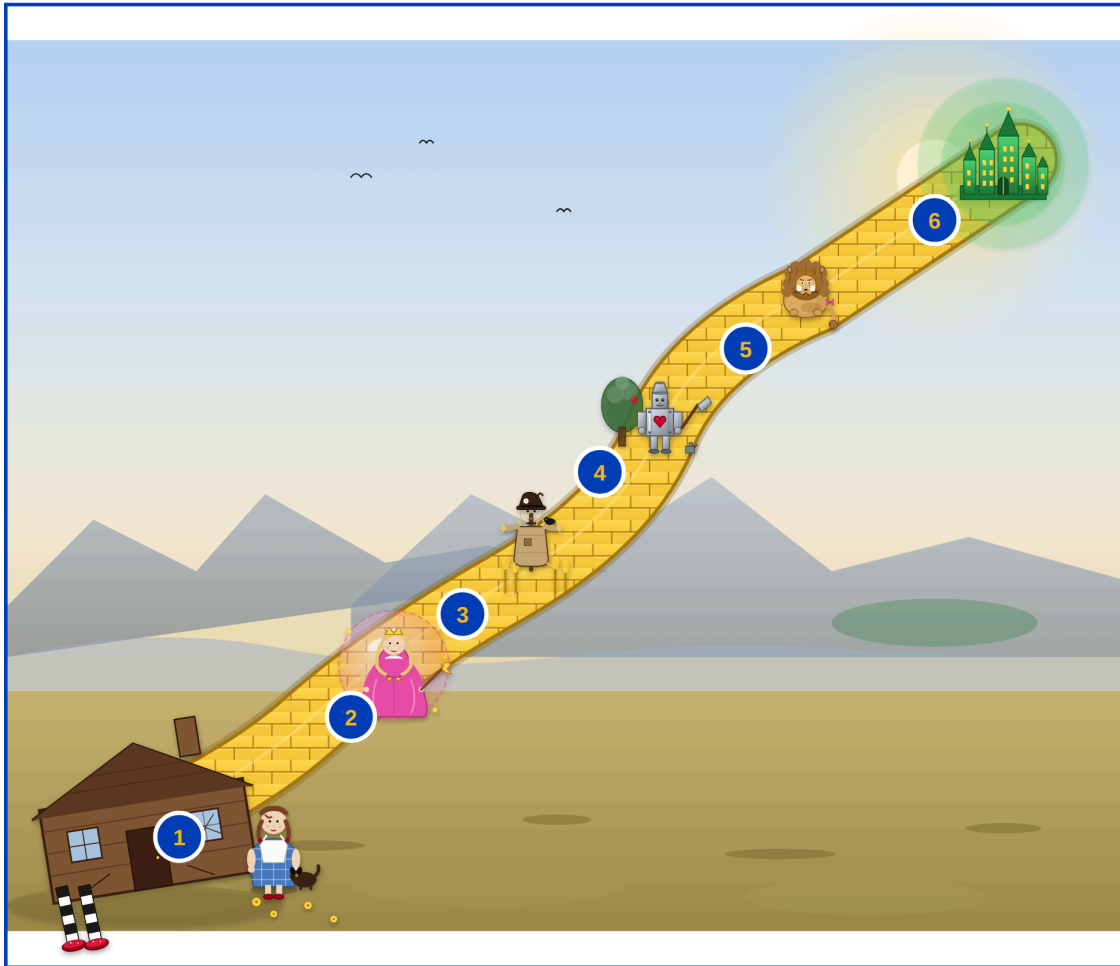
Honest marketing works the same way. It does not promise transformation. It tells the customer the truth: working with you will not save them, but it will give them what they need to do the thing themselves. The outcome is not “they were rescued.” The outcome is “they finally got it done – and they trust you for being the steady presence along the way.”

That is the kind of story that sells. Not because it is dramatic. Because it is true.

FIGURE 4.1

The Customer Journey, Told as a Story

Dorothy's journey down the yellow brick road follows the same arc every customer travels – from a problem they didn't expect to an outcome they couldn't reach alone.



1. The Problem

MUNCHKINLAND

The customer lands in a situation they didn't ask for. The problem isn't stated – it's felt.

2. The Guide

GLINDA

Your business. Acknowledges the problem, hands over a plan, points the way. Doesn't walk the road for them.

3. Their Doubt

SCARECROW

The part of the customer that wonders "am I informed enough to make this decision?"

4. Their Avoidance

TIN MAN

The part that has lived with the problem so long they have chosen to avoid it.

5. Their Fear

COWARDLY LION

The part that is afraid to commit, to be seen trying, to fail in public.

6. The Outcome

EMERALD CITY & HOME

No magic. The truth is they had what they needed all along – the journey is what revealed it.

How to read this: The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion are not separate characters Dorothy meets on the road. They are parts of Dorothy – the same parts every customer brings to a decision. Your job as the guide is to recognize which one you are talking to in any given moment.

What is your story?

Now think about your business through the same frame.

Where does your customer start? Not the moment they call you – the moment before that, when something in their situation first stopped feeling right. What does that look like for the people you serve?

Who is the equivalent of Glinda in your story? Are you arriving with acknowledgement and a plan, or are you arriving with a sales pitch?

Which version of the customer is most likely to be standing in front of you when they first reach out? The one second-guessing themselves. The one who has been avoiding it. The one afraid to commit. Each one needs a slightly different first response from you.

And what is the truth at the end of your road? What is the honest outcome a customer can expect – not the magic, but the real thing they will walk away with after working with you?

The next activity will help you put your own answers in writing.

Your Story Inventory

Before you can tell your story well, you need to know what it is. This activity helps you find the raw material. You will use it in Chapter Six to build your complete marketing story.

YOUR ORIGIN

1. Why did you start this business – or why do you stay in it? What is the real answer, not the polished one?

2. What have you seen go wrong for customers who came to you after a bad experience elsewhere?

3. What do you know about your customer's problem that most people in your industry miss or ignore?

YOUR CUSTOMER'S STORY

4. Describe the moment a customer typically decides they need to call someone like you. What has just happened? What are they feeling?

5. What does a customer say after working with you that tells you you got it right? Write it in their words, not yours.

6. What transformation happens between before and after? Be specific about what changes in their life or business.

YOUR PROOF AND YOUR DIFFERENCE

7. Describe one customer outcome you are most proud of. What was the situation, what did you do, and what changed for them?

8. What do your best reviews actually say? Write the phrases customers use most often.

9. Complete this sentence in plain language: Unlike most businesses in our category, we

10. What would a customer lose if your business did not exist?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

5

CHAPTER FIVE

Your Core Message



ou now know who your customer is. You know what problem they are living with before they find you. You know what changes when they work with you.

Now it is time to turn that understanding into a message.

A core message is not a tagline. It is not a mission statement. It is not a list of services or a description of your process. A core message is the set of truths that holds all of your communication together across every channel, every format, and every customer interaction.

Think of it as the spine of your marketing. Everything else — the radio ad, the homepage headline, the email subject line, the social caption — is built around it. When the spine is clear, writing and adapting content becomes much easier. When it is missing, every piece of content feels like starting from scratch.

The four components of a strong core message

A useful core message answers four questions clearly.

Who do you help?

Not everyone. The specific person or business whose problem you understand best and serve most reliably. This should connect directly to the customer profile you built in Chapter Two.

What problem do you solve?

In the customer's language, not yours. The frustration they feel, the tension they are living with, the thing that keeps them searching. This connects to Chapter Three.

What becomes possible when they work with you?

Not a list of features or services. A concrete, believable description of the outcome. What can they stop worrying about? What have they gained? What does the after feel like?

Why should they trust you to deliver that?

Your proof. Not a vague claim about experience or quality. A specific, grounded reason to believe. How long you have been doing this, what your customers consistently say, what you do differently, what your track record demonstrates.

Compression without flattening

The challenge of messaging is saying enough to be believed without saying so much that the audience loses the thread.

Many businesses err in two opposite directions. They either try to say everything at once – listing every service, covering every scenario, addressing every possible customer – or they compress so far that what remains is a vague slogan that carries no real weight.

A strong message keeps the emotional truth while stripping away the clutter. It is specific enough to resonate and simple enough to travel.

Consider the difference between these two versions of the same business:

We provide comprehensive financial planning services for individuals, families, and businesses across Alberta, including retirement planning, tax strategy, estate planning, investment management, and insurance solutions delivered by a team of certified professionals with over twenty years of combined experience.

And:

We help Alberta families stop guessing about retirement and start feeling confident about the future. No jargon. No pressure. Just honest advice from people who have been doing this for twenty years.

Both are accurate. Only one feels like a conversation.

Adapting the message across formats

A core message is not identical wording everywhere. It is a consistent set of truths expressed in different ways depending on the format and the moment.

On a radio ad, the message might lead with a feeling or a tension. On a homepage, it might lead with clarity and proof. In an email, it might unfold more gradually. On social media, it might highlight one small, specific moment from the larger story.

The goal is coherence, not uniformity. The audience should encounter the same business everywhere they look, even if the words are different.

A voice that belongs to the business

Your message should sound like you. Not a polished marketing voice that could belong to anyone. The specific voice of your business – the way you actually talk about your work, what you notice, what you care about, how you treat customers.

That voice is shaped by what you choose to say and what you choose not to say. By how direct you are. By whether you lead with warmth or efficiency. By whether you use industry language or plain language. By what kind of proof you reach for.

