*MARKETING FIELD GUIDE* *2027*

# *THE GROWTH ESSENTIALS FIELD GUIDE*

**THE FIVE PILLARS FOR DIGITAL MARKETING SUCCESS**

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# INTRODUCTION

The world of marketing is changing, but not nearly as quickly as you're led to believe.

We've constantly heard about how "Google keeps changing the rules." They never did (until AI burst forward, which we'll discuss soon), and every update from Google was simply a greater effort on their part to enforce the rules they already laid out. Here were Google's official quality guidelines from 2002:

- Make pages for users, not for search engines.
- Avoid tricks intended to improve search engine rankings.
- Don't participate in link schemes designed to increase your site's ranking or PageRank.

That's it! Literally everything Google did was in service to those goals. People who felt the rules were changing were simply trying to cheat the system and were upset that Google had caught on.

In 2023, Google's Danny Sullivan tweeted:

> *"Our good advice then remains the same over two decades later. To succeed in Google Search, focus on people-first content."*

There is certainly more that you can do beyond those three items, but those three things will take you 90% of the way there. Sure, you should do lots of technical things like installing Google Analytics, setting up XML sitemaps, customizing your meta descriptions, organizing your topics, and a bunch of other things. Those will indeed help a bit, but everything beyond those core three ideas will only do 10% of the work.

Making great content that helps people solve a problem is key. As Seth Godin said in “This is Marketing”:

> *“Marketing is the generous act of helping someone solve a problem. Their problem.”*

If you can solve someone’s problem and they’re aware you can, you win.

## ZERO-SUM

Search was, and still is, a zero-sum game. With that, I mean that when a new Google update came out where it seemed that “every website dropped in the rankings”, that simply couldn’t be true. If one company was losing rankings, that literally means that others gained rankings. By working hard and following the rules, we saw every “horrible” update inch our clients a bit higher toward the top.

The search engine game has changed significantly since ChatGPT came out in 2022, but the core fundamentals of marketing remain the same. **You need people to see what you do, understand how it can help them, and know how to move forward with you.** That’s it.

Over time, the percentage of users on Google searching for a specific company ("Acme") rather than a specific solution ("Companies that sell anvils") has skyrocketed. I heard tech CEO Rand Fishkin say that *"Google has become the reward for getting marketing right in all of the other channels rather than the place to start."*

Users find you on Google because they're already looking for you. Why would they already be looking for you? That's what this book is about, and why the digital marketing agency I co-founded has set up a system to help you attain it.

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Now we're firmly in the world of AI, and that seems to be all that people talk about. It's for good reason, as AI is going to dramatically shift how we live and work, but it's causing too many businesses to ignore the fundamentals.

Don't ignore AI, and we'll touch on it a bit in this book, but let's stop chasing trends and instead double down on the basics.

When it comes to marketing, you have two broad areas to focus on: **strategies** and **tactics**. Strategies are wildly important, but AI is merely a tactic. Don't ignore it, but don't lean too far into it.

Strategy always comes first, so AI should always come second. If you flip that around, you're gonna have a tough time.

Keep in mind that Google isn't dumb, nor are any of the other AI platforms. They can see and understand what you're writing, and they get better at it every single day. If you're producing great content and getting mentioned by other websites and users, they'll see that. Tagging and schema and things of that nature can help a little, but Google doesn't need your help.

They already see you. Focus on what matters, and your marketing will soar. Here are the steps to do just that.

## THE FIVE PILLARS

For small businesses, there are simply five core things you need to focus on, which we'll call the five pillars. These are intended to help hold your marketing together and give your business the structural integrity that it needs. Together, they form an acronym: **WELDS**:

- **W**ebsite. Without a solid website, marketing can lead to dead ends.
- **E**mail Marketing. Email remains one of the highest ROI activities for a business.
- **L**ocal. If people are searching locally, you need to show up.
- **D**ata. Do you know who came to your site? How they got there? Determining next steps is impossible without solid data.
- **S**ocial. Social media can't be ignored. You don't have to be an influencer on TikTok, but you need to have a presence.