The businesses with the most recognizable marketing are not always the most creative. They are the most consistent. They sound like themselves every time, and over time that consistency becomes a form of trust.

YOUR TURN

Build Your Messaging Spine

Use your answers from Chapters Two and Three to complete this. Do not rush it. Write rough drafts first, then refine. The goal is clarity, not perfection.

1. **WHO DO YOU HELP?** Write one sentence describing your specific customer.

2. **WHAT PROBLEM DO YOU SOLVE?** Write it in their language, not yours.

3. **WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE?** Describe the outcome in concrete, believable terms.

4. **WHY SHOULD THEY TRUST YOU?** One specific, grounded reason – not a vague claim.

NOW COMBINE THEM

5. Write a 3-4 sentence version of your core message that you could put on your homepage. Lead with the customer's problem, not your service list.

6. Now write a one-sentence version. The shortest, clearest thing you can say about what you do and who it is for.

7. Read both versions out loud. Do they sound like you? Would your best customer recognize themselves in them? Note what feels right and what still needs work.

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

6

CHAPTER SIX

Your Marketing Story



ou have now built three things that most businesses never build properly.

You know who your customer is — not just their demographics but their situation, their fears, their hesitations, and the words they use to describe their own problem. You know what problem you solve — the surface tension and the deeper worry underneath it. And you know your story material — your origin, your proof, your difference, the transformation you reliably produce.

Now it is time to turn all of that into a marketing story. One story, told consistently, that travels across every channel your business uses.

One story, many formats

Your marketing story is not a script you read word for word everywhere. It is a set of truths, told in a consistent voice, that adapts to the format while keeping its shape. The radio ad, the homepage headline, the email introduction, the social caption, the sales conversation — all of them should feel like they came from the same source. Different words. Same story.

That consistency is what makes a brand feel coherent. And coherence, as we established in the trust chapters, is what converts.

The structure that travels

Drawing loosely on the StoryBrand framework developed by Donald Miller — which positions the customer as the hero and the brand as the guide — a marketing story that works across channels follows a clear, simple structure.

Here is the problem. Here is who feels it. Here is what becomes possible. Here is why you can trust us to deliver that. Here is the next step.

That is the spine. Everything else is expression.

On radio, the problem might open the ad with a scene the listener recognizes from their own week. On a homepage, the problem might be the headline that stops a scrolling visitor. In an email, the problem might be the first sentence that earns the reader's attention. On social media, a single moment from the story might stand alone as a caption that makes someone pause.

The format changes. The truth underneath stays the same.

Why the avatar makes the story specific

Abstract messaging stays abstract until it is attached to a real person.

You built your customer avatar in Chapter Two. That person — named, situated, worried about specific things, hoping for specific outcomes — is who you are writing to every time you create marketing content. Not a demographic category. A person.

When you write with that specific person in mind, the language changes. It becomes more direct. More human. More specific. Less like marketing and more like a conversation with someone who feels understood.

That feeling of being understood is one of the fastest ways to earn the trust that converts. And it is available to any business willing to be specific enough to achieve it.

Your master reference

The activity in this chapter produces something worth keeping permanently visible. A single-page summary of your customer, your story, and your message — adapted across the channels you use most. Not a finished script for every occasion. A reference that means you never start from scratch.

Every time you brief a designer, write an ad, draft an email, update your website, or record a radio spot, this document is where you start. It protects your voice. It maintains your consistency. It makes sure that no matter who is writing for your business — including AI tools, contractors, or new staff — the core truth stays intact.

FIGURE 6.1

The Story Spine

Five elements every marketing story needs to do its work.

1	The Problem The tension your customer is living with, in their language.
2	The Stakes Why doing nothing – or choosing wrong – has a real cost.
3	The Guide Who you are, why you understand it, and why you can be trusted.
4	The Plan How you make it simple. What working with you looks like.
5	The Outcome The new reality after the problem is solved.

Build Your Marketing Story

Pull out what you wrote in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. You are not starting over – you are assembling. Use those answers to complete this. Write rough drafts first, then refine. The goal is a usable reference document, not a perfect one.

PART ONE: YOUR MARKETING STORY

Use your work from Chapters Two and Three to complete each line.

1. THE PROBLEM – Describe the tension your customer is living with before they find you, in their language:

2. WHO FEELS IT – Describe your customer in one sentence, specific enough that they would recognize themselves:

3. WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE – Describe the outcome, not the service. What changes for them?

4. WHY TRUST YOU – One specific, grounded reason. Not a vague claim – a real proof point:

5. THE NEXT STEP – One clear, low-friction action. What do you want them to do?

NOW WRITE THE FULL STORY

Combine your five answers into 3-5 sentences. Lead with the customer's problem, not your service. Write it like a human, not a brochure.

PART TWO: ADAPT ACROSS CHANNELS

Same story, different format. Use your full story above to write each of these. They should all feel like they came from the same business.

Radio opening (first 10 seconds – name the tension so the listener recognizes themselves):.

Homepage headline (lead with the customer's problem or outcome – not your company name):.

Email subject line (make them open it – curiosity or recognition):.

Social caption (one specific moment from the story – short, human, real):.

Elevator pitch (what you say when someone asks what you do – 30 seconds, no jargon):

PART THREE: YOUR MASTER REFERENCE PAGE

Summarize everything here. Pin this above your desk. Share it with anyone who writes for your business. This is your marketing foundation.

My customer is: _____

Their problem is: _____

What becomes possible is: _____

They should trust us because: _____

My core message in one sentence: _____

The next step I always offer is: _____

My radio opening is: _____

My homepage headline is: _____

My elevator pitch is: _____

EVERY PIECE OF CONTENT I CREATE DRAWS FROM THIS PAGE.

PART THREE

WHERE THE TRUST IS WON OR LOST

Marketing fails most often not at the moment of attention, but at the moment of verification. Customers move through stages – and at every stage, your business is either earning trust or quietly losing it.

7

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Customer Journey

U

nderstanding your customer and your message is essential. But messages do not reach customers directly. They travel through a journey that is messier, longer, and more fragmented than most businesses realize.

The old model was simple. A business advertised. A customer noticed. A customer called. Done.

That model no longer describes how most people actually decide to buy.

Today a customer might hear your ad on the way to work, search your name at lunch, read three reviews in a parking lot, skim your website that evening, glance at a competitor, get distracted, come back two days later, and then decide based on something as small as whether your Google profile looks maintained. All of that happens before they have spoken to a single person at your business.

The four things customers are doing

At any given moment, a customer who is aware of your business is doing one of four things.

They are noticing you for the first time. This might happen through an ad, a referral, a sign, a search result, or a conversation with someone who mentioned your name.

They are checking you out. They are verifying that you are real, credible, and worth considering. This is where your website, your reviews, your social presence, and your search results all do their work.

They are comparing you. They are weighing your business against alternatives, against doing nothing, against waiting. This is where proof, specificity, and responsiveness matter most.

They are waiting for enough confidence. Most decisions are not purely rational. People need emotional readiness as well as practical certainty. They need enough repeated signals to feel that the risk of choosing you is acceptable.

Marketing that works at each of these stages looks different. Advertising that creates awareness is not the same as content that builds credibility. Credibility content is not the same as proof that calms anxiety. Understanding which stage your customer is in — and what they need at that moment — is what makes a marketing strategy coherent.

The invisible middle

Many businesses invest heavily in the first impression and the final sale, and underinvest in everything in between.

They run advertising that generates interest. They have a sales process that converts customers who are ready. But in the middle – where curious prospects are doing research, comparing options, checking reviews, assessing credibility, and deciding whether to keep going or walk away – the business is not doing much.

That is where most growth is lost.

The customer who heard your ad, went to your website, found it vague or outdated, and chose a competitor did not tell you they were leaving. They just left. The business never registered the miss because there was nothing to register. The ad seemed to perform. Reach was achieved. The problem was what happened after the reach.

Every touchpoint is a trust decision

A touchpoint is any moment when a customer comes into contact with your business. It includes your advertising, your website, your reviews, your social media, your Google profile, your email, your phone, your intake process, your follow-up, your quotes, your staff interactions, and your invoices.

Each one of these moments sends a signal. Together they create an impression that either builds confidence or creates hesitation.

The businesses that grow most consistently are not always the ones doing the best work. They are often the ones with the most coherent touchpoints – the ones where every stage of the customer journey sends the same message: we are real, we are competent, we will take care of you.

Where businesses lose customers they never hear from

Most customer loss in the middle of the journey is invisible. The prospect does not fill out a form and select 'chose competitor' as the reason. They simply go quiet. The business never knows they were there.

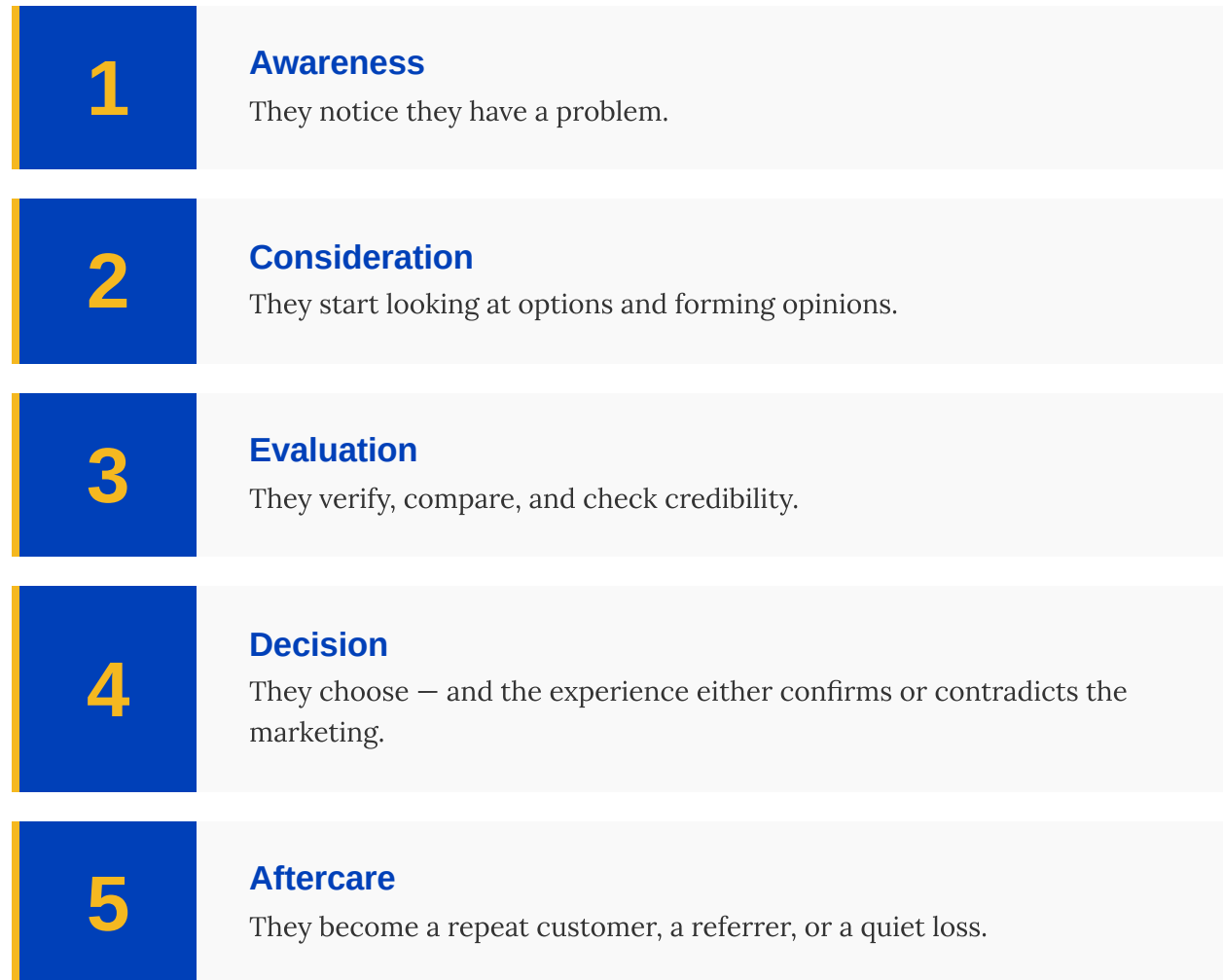
This is worth accepting because it changes how you think about marketing performance. If a campaign generates attention but does not convert, the instinct is to blame the campaign. Sometimes that is right. Often the problem is downstream – in the website, the reviews, the follow-up, or the coherence of the experience the prospect found after the ad worked.

Before spending more on reach, it is worth asking whether what you are sending people into is good enough to deserve the attention you are buying.

FIGURE 7.1

The Customer Journey

Five stages a buyer moves through before, during, and after.



YOUR TURN

Map Your Customer Journey

This exercise asks you to trace the actual path a new customer takes from first hearing about you to making a decision. Be honest about what they really find at each stage, not what you wish they found.

1. How does a typical new customer first hear about you? List the most common ways.

2. What do they do next? Where do they go to check you out? (Search? Reviews? Website? Ask someone?)

3. What do they actually find at each of those checkpoints right now?

4. Where do you think people decide to move forward or walk away? What is the moment that tips them?

5. What happens after someone contacts you? Describe the follow-up experience honestly.

6. Where do you think you are losing people who never tell you they are leaving?

7. If a stranger searched your business name right now and spent five minutes checking you out, what impression would they form?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

8

CHAPTER EIGHT

Where Trust Breaks Down

M

ost businesses do not lose trust in one dramatic event.

They lose it in small, quiet breakdowns that happen long before anyone on the team realizes a sale has slipped away.

Trust breaks down when the ad makes one promise and the website makes another. It breaks down when the brand looks polished from a distance but thin up close. It breaks down when the customer goes looking for reassurance and finds gaps instead.

This is the part of marketing many businesses underestimate. They think trust is built by what they say. In reality, trust is often lost by what the customer finds.

The website problem

A business invests in advertising, drives traffic, and then sends prospects to a site that does not support the sale. The site may be outdated, vague, cluttered, or too focused on the company instead of the customer. It may technically function but still fail the trust test.

Customers are not visiting your website as neutral observers. They are using it to answer live questions: Do these people seem established? Do they understand what I need? Is this current? Can I trust what they are claiming? Will this be easy to deal with?

A weak website does not have to be terrible to hurt conversion. It only has to create hesitation.

The generic language problem

Many businesses sound interchangeable without realizing it. Their websites and ads are full of phrases like trusted service, tailored solutions, quality care, and customer-focused excellence. In a low-trust environment, generic language creates distance. It sounds like marketing instead of meaning.

Customers do not trust what feels mass-produced. They trust what feels specific, grounded, and clear. If your message could belong to almost anyone, it does not do much to strengthen belief.

The reviews problem

Customers are not only looking at your star rating. They are looking at volume, recency, patterns, tone, and response. A business with forty strong reviews from four years ago does not feel as credible as one with steady, recent feedback. An unresolved complaint with no company response creates more hesitation than most businesses realize.

Reviews are not merely testimonials. They are evidence of current operational reality. They tell the customer whether this business still delivers, still pays attention, and still cares enough to respond. An ignored review profile sends a message, and it is rarely a good one.

The speed problem

A slow reply is not always interpreted as busyness. Often it is interpreted as disorganization or indifference. A customer reaches out because they are ready to move forward. If the response is delayed, confusing, or cold, doubt has room to grow. Follow-up is never just administrative. It is reputational.

The inconsistency problem

Inconsistency weakens trust because customers experience it as instability. The ad sounds confident but the website is neglected. The social media feels current but the Google profile is incomplete. The business claims to be premium but the experience feels average. Customers may not articulate these mismatches, but they feel them.

The invisibility problem

Trust is not something you build once and keep forever. It has to be reinforced. A business that has gone quiet online, stopped updating its website, or neglected its reviews may still believe it is well known. But the customer does not experience brand history the way the business does. The customer experiences what they can find right now. If what they find feels stale, the vacuum begins to fill – and competitors with fresher proof are ready to fill it.

The AI content problem

Businesses are now using AI to generate websites, emails, social content, and follow-up language at scale. Used well, it helps. Used carelessly, it produces language that is polished but empty – friendly but generic, correct but hollow. Customers are becoming increasingly sensitive to this. They notice when a business sounds smooth but not human. The easier it becomes to automate content, the more customers look for signs that there is an actual person behind the business.

FIGURE 8.1

Common Trust Breakdowns

Where small businesses lose customers without ever hearing about it.

The Stale Website

Looks abandoned. Old copyright. Photos from a decade ago. Says nothing about who you serve today.

The Silent Reviews Page

Few reviews, or none recent. The customer reads it as a question mark.

The Slow Response

A two-day reply to a fresh inquiry. The window of belief closes faster than the inbox does.

The Mismatched Voice

Ads say one thing. The website says another. The intake call says a third.

The Missing Proof

Claims of quality with no examples, photos, testimonials, or specifics.

The Generic Message

Words that could apply to any business in any city. Customers feel nothing because there is nothing specific to feel.

Go through every touchpoint in your business and mark it honestly. This is the most important diagnostic exercise in the book. Take your time.

YOUR WEBSITE

- Homepage clearly states what we do and who we help within the first few seconds
 - We lead with the customer's problem, not our company history
 - We have real photos (not only stock images)
 - Contact information is visible and easy to find
 - There is an obvious next step on every page
 - The site loads quickly on mobile
 - The copyright date and content feel current

YOUR REVIEWS

- We have more than 15 Google reviews
- We have received a review in the past 60 days
- We respond to all reviews, including negative ones
- Our review responses sound human and specific, not templated
 - Our rating is 4.0 or above

YOUR MESSAGING

- Our advertising and website sound like the same business
- We avoid generic phrases like 'trusted excellence' and 'quality solutions'
- Our message is specific enough that a competitor could not copy it word for word
 - We name the customer's problem clearly

YOUR FOLLOW-UP

- We respond to inquiries within one business day
- Our initial reply is personalized and sounds human
 - The next step after contact is clear

We have a system for following up if the lead goes quiet

YOUR CONSISTENCY

Our Google Business profile is complete and current

Our social profiles match our other branding

The tone across all channels sounds like the same business

We have been visible and active in the last 60 days

REVIEW YOUR RESULTS. WHERE ARE YOUR BIGGEST GAPS?
LIST YOUR TOP THREE TRUST LEAKS BELOW.

Trust Leak 1: _____

Trust Leak 2: _____

Trust Leak 3: _____

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

9

CHAPTER NINE

Building Trust on Purpose

M

ost businesses wait for trust to happen.