None of these need to be big lifts. While you can spend $50,000 and get a killer website, or post on social media 15 times a day and see results, most businesses just need to do a fraction of that. **Consistency beats volume every time.**

Seth Godin says in "This is Marketing" that *"persistent, consistent, and frequent stories, delivered to an aligned audience, will earn attention, trust, and action."*

Just like welding, this is all about structural integrity. If you don't have strong connections, your marketing will fall apart. If you get all of the pieces together, it becomes an amazing machine.

Marketing is everything you do, and the **WELDS** system provides the foundation to make it happen. It doesn't cover everything, but it will take care of the 80% of the pieces that are the most impactful. Outside of **WELDS**, marketing is also:

- How you answer the phone.
- How you show up to serve your customers.
- How you treat your vendors.
- How you help your community.

It's similar to branding, which I see as this simple question: when people hear about your company, what do they immediately think of? That's your brand.

**Good marketing is often boring,** and that's not a bad thing. A Super Bowl ad would be fun to run, but very few companies ever get that chance. Instead of pressing toward that unreachable level, lean into the opposite. Push for reliability over novelty, systems over stunts, and trust over tactics.

This will lead to marketing that may seem somewhat boring, but is much more effective.

We'll dig into all five areas, walking through a few simple ideas for each.

1. **The Myths:** What kind of unnecessary beliefs do you have in this area?
2. **The Problems:** What problems do small businesses most commonly make here?
3. **The Framework:** What is the overall strategy to solve this problem?
4. **The Proof:** What are some stories and examples about how this went wrong and got corrected?
5. **The Actions:** What are things I can do today to get things moving in the right direction?

# 01

PILLAR
ONE

## WEBSITE

*"The launch of a website isn't the important part — it's the tending that matters."*

While the power of websites has dropped in recent years due to changes with AI and search, it's still an essential part of your business and one of the few assets you can actually own (you'll never "own" your Facebook page). When your marketing is going well, people come to your website, and it needs to keep showing them how you can solve their problems.

In the end, solving problems is all that matters. People have something that needs to be resolved, and you have the solution for those people. Keep that as your focus through all of your marketing.

In Donald Miller's book "Marketing Made Simple", he explains that *"your customers are not curious about you, they are curious about how you can solve their problem."*

Seth Godin shares something similar in "This is Marketing", explaining that *"marketing is the generous act of helping someone solve a problem. Their problem."*

Lastly, don't overdo it. People are busy. Get to the point. In the book "Smart Brevity", they explain that *"People are overwhelmed with information, yet most communication is unnecessarily long, unclear, and ineffective."*

## THE MYTHS

There are a few myths surrounding websites; some brand new, and some as old as the web itself.

### "I can just pick a template."

Yes, you can, but why? Having a clean, good-looking website is important, but your content always comes first. We recently had a client who paid a lot of money to a firm to design their website, and then they went in to try to write content to fit the design. The design looked great, but it became a disaster because they had to make their content worse in order to fit.

### **"I don't have time to build a new website."**

I have good news and bad news for you on this one: you might not need a new site; you might just need to get to work on the one you already have.

I've talked to a variety of people who were looking to build a new site because *"our team page is no longer accurate, and we haven't published a news story in 23 months"*. Cool, no need for a new site; let's just update that team page and publish some news.

When companies build a new website to solve problems caused by negligence, those problems start festering again almost immediately.

### **"My website is finished."**

Related to the previous myth, it's dangerous to think that your website is ever done. As soon as you do, you become that company with the messy team page and the lack of news. Think of your website more like a garden and less like a billboard:

- A billboard is a static thing that you put up and hope that works. A garden is dynamic and grows and evolves over time.
- A billboard is a one-time project. A garden is a living asset that grows more valuable over time.
- A billboard either works or it doesn't. A garden continues to grow, and small improvements can lead to big outcomes over time.

### **"I have social media, so I don't need a website."**

Having a website is still essential for any business. We'll talk about ownership later in the book, but a website is one of the few tools in your digital arsenal that you actually own. You may have an awesome following on a particular social media platform, and that's fantastic, but it can disappear overnight (you could get banned, the company gets bought, trends shift). Your website is yours, and you need to build that solid ground as much as possible.