They do good work. They show up. They hope the market notices. And sometimes it does. But waiting is no longer enough. In a market where customers check before they call, verify before they commit, and compare before they decide, doing good work behind the scenes is only half the job. The other half is making sure the evidence of that work is visible, coherent, and convincing at the exact moment someone goes looking.

That is what it means to build trust on purpose.

It does not mean manufacturing a reputation you have not earned. It means taking the trust that already exists in your business — in your work, your people, your history, your values — and making it legible to the stranger who just heard your name for the first time.

Coherence is the foundation

The single most important principle for building trust is coherence.

Coherence is what happens when the customer's experience makes sense. The ad sounds like the website. The website sounds like the person who answers the phone. The reviews reflect the promise. The follow-up confirms the impression. The business feels like itself at every step.

Most businesses have some pieces in place and others neglected. None of these gaps seems fatal in isolation. Together they create friction. And friction is where customers quietly leave. Coherence removes that friction.

See your business the way a stranger does

The fastest way to create coherence is to see your business the way a stranger sees it. Not as the owner who knows the full story. As someone who just heard your name and has thirty seconds and a phone in their hand.

Search your own name. Read your own reviews. Land on your own homepage without the owner's context. Call your own number. Fill out your own contact form. Wait for your own reply. Feel where the confidence builds and where it softens.

Most business owners, when they do this honestly, find gaps they had not noticed. A homepage that leads with the company's history instead of the customer's problem. A review profile that hasn't had a new entry in months. A Google profile with missing hours and an old photo. A follow-up email that sounds like it was written by no one in particular.

These are trust leaks. They are expensive because they are invisible. The business never sees the people who checked and left. It only sees the ones who stayed.

The fix is structural, not cosmetic

Fixing the leaks is not about redesigning your logo or rewriting every page of your website. It is about closing the gap between how good you actually are and how believable you appear when someone checks.

That means the website has to answer the customer's questions, not the company's preferred talking points. It means reviews have to be recent enough to feel current. It means follow-up has to be fast and human. It means the message has to be specific enough to feel real.

None of this requires a large budget. It requires attention and honesty about where the gaps actually are.

What changes when you fix the leaks

When the trust signals are strong and coherent, marketing starts to work harder for less. The ad that used to generate interest but not action starts converting. The referral that used to go quiet starts following through. The lead that used to shop around starts choosing you. Not because you changed what you do. Because you changed what they find when they check.

Trust is not an accessory to growth. It is infrastructure. And like all infrastructure, it has to be built, maintained, and reinforced — not once, but continuously.

Your Trust Building Priorities

Based on your audit in Chapter Six, use this section to decide what you are going to fix and in what order. Be realistic about time and resources.

1. From your trust audit, what are the three things most likely costing you customers right now?

Priority 1: _____

Priority 2: _____

Priority 3: _____

2. For each priority, what is the specific fix? Be concrete.

Fix for Priority 1: _____

Fix for Priority 2: _____

Fix for Priority 3: _____

3. What could you fix this week without significant budget?

4. What would require more time or investment, but is worth planning for?

5. How will you know when a trust gap has been fixed? What would success look like?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

10

CHAPTER TEN

Your Web Presence



our website is your most controllable marketing asset.

Unlike social media platforms that change their rules, search algorithms that shift, or advertising costs that fluctuate, your website is yours. You determine what it says, how it looks, and what experience it creates. And for many potential customers – especially those who found you through a referral, a radio ad, or a passing truck – it is the first place they go to decide whether you are worth their time.

That makes it one of the most important trust decisions your business makes.

What a website actually needs to do

Most business owners think about their website as a place to display information. In reality, a website is a trust conversation.

A customer who lands on your homepage is not simply gathering facts. They are assessing you. They are deciding, within seconds, whether this business feels credible, current, and worth taking the next step with. Everything on the page – the headline, the photos, the layout, the language, the presence or absence of proof – contributes to that assessment.

A strong website does not need to be elaborate. It needs to answer a few questions quickly and well: What do you do? Who do you help? Can I trust you? What should I do next?

Lead with the customer, not the company

The most common homepage mistake is leading with the company's story instead of the customer's problem.

The business talks about its founding year, its team size, its values, its awards. All of that may be true and even admirable. But a new visitor who does not yet care about you will scroll past it looking for the thing that tells them whether this business understands their situation.

The most effective homepage headlines lead with the problem, the outcome, or the person. Not with the service. Not with the company.

We help Calgary homeowners navigate renovation without the stress is stronger than Twenty Years of Quality Renovation Experience. Both may be true. Only one speaks to what the customer is actually looking for.

Proof has to be visible

Many businesses have proof of their quality buried in pages no one visits. A testimonials page three clicks deep that no one has updated in two years. A case studies tab that was never fully built. Reviews that exist on Google but are never referenced on the website.

Proof needs to live where people look first. On the homepage. Near the call to action. In the places a visitor is most likely to be deciding whether to stay or leave.

Real photos outperform stock photography. Specific testimonials outperform general praise. Named customers with real outcomes outperform anonymous quotes.

The next step has to be obvious

Many websites fail at the moment they should succeed. A visitor has made it through the homepage, read a service description, felt reasonably confident — and then has no idea what to do next.

The call to action should be obvious, clear, and low-friction. Not just a contact form at the bottom of the page. A visible button. A phone number at the top. A clear statement of what happens when someone reaches out. Book a call. Request a quote. Get a free estimate. Send us a message and we'll respond within one business day.

Remove every unnecessary step between interest and contact.

Mobile and speed are not optional

Most people check businesses on their phones. A website that is slow to load, hard to navigate on a small screen, or that requires pinching and zooming creates immediate friction. That friction is a trust signal too — it suggests the business is not paying attention to how customers actually arrive.

YOUR TURN

Website Clarity Audit

Open your website right now – on your phone if possible. Read it as if you have never heard of your business. Answer honestly.

1. What does your homepage headline say? Write it here exactly.

2. Does that headline describe the customer's problem or your company's solution? Which?

3. How many seconds before a new visitor knows what you do and who you help?

4. What proof is visible on your homepage right now? (Reviews, photos, testimonials, credentials)

5. What is the clearest call to action on your homepage? Is it obvious?

6. What three things would you fix on your website today if you could?

Fix 1: _____

Fix 2: _____

Fix 3: _____

7. Rewrite your homepage headline using what you learned in Chapter Four. Lead with the customer's problem or outcome.

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reviews and Reputation

Before a stranger trusts you, they trust other strangers.

That is the simple truth behind why reviews have become so powerful in local business marketing. Not because people are naive, but because in the absence of personal experience, social proof is the next best thing. A

business with eighty recent reviews and thoughtful responses feels safer to approach than an equally skilled business with eight old ones and radio silence.

You may know your work is excellent. Your customer doesn't yet. Reviews are how they find out before they call.

What customers actually look at

Most business owners know reviews matter. Fewer understand exactly how customers use them.

Star rating is the first filter, but it is rarely the last. A customer will often look at the rating, then quickly scan recent reviews for patterns. Are people happy or frustrated? Is the feedback specific or generic? What do people say went wrong, and did the business respond?

Recency matters more than total volume. A business with twenty reviews this year feels more credible than one with a hundred from four years ago. Customers want to know that the business is still performing at that level now, not that it was performing well in 2020.

Response behaviour is a trust signal in itself. A business that responds thoughtfully to both positive and negative reviews signals accountability, attentiveness, and care. A business that ignores negative reviews – or worse, responds defensively – signals the opposite.

Most satisfied customers do not leave reviews without being asked

This is the single most common review problem. The business does excellent work. The customer is genuinely happy. And they simply do not leave a review because it never occurred to them, they forgot, or they did not know it mattered.

The solution is not complicated. Ask. Not in a way that feels pressured or transactional — a simple, human request at the right moment. Right after a successful job. Right after a customer says something positive. Right after the outcome they hoped for has arrived.

A simple system — a follow-up email or text with a direct link to your Google review page — makes the ask easy and the action immediate.

How to respond to negative reviews

Negative reviews are opportunities as often as they are threats, but only if they are handled well.

A thoughtful response to a complaint demonstrates more about the character of a business than a hundred five-star reviews. It shows that the business listens, acknowledges, takes responsibility where appropriate, and is committed to getting it right.

What it should never do is argue, dismiss, or explain why the customer is wrong. Even when the customer is wrong, the response is read by every future customer who finds that review. What they are assessing is not whether the original complaint was fair. They are assessing how the business handles difficulty.

Acknowledge. Apologize where appropriate. Offer to resolve. Move the conversation offline. Keep it brief and human.

Reviews as ongoing reputation management

Review generation is not a one-time project. It is an ongoing practice. The businesses with the strongest review profiles are not the ones that ran a review campaign once. They are the ones that have built asking into their standard workflow so that new reviews arrive consistently over time.

That consistency signals active operation. It tells every new visitor that this business is still delivering, still paying attention, and still worth considering.

Your Review Strategy

This activity helps you build a simple, sustainable review system that works without feeling forced.

1. How many Google reviews do you have right now? When was the most recent one?

2. What is your current star rating?

3. Do you currently have a system for asking customers for reviews? If yes, describe it.

4. When is the best moment in your customer relationship to ask for a review? (After job completion? After a positive comment? At invoice?)

5. Write a simple, human review request you could send via email or text. Keep it short and genuine – no pressure language.

6. If you have any unresponded reviews right now, write a draft response to the most challenging one.

7. What is your goal for reviews over the next 90 days? (Number, recency, rating)

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

PART FOUR

THE CHANNELS THAT CARRY IT

The medium is the message. The channel through which information travels does not just carry content – it shapes how that content is believed. Choose where you show up with intent, not habit.

12

CHAPTER TWELVE

Radio and Audio

People still listen.

They listen in trucks and kitchens and offices and school runs. They listen on smart speakers and streaming apps and the radio that has been in their car since they bought it. They still recognize familiar voices. They still hear local weather and local concerns and local personalities and local business names.

Radio gets dismissed because people evaluate it with the wrong assumptions. They compare it to digital channels using digital metrics and conclude it does not measure up. But radio was never meant to do what digital does. It does not capture intent the way search does. It does not retarget. It does not produce an immediate click.

What it does is something harder to measure and more durable in effect. It builds familiarity. It creates the feeling of a known voice. It settles a name into the memory of people who were not looking for you yet.

And most buying decisions do not start with a search. They start with a name that surfaces when the need arises.

Radio is relationship, not reach

Radio lives alongside daily life. It accompanies rather than interrupts. It arrives through voice, tone, timing, repetition, and the listener's ongoing relationship with the station environment.

A good radio ad borrows the emotional conditions of the medium itself: familiarity, warmth, rhythm, routine, and presence. That is why radio can feel more like a recommendation than an announcement when it is done well.

Audio is powerful because it engages imagination. The listener helps complete the picture. That participation creates stronger memory and stronger emotional ownership than many visual ads produce. It also means that voice quality, honesty, pacing, and restraint matter enormously. A radio ad that sounds inflated, generic, or obviously overproduced fails precisely because the medium is intimate.

Event radio versus brand radio

One of the most useful distinctions in radio strategy is the difference between event campaigns and brand campaigns.

An event campaign is short-term and urgent. It promotes a sale, an open house, a seasonal push, or a specific offer. It needs frequency in a compressed window and a very clear call to action.

A brand campaign works differently. It shapes memory over time. It relies on consistency, recognizability, and a message worth repeating for months rather than days.

Businesses often confuse the two. They run a short flight expecting a deep brand effect, or they run a vague brand message while hoping for immediate measurable response. The schedule and the creative need to match the objective.

What good radio creative sounds like

It sounds like a human being. It identifies a real problem or desire. It gives the listener a clear mental picture. It avoids inflated jargon. It is consistent enough to build familiarity. It does not try to say everything at once.

Bad radio often fails because it sounds like a brochure read aloud. The best radio sounds like a person with something worth saying.

Radio and digital working together

Radio is strongest when it is not left to work alone. A radio campaign can create familiarity and search behaviour. Then digital takes over. The website confirms legitimacy. Reviews reduce uncertainty. Email maintains connection. Social channels demonstrate that the business is active and real.

Radio plants the name. Digital captures the search. The website earns the confidence. Reviews close the gap. That is the full stack working together.

Streaming audio and the expanded audio landscape

Audio listening has diversified. Listeners now move between terrestrial radio, station apps, streaming audio, smart speakers, and podcasts. The access points have multiplied, but the core strength of audio remains.

Think less about old versus new and more about trusted audio environments. The question is not whether someone is listening through an FM dial or a phone app. The question is whether the message lands in a context where attention and trust still have room to breathe.

Radio and Audio Planning

Whether or not you are currently using radio, this activity will help you assess whether it belongs in your strategy and how to approach it if it does.

1. Is your target customer likely to be a radio listener? When and where do they listen?

2. What is the single clearest mental position you would want to own in your market? (Not a list of services — one clear association.)

3. Is your goal brand awareness over time or promotion of a specific offer? (This determines the type of campaign.)

4. Using your messaging spine from Chapter Four, draft a rough 30-second radio script. Include the tension, who it is for, what you offer, and the next step.

5. If radio is part of your strategy, what would your digital presence need to support it? (Website landing page, review profile, search presence?)

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Email and First-Party Data

E

very few years, someone declares email dead.

And yet email remains one of the most durable tools in marketing because it solves a problem many other channels do not solve very well. It creates a direct, permission-based line of communication between a business and a person who has chosen to hear from it.

That matters more now, not less.

In a fragmented environment where algorithms filter visibility and platforms change their rules, email remains one of the few channels a business can meaningfully control. It does not belong to Meta, Google, or TikTok. It sits closer to owned attention than most businesses realize.

Owned versus rented attention

One of the most important distinctions in modern marketing is the difference between rented attention and owned attention.

Rented attention is what you borrow from a platform. A social media following, a search ranking, a paid ad audience. These can all be useful, but they are not truly yours. The rules can change. The reach can shrink. Costs can rise.

Owned attention is different. Your email list, your CRM, your customer database — these are assets you control. If social platforms disappeared tomorrow, could you still reach the people who have shown interest in your business? That is the question email answers.

Email is not a newsletter

Many businesses treat email as a broadcast channel. They collect addresses and then send the same message to everyone, regardless of where they are in the decision process.

Better email marketing thinks in terms of moments. The welcome email for someone who just made first contact. The follow-up for someone who requested a quote but went quiet. The nurture sequence for someone who is interested but not yet ready. The retention message for a past customer you have not heard from in a year.

Different moments call for different messages. That is what makes email powerful when it is done well.

First-party data and why it matters now

First-party data is the information customers give you directly – email addresses, preferences, purchase history, inquiry history, appointment records. In an environment where third-party tracking is becoming less reliable, first-party data becomes more valuable.

Handled well, this data allows a business to be more relevant and more timely in its communication. Handled poorly, it becomes a trust problem.

A business does not build long-term trust by collecting everything possible and using it indiscriminately. It builds trust by gathering what is useful, communicating in ways that feel earned, and making it easy for people to manage their own preferences.

What good email looks like for a small business

It sounds like a person, not a marketing department. It arrives at the right moment with something relevant to say. It does not always sell – it sometimes teaches, sometimes updates, sometimes simply reminds the reader that you still exist and still care.

For many small businesses, two strong, genuinely useful emails a month will outperform twelve forgettable ones. Consistency matters more than frequency.

Your Email Foundation

This activity helps you build the basics of a working email system – even if you are starting from scratch.

1. Do you currently collect email addresses from customers and prospects? How?

2. What email platform do you use, or are you considering? (Mailchimp, Klaviyo, Go High Level, etc.)

3. What would you send in a welcome email to someone who just made first contact with your business?

4. What is the most common point where a lead goes quiet after showing interest? What would a good follow-up email say at that moment?

5. Name three topics you could write a genuinely useful email about for your customers. (Not promotional – educational or helpful.)

Topic 1: _____

Topic 2: _____

Topic 3: _____

6. How often could you realistically send a quality email to your list?

7. What would your email need to consistently deliver for customers to look forward to receiving it?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Content That Builds Trust



Content is one of the most overproduced and underthought parts of modern marketing.

Businesses are told to publish constantly, repurpose aggressively, appear on every platform, and remain visible no matter what. The pressure to produce is so intense that many stop asking a simpler and more important question: what is this content supposed to do?

Good content performs a function. It helps people understand. It reduces uncertainty. It builds familiarity. It demonstrates competence. It makes the next step easier. These are useful outcomes. Activity for its own sake is not.

Teach more than you sell

Most businesses lean too heavily in one of two directions. They either promote constantly, or they educate so vaguely that no offer ever emerges.

Promotional content has a place. But when every piece of content asks for attention, urgency, or purchase, the audience learns to tune out.

Educational content creates a different kind of value. It helps people name a problem, understand an option, avoid a mistake, or make a better decision. It does not need to be dry or overly instructional. It simply needs to leave the audience more informed than before.

A healthy rhythm: teach more often than you sell. Make sure the educational content naturally supports the offer. Sell clearly when the moment calls for it.

Content for different stages of the journey

Not all content is for the same moment.

Awareness content introduces a problem, names a need, or sparks curiosity. Consideration content explains differences, addresses objections, and demonstrates credibility.

Conversion content clarifies the offer and gives a clear next step. Retention content supports customers after the sale and deepens the relationship.

Many businesses produce content without aligning it to where the audience actually is. They send conversion messages to cold audiences, or awareness content to people who are already ready to act. When content matches the stage, trust grows more naturally.

One idea, many formats

One of the simplest ways to reduce content fatigue is to stop treating every channel as though it requires a completely new idea.

A customer question can become a radio segment, a blog post, a short video, a social caption, a follow-up email, and an FAQ section. This is not laziness. It is discipline. It respects the reality that audiences encounter ideas in different places at different times and increases consistency across channels.

Quality over volume

A business that repeatedly publishes vague or generic content teaches the audience not to pay attention. A business that publishes less often but says something specific and useful strengthens its position every time it shows up.

This matters especially now that AI can help generate content at speed. The ability to produce more no longer distinguishes anyone. The ability to remain meaningful does.

4. How often can you realistically produce quality content? Be honest.

5. Pick one piece of content you could create this week. What would it be, and what question would it answer?

6. How could you repurpose that one piece across at least three different channels or formats?

Format 1: _____

Format 2: _____

Format 3: _____

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

15

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Social Media Without Losing Your Mind

Social media becomes exhausting when it is treated as a moral obligation instead of a strategic choice.