## THE PROBLEMS

We've all seen websites that are wildly problematic, but there are some smaller things that you may not notice.

### Too self-centered

It's so easy to be accidentally self-centered on your website. I mean, it's about you! That's not why people visit, though. People are coming to your site with a problem, and they need to quickly determine whether you're capable of solving it.

If your website leads with "help us celebrate our 20th anniversary", you've missed the mark. The person that just came to your website needs help, and the fact that you're celebrating your 20th anniversary doesn't help them at all.

There is a bit of an exception to this, though. Once they understand that you're the kind of company that might be able to help them, they'll often want to know more about you (via your "about" page, blog posts, and related media). If you lead with "celebrate our 20th anniversary," and your competitor leads with "here is how we can solve your problem", you just lost.

### Unclear

Donald Miller's StoryBrand framework offers a quick test to determine whether your site is clear, which he calls "the grunt test".

In short, users should be able to answer these three questions right away:

1. What do you offer?
2. How will it make my life better?
3. What do I need to do to buy it?

That's it. Get that info taken care of, and if the user likes what they see, then they'll dig in for more. Save your "20th anniversary" and your "commitment to be #1" for later, and make sure people know exactly how you can help them after their initial grunt.

### Too chaotic

When building a website, it's a common desire to want to make it flashy. Add more animations! Attract attention!

Of course, when someone is already on your site, what are you trying to "attract"? At this point, they simply need to know whether you can solve their problem, and flashiness and animations are unlikely to help with that.

If you want to add animations to your site, they should serve one of three goals:

- Impact: Make people feel the power of what you do, like a beautiful drone flyover at the top of the page.
- Focus: Movement on the page that draws the eye where you want it to go.
- Interaction: Movement to let the user know their action was correct, such as a button changing color after you click it.

Beyond that, it's just noise. Being clever and distinct sounds good, but it's often a bad idea. As shared by Blake Howard in his book "Radically Relevant", *"it's a mistake to sacrifice clarity on the altar of distinction"*.

Keep your site calm and focused on the problem you solve. With less chaos, your message becomes clearer, and that's the best path to success for everyone.

### Devoid of humanity

It seems like the internet is getting louder every day.

More social media.

More AI.

More spam.

More videos.

More more more!

The web is being flooded with over-optimized websites and funnels, and humanity is seemingly disappearing.

That's unlikely to reverse course anytime soon, but you can. If you can offer some clarity and restraint, that can signal confidence to those who find you.

Make things clear, simple, and human-focused, and then consistently do the little things to stay on that path. You can try to run faster and faster and faster, or you can take steps to escape the madness and be a human who likes working with other humans.

### Valueless

I've heard Google's John Mueller encourage people to *"ask yourself why would anyone go to this site instead of the thousands of others."* It's similar to the classic known as the "Deb Oler question", which poses: *"why should our customers buy from us over anyone else?"*

You certainly need to work on your page speed and other technical items, because if those are a mess, it's a problem. Once you reach a certain point, though, it becomes a case of diminishing returns. Instead of trying to make your site load 2% faster, spend some time producing great content that your users will love.

### Ignored

As we mentioned above, with an inaccurate team and a lack of news, there are many ways a site can be neglected.

"Set it and forget it" is the dream solution to many challenges in life, but it rarely works. 25 years ago you could build a website and largely leave it alone, but those days are long gone. When you let your website just sit there, bad things can happen.

- Contact forms stop working, and you have no idea.
- Visitors may see security warnings that you're unaware of.
- The content on your website is so outdated that it undermines credibility.
- You have tons of data about the visitors on your site, but you never look at it (much less act on it).

- Your site can get hacked, and most hacks are things you'll never notice on the front of the site (like sneaky links to casinos in the back end that Google will penalize you for).

Fixing this stuff isn't necessarily complicated or expensive, but it takes work. Someone needs to be watching, noticing, explaining, and planning. That someone could be you, but if you don't have time, then it could very well be someone like us (or one of the other great website firms in your area).

You have many options to help keep things running smoothly, and you should take advantage of them, because if you try to "set it and forget it," you're likely to encounter major problems you won't notice until it's too late.