Many businesses operate as though they must be active on every platform simply because those platforms exist. The result is diluted effort, fractured messaging, and a sense of permanent underperformance. A better starting point is simpler: where is your audience likely to notice, check, or engage with you, and what kind of presence is actually useful there?

Platform fit over trend chasing

Not every business needs TikTok. Not every company needs LinkedIn thought leadership. Not every local service provider needs daily Instagram stories. Presence should follow purpose.

The right question is not which platform is most popular. It is where your specific customer spends time and what they are looking for in that environment. A platform can be culturally loud and still strategically wrong for your business.

What organic social actually does

Organic social reach is weaker than it once was, but that does not make organic content useless.

Organic content shows proof of life. It demonstrates voice and values. It gives prospects a place to check you. It creates small repeated impressions over time. It helps current customers stay connected. It supports other channels by reinforcing the same message.

Organic social is no longer primarily a growth engine for most small businesses. It is a trust-building support tool. Understanding that distinction helps set realistic expectations.

What paid social is actually good for

Paid social can be effective for expanding awareness, retargeting warm audiences, promoting timely offers, driving registrations, and supporting local visibility in a defined market.

It is less effective when the offer is unclear, the audience is too broad, the landing experience is weak, or the business expects a single campaign to accomplish what should really be a larger trust-building system. Paid social is acceleration. It is not a substitute for the foundation.

Consistency over intensity

A modest, credible, well-maintained presence on one or two platforms does more for trust than a frantic and inconsistent presence on five. When someone checks your social profile – and they will – what matters most is that the business looks alive, current, and coherent.

You do not need to be everywhere. You need to be believable where you show up.

Your Social Media Strategy

Answer these questions to cut through the noise and decide what social media should actually do for your business.

1. Where does your target customer actually spend time online? Which platforms do they use?

2. Which platforms are you currently active on? Rate your consistency on each one honestly.

3. For each platform you use, what is the purpose? (Brand awareness, proof of life, lead generation, retention, community?)

4. Which platform gives you the best return for the effort you put in?

5. Which platform could you stop using or reduce without meaningful loss?

**6. What would a realistic, sustainable social media rhythm look like for your business?
(Posts per week, format, tone)**

7. Is paid social worth testing for your business right now? What would you promote and to whom?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

16

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AI for Your Marketing

A

rtificial intelligence is changing how marketing work gets done and the environment into which that marketing is released. Both matter.

AI can help you work faster. It can reduce the blank-page problem, accelerate drafting, summarize research, and help small teams produce more than they could before. That is genuinely useful.

But AI is also flooding the marketplace with polished, competent-sounding content that is often emotionally empty. Customers are becoming more sensitive to this, even when they cannot name it. They notice when a business sounds smooth but not human. Language that is direct, useful, and grounded in real experience builds more trust than language designed to impress.

That means AI is most valuable as a tool, not as a replacement for judgment.

Where AI helps most

AI is most useful when it reduces friction around tasks that are repetitive, structurally predictable, or time-consuming. It can help summarize meetings, organize notes, draft rough outlines, generate first-pass copy, suggest email subject lines, reformat long content into short content, and accelerate the early stages of planning.

Used well, AI gives time back. It lowers the blank-page problem. It helps move work from idea to draft more quickly.

Where AI can hurt you

Overuse leads to sameness. Because AI is trained on patterns, it tends to produce language that sounds competent while drifting toward generic. Businesses that rely on it too heavily begin sounding interchangeable.

AI also does not automatically know what is true about your business. It does not understand your specific market, your specific customer, or the specific way your business delivers value. It can produce language that is plausible without being accurate.

That means AI-assisted content should be treated as starting material. It needs editing, sharpening, and in many cases re-humanizing before it sounds like you.

Keeping your brand voice intact

The healthiest way to think about AI is as a multiplier of your thinking, not a substitute for it. Used well, AI can make a thoughtful team faster and more organized. Used poorly, it can make average thinking louder.

Every piece of AI-assisted content should pass through a human filter: Does this sound like us? Is this specific enough? Is it accurate? Is it useful? Would we be comfortable standing behind this publicly?

AI can help you draft. Trust still depends on what you are willing to sign your name to.

Prompting basics for marketers

A weak prompt produces vague output. A stronger prompt includes context, audience, objective, format, tone, and constraints.

Instead of: Write a social post about our service.

Try: Draft three short Facebook posts for homeowners in Calgary who are worried about choosing the wrong contractor. Use a reassuring, direct tone. Avoid jargon. Focus on the one thing that makes us different: we call you back the same day, every time.

Better input produces better output. Prompting is structured thinking.

YOUR TURN

Your AI Marketing Checklist

Use this to assess where AI fits in your workflow and where to be careful.

WHERE AI CAN HELP YOU RIGHT NOW

- Drafting first versions of emails, social posts, or ad copy
 - Generating headline options to choose from
- Summarizing customer feedback or reviews into themes
- Repurposing one piece of content into multiple formats
- Brainstorming content ideas based on customer questions
 - Writing FAQ sections based on common inquiries
 - Drafting responses to common review scenarios

WHERE TO BE CAREFUL

- Publishing AI content without editing for your specific voice
- Letting AI describe your business without checking for accuracy
- Using AI to replace personal follow-up that should feel human
- Flooding your channels with AI volume at the expense of quality

1. Write a strong prompt for a piece of marketing content you need right now. Include your customer, the problem, the tone, and the format.

2. After generating that content, what would you need to change to make it sound like your business?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

PART FIVE

WHAT TO DO WITH ALL OF THIS

You now have the customer, the message, and the channel options. The last three chapters are about choosing, spending, and executing – turning the work into a real plan you can run for the next 90 days.

17

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Choosing Your Channels

N

ow that you understand the individual channels — radio, email, social, content, web presence, reviews, and AI — the most important decision is which ones belong in your strategy.

Not all channels work equally well for all businesses. The right mix depends on who your customer is, where they spend time, what kind of decision they are making, how long their buying cycle is, what your budget can support, and what your team can actually sustain.

Chasing every channel creates a different problem. It spreads effort thin, fractures messaging, and generates noise without building trust.

The four channels that matter most for most small businesses

If you are a small local business managing your own marketing, you likely need four things more than anything else.

A credible, current web presence that answers questions and builds confidence quickly.

A strong review profile with recent, genuine feedback and thoughtful responses.

A direct relationship channel — usually email — that lets you stay present with people who have already shown interest.

At least one awareness channel that reaches new people who have not yet heard of you. For many local businesses, that is radio, search advertising, or a well-maintained social presence in a platform where their customer is active.

Everything else builds on this foundation.

Matching channel to customer and goal

Radio creates familiarity and top-of-mind awareness for people who are not yet looking. It works best for businesses with broad local audiences and a message worth repeating.

Search advertising captures people who are already looking. It works best when the intent is clear and the landing experience is strong.

Email deepens relationships with people who have already shown interest. It works best for longer buying cycles and businesses with a reason to stay in regular contact.

Social media supports presence, proof, and light engagement. It works best as a supporting channel rather than a primary one for most small businesses.

Content builds long-term credibility and discoverability. It works best when the business has genuine expertise to share and the capacity to maintain a rhythm.

Integration over isolation

The businesses that get the most from their marketing are not the ones that found the one right channel. They are the ones whose channels work together. Radio creates search behaviour. Search leads to the website. The website earns confidence through reviews and clarity. Email maintains the relationship. Social reinforces presence.

No single channel carries the whole load. Each one plays a role in the journey your customer takes from first hearing your name to choosing your business.

What you can actually sustain

The honest limit of any channel strategy is capacity. A channel you cannot sustain consistently will create inconsistency, which weakens trust. Better to do fewer things well than many things poorly.

Choose the channels you can commit to, not the ones that seem impressive on paper.

FIGURE 17.1

What Each Channel Is For

Not every channel does every job. Match the role to the stage.

CHANNEL	AWARENESS	TRUST	DEPTH	BEST FOR
Radio & Audio	STRONG	STRONG	LIGHT	Steady visibility in a credible environment.
Search (SEO/SEM)	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LIGHT	Captures intent that already exists.
Reviews	LIGHT	STRONG	LIGHT	The verification step that makes or breaks the sale.
Website	LIGHT	STRONG	STRONG	The hub. Every other channel sends people here.
Email	LIGHT	MEDIUM	STRONG	Owned audience. Long-term relationship.
Content	MEDIUM	STRONG	STRONG	Demonstrates competence over time.
Social Media	MEDIUM	VARIABLE	LIGHT	Useful as a signal of life, not a primary engine.

YOUR TURN

Your Channel Selection

Use this worksheet to decide which channels belong in your strategy and what role each one plays.

1. Where does your target customer go when they are first becoming aware of a need like yours? (Radio, search, social, referral, word of mouth?)

2. Where do they go to verify and evaluate a business they have heard of? (Reviews, website, social, ask a friend?)

3. What channels are you already using? Rate their effectiveness honestly.

CHANNEL SELECTION MATRIX

For each channel, mark your answer.

Website – current, credible, clear next step

Strong Needs Work Not Sure Doesn't Exist

Google Reviews – recent, volume, responses

Strong Needs Work Not Sure Doesn't Exist

Radio / Audio – awareness, familiarity, reach

Strong Needs Work Not Sure Doesn't Exist

Email – owned list, follow-up system	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist
Search Advertising – Google Ads, intent capture	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist
Facebook / Instagram – organic or paid	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist
LinkedIn – B2B, professional network	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist
Content / Blog – expertise, discoverability	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist
Video – YouTube, Reels, short form	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Work	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Doesn't Exist

4. Based on your customer, your goals, and your honest capacity, which three channels will you commit to for the next 90 days?