## THE FRAMEWORK

### Have a goal for every page

One of the biggest things that companies miss on their website is goal setting. Not from a high-level, necessarily, but from the level of each individual page. Every page on your site should have a goal.

The goal doesn't have to be a huge achievement; it could be as simple as helping users understand one feature of your product, with a call to action at the end to learn the next piece. Really, simply having that call-to-action is the key to your goal on many pages.

There are too many sites that have great information, but then leave users hanging at the end of the page without a clear next step. While some users will take the initiative to find out more, it's always wise to give a clear option for those that aren't sure.

## Don't just own your website; care for it

As I mentioned a few pages back, one of the biggest shortcomings of websites is when they're simply left alone.

This doesn't require a huge effort. I'm not talking about hours a day, but just a bit of focused effort (which you can do yourself, or hire it out). Things like:

- Managing security patches to avoid hacks and downtime.
- Updating your blog with information that your customers would find valuable.
- Updating other areas of your site with new processes, products, staff, and ideas.

This isn't difficult, but it doesn't happen automatically, and if you don't carve out intentional time to make it happen, it literally never will. A few minutes a week is all it takes, and I encourage you to start right now.

## What happens between website redesigns matters

When you're building a new website, launch day is super exciting — as it should be! There's been a ton of work that's gone into the new site, and it should be celebrated.

At our agency, GreenMellen, we certainly do this. When we launch a new site, we celebrate with the client, post about it on social media, and feel good for a job well done. However, very few other people outside of our two companies really care about that moment.

Why should they? They're likely happy for you that you got the new site launched, but it doesn't really affect them.

Websites need a good overhaul every so often (3-5 years in most cases), but it's the work that happens between launches that really makes the difference.

Measure what's happening. Make small tweaks. Update some content. Publish a new blog post. Keep learning and adjusting.

It doesn't take much effort, but so many companies tend to "set it and forget it" that even a little regular adjustment can give you a huge advantage. Big launches are awesome, but the impact comes from the ongoing tweaks.

Remember the myth of the "finished" website, and keep making the small improvements so it can stay relevant for the long run.

## THE PROOF

### Consistent attention beats occasional overhauls

I was talking with a potential client recently who is considering building a new site, and perhaps it's needed. As of now, though, they haven't published anything on their social platforms in months, their blog hasn't been updated in over a year, two new staff members they hired in the fall aren't on the site yet, and security patches from months ago still aren't in place.

It seems like a long list, but it could largely be remedied in an afternoon, and it would make a big difference.

1. Add a blog post to the site, share it on your Google Business Profile, and use a solid excerpt from it for some social posts.

2. Add those new employees to the site.
3. Update the outdated plugins.

There are cases where a site is simply so outdated that a replacement is the best move, but 90% of the time an afternoon (and a plan to revisit frequently) will have a much bigger and less expensive impact.

### If your website is working, how would you know?

When it comes to your website, there are a bunch of little things that can make a huge difference. Many can fall into the idea of "no news is good news", which is a dangerous path to take.

A few years ago, we launched a website for a new client, but they declined having us help maintain it post-launch. That's no problem, so we simply implored them to make sure the updates were taken care of, and even left detailed instructions on how to do it themselves. For the most part, they ignored those instructions. At some point the following summer, an update broke the back end of their contact form, and they didn't realize it. Users could still fill out the form, but the company never received them.

Six months later, they noticed the problem and reached out for help, which we gladly provided, but they missed hundreds of opportunities in the meantime. In their mind, the website looked good, so they had nothing to worry about, but a tiny mistake they made in the back end cost them quite a lot of money.

This is part of the quiet work that makes everything else work, and it's why you should never consider your website finished.

It isn't expensive or difficult to keep things humming, but it's easy to skip. Basic website care can help prevent these devastating problems, and simple reports and insights can help spot little issues before they become a big deal.

Most businesses don't need to invest dozens of hours a week in their website, but if that number drops to zero, it can be incredibly problematic.

### Optimizing for website traffic is dumb

It can be tempting to try to optimize your website to get more traffic because, with all else being equal, more traffic will lead to more sales. The problem is that nothing is ever the same.