Channel 1 and its role: _____

Channel 2 and its role: _____

Channel 3 and its role: _____

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

18

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

What to Spend

Budget is the question most business owners want answered first and the one that cannot be answered honestly without context.

There is no universal right number. A business spending one percent of revenue on marketing may be overspending if the channels are wrong and underspending if the market is competitive. A business spending ten percent may be wasting half of it or winning market share, depending entirely on the execution.

What is more useful than a number is a framework for thinking about what you are spending and why.

Start with what you are trying to accomplish

Budget decisions should follow goals, not lead them.

Are you trying to maintain your current customer base and stay visible in a familiar market? Are you trying to grow by reaching new customers who have never heard of you? Are you launching something new that requires building awareness from scratch? Are you defending market share from a competitor who is increasing their visibility?

Each of these situations calls for a different level of investment. Maintenance requires less than growth. Growth requires less than launch. Defense depends on what you are defending against.

The industry benchmark as a starting point

A commonly cited benchmark is that most small businesses spend between five and ten percent of gross revenue on marketing. That range is wide because it covers very different industries, competitive environments, and growth objectives.

Service businesses in competitive local markets often need to be at the higher end. Businesses that rely heavily on referrals and repeat customers and are not trying to grow aggressively can often operate at the lower end.

These are starting points, not rules. What matters more than where you start is whether the spend is working — and whether you are measuring the right things to know.

Thinking in tiers

A practical way to think about marketing budget for a small business is in three tiers.

The foundation tier covers the essentials that every business should maintain regardless of budget: a current website, an active review profile, basic email follow-up, and a maintained Google presence. These do not require large ongoing spend. They require attention.

The awareness tier covers the channels that put your name in front of people who have not yet heard of you. Radio, search advertising, paid social, and local sponsorships all belong here. This is where budget makes the most direct difference.

The relationship tier covers the channels that keep you present and trusted with people who already know you. Email, content, social, and ongoing review generation belong here. These are often lower cost but high value.

Budget and channel fit together

The channel selection you made in Chapter Fifteen should inform your budget directly. Each channel has different cost structures.

Radio requires a production investment and a media buy. The media buy needs enough frequency to build familiarity — a one-week flight rarely does what a sustained schedule does.

Search advertising is pay-per-click. Costs vary enormously by industry and market. A local plumber in a major city competes for expensive keywords. A specialty business with less competition can often get strong results for a modest spend.

Email is low cost but not free — platform costs, time to write, and system setup have real value.

Content takes time more than money.

Social media management takes time. Paid social can be as modest or as aggressive as the budget allows.

What gets measured gets managed

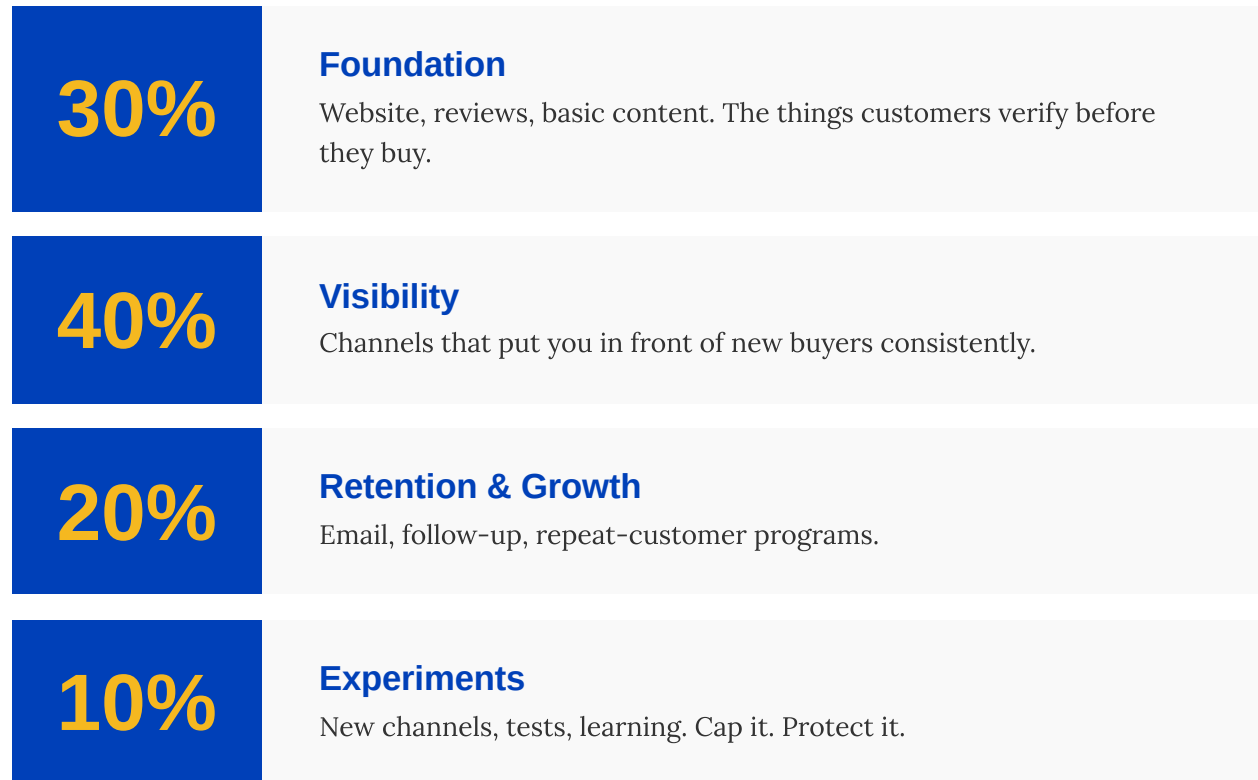
Budget without measurement is guessing. You do not need a sophisticated attribution system to make reasonable decisions. You need to know, roughly, where your inquiries are coming from and whether the spend on each channel is returning something worth measuring.

Ask customers how they heard about you. Track call sources where possible. Watch what happens to inquiry volume when you increase or decrease spend in a particular channel. That information, gathered consistently over time, is more valuable than any dashboard.

FIGURE 18.1

A Sane Way to Think About Spend

There is no universal percentage. There is a sensible framework.



These percentages are a starting point, not a prescription. Adjust them to your stage, your goals, and what your channels actually do.

Run the real numbers first

The most common error in marketing budgets is not the percentage. It is the number that percentage is applied to. Business owners tend to project revenue optimistically and underestimate the cost of running the business. Ten percent of an optimistic revenue number is not the same as ten percent of what actually came in.

Before deciding on a marketing budget, run the real numbers. Last year's actual gross revenue. This year's expenses, including the ones you forget about until the bill arrives. What is left over is what marketing can be drawn from without breaking the business.

The figure on the next page works through this for two example businesses at different stages — a solo operator and a growing crew. The same math applies to any service business. Substitute your own line items.

FIGURE 18.2

A Realistic Marketing Budget

The same math works for any service business — substitute your own line items. The two examples below are renovation contractors at different stages, shown for demonstration only.

EXAMPLE A — SOLO OPERATOR		
Maple Solo Renovations		
<i>One-person shop. Bath & kitchen refreshes, decks, finish carpentry. \$5k–\$25k jobs.</i>		
LAST YEAR		
Gross revenue	\$300,000	
OPERATING EXPENSES		
Materials & subcontractors	\$135,000	
Vehicle & fuel	\$12,000	
Insurance & WCB	\$4,000	
Tools & software	\$6,000	
Accounting & admin	\$2,000	
Marketing (last year)	\$4,500	
Misc / contingency	\$3,500	
Total expenses	\$167,000	
Net (before owner pay)	\$133,000	
THIS YEAR		
Projected revenue	\$330,000	
MARKETING BUDGET @ 5% / 10% / 15% OF \$330,000		
	PER YEAR	PER MONTH
5%	\$16,500	\$1,375
10%	\$33,000	\$2,750
15%	\$49,500	\$4,125
At this scale, anchor closer to 5–7%. The owner's own pay still has to come out of net. 15% is rarely sustainable here.		

EXAMPLE B — GROWING CREW		
Prairie Home Renovations		
<i>Owner + 3 staff/subs. Kitchens, bathrooms, basements, small additions. \$40k–\$200k jobs.</i>		
LAST YEAR		
Gross revenue	\$1,500,000	
OPERATING EXPENSES		
Labour & subcontractors	\$720,000	
Materials	\$390,000	
Vehicles & fuel	\$35,000	
Insurance & WCB	\$28,000	
Shop & storage	\$36,000	
Software & admin	\$24,000	
Accounting & legal	\$12,000	
Marketing (last year)	\$30,000	
Misc / contingency	\$30,000	
Total expenses	\$1,305,000	
Net (before owner pay)	\$195,000	
THIS YEAR		
Projected revenue	\$1,650,000	
MARKETING BUDGET @ 5% / 10% / 15% OF \$1,650,000		
	PER YEAR	PER MONTH
5%	\$82,500	\$6,875
10%	\$165,000	\$13,750
15%	\$247,500	\$20,625
At this scale, 10% funds a real system. 15% only makes sense if growth is the explicit goal and operations can absorb the volume.		