We're seeing a world lately where the best optimized websites and marketing plans are seeing less traffic but more sales. If you can get your marketing more targeted, you're far better off focusing on that than just trying to outplay Google and steal a few more clicks.

Rand Fishkin summed this up perfectly:

> *"And so the big differences: One, optimizing for traffic is straight up dumb. It's just a bad idea. It doesn't make sense. And number two, the way to improve is not to get more visits to the website, which was the way that we sort of pounded on things in 2012.*
>
> *The way to improve is to improve your marketing and the experiences people have off of your website."*

That's the key. Marketing today is about doing all of the right things off of your website, so that when people visit your site they're already on your side, which we'll dig into later in this book.

Customers are increasingly doing their research on other places (social media, AI tools, in-person conversations, etc.) and then searching for you specifically on Google, pulling up your site near the end of their research journey. Your website is still a vitally important piece of this process, but it's not the starting point and "more traffic!" shouldn't be your top goal.

A few years ago we rebuilt a website for a client and consolidated it quite a bit. After the launch, traffic dropped considerably, but leads and revenue from the website rose — exactly as planned. Instead of working to attract more people, we focused on attracting the **right** people.

Getting more traffic on your site isn't a bad thing, but rather than getting more traffic, you should work on getting *better* traffic.

## THE ACTION

You might need a new website, but probably not. Spend 30 minutes today updating what you already have, and it's likely to make a world of difference.

### Do the quiet work

There are flashy and important things to do in most businesses, but at the end of the day, it's the quiet work that makes all the difference.

It's Dan Cathy picking up napkins in the parking lot of Chick-fil-A restaurants (while he was president of the entire company).

It's the owner of a trash company hopping on a truck to make sure the trash gets picked up even when some staff isn't able to come in.

Or, in our case, it means doing the quiet work of managing websites to keep them secure and running smoothly. We currently manage roughly 200 websites that face roughly 2 million cyberattacks every week, and they are almost never hacked, even in very small ways. It can happen at times, but we're prepared for that too (with extensive monitoring and multiple backups on hand).

Big things like Super Bowl ads can be very exciting, but keeping things clean, up to date, and running smoothly will require far less cost and effort and will propel you past almost all of your competitors.

### Every web page should have a goal

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, every web page on your site should have a goal. As you go through and clean things up, keep that in mind. While you're working on a page, think "when a user gets to the end of this page, what do I want them to do?"

Maybe you want them to call you, read more data, meet your team, or anything else you think may be of value. You have choices, but give them a clear option and don't just leave them hanging.

# 02

PILLAR
TWO

## EMAIL

*"I'd rather have 1 new email subscriber than 1,000 more followers on Facebook." - Rand Fishkin*

I mentioned that websites are one of the few assets that you can own, and email is the other big one. While you can't take your Instagram followers with you to a new social platform, your email list is yours to own and control.

Ultimately, email marketing is a huge opportunity that's oft-ignored. This chapter will largely focus on email marketing to your lists, but will also touch on tips for better one-to-one email.

## THE MYTHS

### "No one reads email anymore"

Every few years we hear that "email is finally dead". It's not.

Social media, SEO, and digital ads can be great ways to help promote your business, but lowly email still generally has (by far) the best return on investment. According to a recent study from some top companies, via PC Mag:

> *The study showed that email-marketing ROI is currently calculated to be 4,400%, or about $44 return on every dollar you spend in your marketing campaign.*

There are two big reasons why email is still huge, and why it's not likely to go away any time soon:

- **Everyone has it.** Some people check it more often than others, but no one can escape it. By comparison, your friends, colleagues, and customers are spread around various social networks, with things fragmenting a bit more every day. In some ways I still wish that "everyone" was on Facebook, but they're not, and they're not all going to come back.
- **It's an open protocol.** If you don't like Facebook and you leave for Parler, you can no longer talk to people on Facebook. If you don't like Gmail and leave for ProtonMail, you can still email 100% of the people you could before. Yeah, changing your address is a bit of a pain, but you're not cut off from anyone. The core tenets of email make sure that's possible.