REALITY CHECK

What is the smallest number you can confidently commit to for 90 days without disrupting the business? That is your honest starting budget — not the rule of thumb, not the aspiration. Start there. Grow it as the work proves itself.

Owner compensation is treated separately from operating expenses in both examples. Numbers are illustrative and intended to show the math, not to recommend a specific spend for any business.

Your Budget Framework

This activity helps you build a marketing budget that reflects your goals, your channels, and your current reality.

1. What is your approximate annual gross revenue?

2. What percentage of that are you currently spending on marketing (including advertising, tools, and support)?

3. What is your primary marketing goal for the next 12 months? (Maintain, grow, launch, defend)

4. Based on that goal, what percentage of revenue feels appropriate to invest?

ALLOCATE YOUR BUDGET

Foundation (website, reviews, Google profile): _____

Awareness channel 1 (e.g., radio, search ads): _____

Awareness channel 2 (if applicable): _____

Relationship channel (email, content): _____

Tools and software: _____

Support (contractor, designer, writer): _____

Testing budget (trying something new): _____

TOTAL: _____

5. How will you know if this spend is working? What will you measure?

6. What would need to be true for you to increase this budget in 12 months?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

19

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Your 90-Day Plan

E

verything you have built throughout this book — your customer profile, your core message, your understanding of the customer journey, your trust audit, your channel choices, your budget — comes together here.

A 90-day plan is not a five-year strategy. It is a realistic commitment to focused action over a specific period. Long enough to see results. Short enough to stay honest about what is achievable.

Month one: Clarify and fix

The first month is not about launching campaigns or publishing content. It is about fixing the foundation.

Use what you discovered in your trust audit. Close the most obvious gaps. Update the website headline. Request reviews from recent customers. Clean up the Google profile. Set up a basic email follow-up sequence. Make sure the business sounds like itself everywhere a customer might check.

No business scales confusion well. Month one is about building a cleaner foundation before you invest in reaching more people.

Month two: Activate and publish

Once the foundation is stronger, month two is about visible activity.

Launch or refine your primary awareness channel. Publish your first few pieces of content. Send your first intentional email to your list. Make sure your social presence is consistent and current. Test one thing you have not tried before.

The goal here is not maximum volume. It is coordinated visibility. Promote what matters. Publish what supports trust. Make sure attention has somewhere credible to land.

Month three: Measure and refine

By month three, patterns should begin to appear. What message is landing? Which channel seems to be supporting the others? Where are leads dropping out? What objections keep repeating?

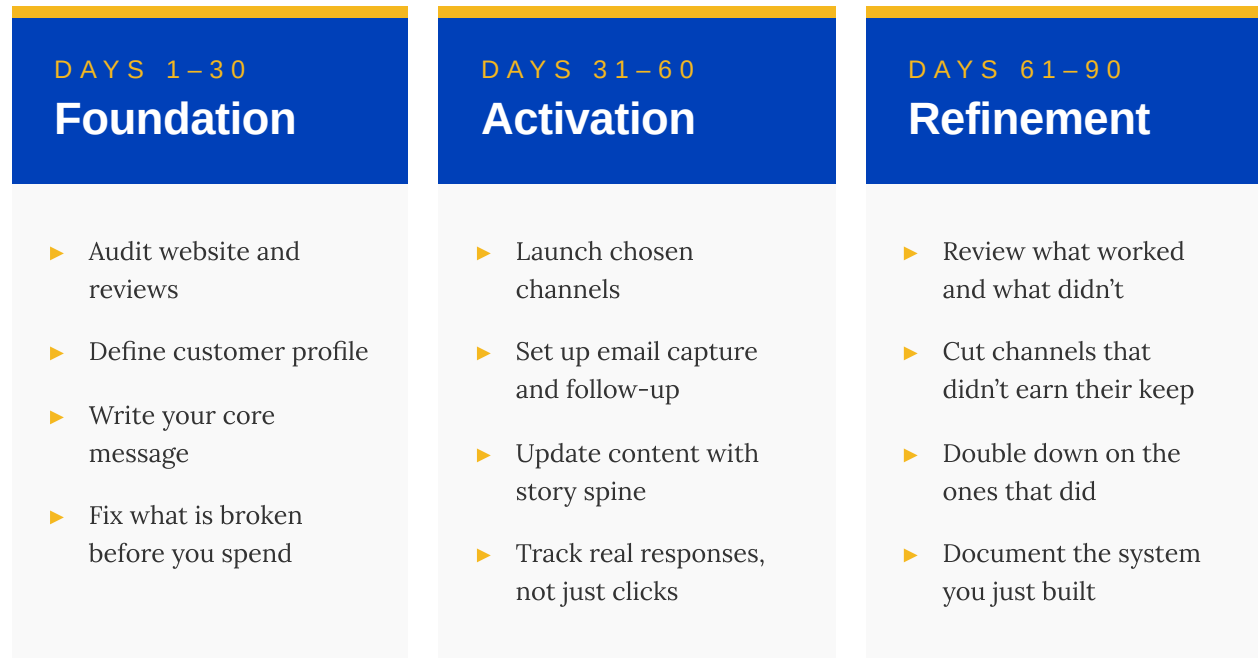
This is the time to strengthen what is working, cut what is clearly wasting energy, and begin automating the follow-up that is already proving itself.

A 90-day plan does not solve every marketing challenge. But it moves you from reaction to rhythm. And rhythm is where sustainable growth lives.

FIGURE 19.1

Your 90-Day Plan

Three months. Three focuses. One working system at the end.



Build Your 90-Day Plan

Use everything you have built in this book to complete your plan. This is your working marketing foundation.

YOUR FOUNDATION SUMMARY

My target customer is: _____

The problem I solve is: _____

The outcome I deliver is: _____

The reason they should trust me is: _____

My core message in one sentence is: _____

MY CHANNEL STRATEGY

Primary awareness channel: _____

Trust and credibility channel: _____

Relationship and follow-up channel: _____

Monthly budget: _____

MONTH ONE — CLARIFY AND FIX

Top three trust fixes:

Foundation tasks to complete:

Update homepage headline to lead with customer problem

Request reviews from 5 recent customers

Update Google Business profile

Set up basic email follow-up sequence

Other: _____

MONTH TWO — ACTIVATE AND PUBLISH

Awareness campaign to launch or activate:

Content to publish (list at least three pieces):

One new thing to test:

MONTH THREE — MEASURE AND REFINE

What will I measure?

What does success look like at day 90?

Keep your answers. You will build on them in the next chapter.

Conclusion: One Question

Here is where most business books give you a summary.

This one is going to do something different.

Because if you have read this far and done the work, you already have something most business owners do not have: a clear picture of your customer, a core message that belongs to your specific business, an honest assessment of where trust is breaking down, a channel strategy that fits your reality, and a 90-day plan you can actually follow.

That is not nothing. Most businesses operate without any of it.

What you need now is not more information. What you need is one question to carry with you as you execute.

The Question *Does this make it easier or harder for someone to trust us?*

Apply it to your homepage. Your reviews. Your follow-up. Your ads. Your social presence. Your Google profile. Your intake process. Your email tone. Your phone greeting. Your proposal template. Your response time. Your photos. Your bio.

Everything your business shows the world is either building confidence or creating doubt. This question helps you see which is which.

It is not a complicated question. But it is an honest one. And it will show you, faster than any audit or agency report, exactly where your growth is hiding.

Not in a new campaign.

Not in a new platform.

Not in a bigger budget or a better slogan.

In the gap between how good you actually are and how believable you appear to the stranger who just heard your name and reached for their phone.

Close that gap.

That is the work.

And it is worth doing.

What Comes Next

You have done the work. You have a customer profile in real language. A message that does not sound like every other business in your category. A channel strategy that fits your market. A budget that reflects your reality. A 90-day plan that is realistic instead of aspirational.

None of that matters if it sits in this book.

Pick the smallest, most useful piece of work you have completed and act on it this week. Update one page of your website. Reply to three reviews. Send one email to your list. Record one piece of content. Choose one channel to commit to for ninety days and one to retire.

Then come back to the worksheets in 90 days and notice what has changed.

*Marketing that works is not a campaign. **It is a system you keep refining.***

If you ever want a second pair of eyes on the work, that is what I do for a living. Reach out. Otherwise, the most valuable thing I can wish you is a quiet, steady stream of customers who already trust you by the time they call.

— Jodi

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JODI MOREL



Jodi Morel helps small business owners build marketing that works – without the noise, the hype, or the wasted spend.

Her background is in journalism, radio, print, and digital – disciplines where a story only works if the trust behind it holds.

She helps businesses build the foundations most marketing skips: clear goals, real benchmarks, an honest understanding of who they serve, and a precise grasp of the problem they actually solve. From there, the work is communicating that story in a way that is engaging, honest, and earns trust.

She works with service-based businesses, local owner-operators, and growing teams across Canada from her base in Calgary, Alberta.

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MARKETING THAT WORKS

“Does this make it easier or harder for someone to trust us?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JODI MOREL

Jodi Morel helps small business owners build marketing that works — without the noise, the hype, or the wasted spend.

With a background in journalism, radio, print, and digital, she helps businesses build marketing foundations rooted in clear goals, real benchmarks, and an honest understanding of their audience and the problem they solve.

Her work is built on one principle: communicate honestly, build trust at every touchpoint, and stop spending on what doesn't fit.

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