Email has challenges, for sure, but I don't see either of the above advantages changing anytime soon. Email is often a challenge due to user laziness ("it's just easier to create a Facebook group"), but as social media continues to slowly splinter into separate apps, email will likely remain the one place that you can reach everyone.

### "Social media is a better way to reach people"

While I have my share of bad things to say about social media, I'm still fairly active on most networks and plan to be for the foreseeable future. I suspect some of you found this guide via social media, and that's great!

In the long run, though, email is where your followers need to be. Not that email is great, per se, but you can truly own your list, and that is hugely valuable. David Perell calls this taking your users over the "Public to Private bridge".

Perell's idea is that you should build a bridge to bring users to your private channels, slowly guiding interested users onto your email list and other private channels for sustained growth.

Rand Fishkin recently laid this out in a post on the state of the web and what creators need to do. In that post, he included the thought:

> *"I'd rather have 1 new email subscriber than 1,000 more followers on Facebook"*

It's amazing to me that email remains one of the best ways to reach people, but the numbers don't lie. Continue using social media to the extent you desire, but do your best to keep growing your list.

**"The only way to build an email list is through shady tactics"**

You've likely seen it 100 times. *"To get this free PDF with 10 tips to prepare for winter, give us your email address and we'll send it right over"*. It's been a solid way to grow email lists for years, but it brings along one old problem and one new one.

In many cases, the people who sign up for your list aren't likely to become customers. If you own a local company that designs and installs pools, a popular giveaway might be something like *"The best ways to prevent algae from growing in your pool"*. It's helpful, and might be quite popular!

The problem is that the people who need that document already own a pool and seem to manage it themselves (and they could be located anywhere in the world). The benefit is small.

In addition, the email gate turns many people away. They might be interested in your content, but they aren't willing to give up their email address for it. Instead, you should just brand it well and give it away. It'll spread much further, and it's more likely to end up in the hands of a potential customer. That's what we do with our downloads, for things like storytelling tips, marketing checklists, social media best practices, and more. We feel that they're quite helpful, and you can just click and download them without giving us any information.

Over the last few years, a new problem has developed: AI. Generally speaking, if you want to show up in AI-powered search results, you need to feed the systems a ton of content. If you have great documents and info hidden behind an email gate, AI tools will never see them.

Ranking well in AI is tricky and always evolving, but hiding your content is a sure way to hurt your potential.

The internet is moving faster, and people are more reluctant to give up their personal information. If you have great things to share, share them; the benefit of spreading your knowledge will far outweigh the handful of email addresses you might otherwise earn.

## THE PROBLEMS

### Spam makes it harder for the good stuff to shine

A few years ago, I used a video tool to send a few quick videos to the members of my membership committee for the Kennesaw Business Association. I spent some time creating 20 unique 30-second videos for each person on the committee, checking in on how they were doing and letting them know about our next meeting.

Of the 20 that I sent, three watched the video, and just one replied. That was it! I think people are so used to being hit with "email blasts" that it's hard for a personal message like that to come through. While I think the video concept is great, I just have a hard time getting people to open them; even those that I know personally that have specifically asked me to reach out!

Online trust is fading. We shouldn't hustle people that we want to serve, but it can be hard to stand out among the hustlers. Regardless, I encourage you to stay strong and do the right thing, and the people that watch what you do will see the ways that you stand out.

### Cold outreach is a form of the tragedy of the commons

The tragedy of the commons is the concept that if many people enjoy unfettered access to a finite, valuable resource, they will tend to overuse it and may end up destroying its value altogether. This is generally applied to things like farmland, but I think it can also apply to the internet, with the "finite, valuable resource" being our attention.

If everyone behaves properly, the resource stays useful for all. If a few people misbehave to take "just a bit more" for themselves, it can encourage everyone to try to take a bit more and destroy the value for everyone.

This is cold outreach in a nutshell. We have an amazing tool with the internet, but as more people try shady things to steal a bit of attention, it encourages others to do the same to keep up. As I've shared from Seth Godin a few times:

> *"People are smart enough to see that once spam becomes professionally and socially acceptable, all open systems fall apart."*

Techniques like cold calls and spam are tempting, for sure. The cost is essentially zero, and you can potentially make 10 more sales if you just bug 24,990 other people in the meantime.

The internet is unbelievably massive, but the attention of humans is a scarce resource and should be respected by everyone, or we risk ruining the entire system.

### Experts don't cold call

If you want to be seen as an expert, cold calling will destroy that idea.

Some of the funniest emails I get are from "SEO experts", and I'm sure you get many of the same. My initial thought is "if they're so good at SEO, why do they need to resort to spam?"

Of course, they're not any good at it, which is why spam becomes their tactic.

In a classic post from Seth Godin over a decade ago, he defines spam this way, and explains the wider repercussions if we agree to allow it as an acceptable way to do business:

> *Spam is commercial, unsolicited, unanticipated, irrelevant messaging, sent in bulk. It's the email you didn't ask to get, the junk in the comments that's selfish and trying to sell something, the robocall on your cell phone from a company pretending to be Google Maps.*
>
> *Some spammers will tell you that all you need to do is opt out. But of course, the very problem with spam is that it requires action on the part of the recipient, action that can't possibly scale (how many times a day should we have to opt out, communicating with businesses we never asked to hear from in the first place?) People are smart enough to see that once spam becomes professionally and socially acceptable, all open systems fall apart.*

A recent episode of the excellent 2Bobs podcast (a fantastic show from Blair Enns and David C. Baker) brought this around again with a slightly different angle. From David:

> *"I'm also just struck by something else you said about how other experts in your life show up. I'm just laughing as like,*

> *so who is the expert in your life? Maybe it's a divorce attorney, or maybe it's a medical practitioner, an expert, or maybe it's somebody that's trying to get you out of a tax issue or something, did any of these people call you ahead of time and ask for your business?"*

Experts don't spam you. They don't send cold emails or call your cell phone to try to win your business. When you need an expert, you know how to find them. If they've done a good job, they're already in your sphere to some degree, making it an easy decision for you to reach out when you need them.

Related to David's comment, I've never needed a divorce attorney, a medical expert, or help with a tax issue, but I already know the first person I'd call for each of those scenarios. None of them have ever spammed me, but they've positioned themselves as experts in their field so that when the time comes, I know who to call.

David's podcast partner on the "2Bobs" show, Blair Enns, makes it very simple:

> *"David and I effectively agree that cold outreach is the domain of spammers."*

If an "expert" reaches out cold, you should quickly question whether they're an expert at all.

## THE FRAMEWORK

### Short emails are a good thing

There may be rare circumstances where a flowery email is appropriate, but 99% of the time you're better off just getting to the point. Thanks to AI, many people are writing a short email and then using AI to unnecessarily expand it to make it more "professional".

The end result is wasted effort on both sides, and likely a degree of miscommunication. It's kind of like using Google Translate to translate text from English to German, then back again. It's likely going to have the same overall sentiment, but some things may get lost in translation.

Don't be curt with your colleagues, but don't feel the need to make emails unnecessarily long. Share what you need and move on.

We're seeing similar trends with email marketing. It used to be that a "proper" email newsletter covered a wide variety of topics, shared blog posts and social media content, and tried to be almost like a monthly magazine. These days, you'll find far more success with a succinct email that conveys a single message.

The book Smart Brevity suggests simply using *"one topic per email; no one is reading your 57 news stories."*

Short emails can be great.

### Who are your emails from?

When you're working on a big email marketing campaign, most of the focus is on the content of the email itself — as it should be. Next is the subject line, which is a big factor in open rates. What's often overlooked, though, is the name and address that your email is "from".

While I generally think of the subject line as the most important element for getting people to open an email, the folks at Campaign Monitor have said that "studies on email open rates have found that trusting the sender is the single most important factor in whether an email is opened or not." If the "from" field is suspicious, nothing else matters because the email will never be opened.

There's no single right answer about what to use. There are two general directions you can go: the name of the company or the name of a human. In most cases, the human name will perform better.

Of that, though, you have a variety of choices for people to use:

- The company founder
- The marketing director
- The customer service rep that many clients know

Finding the right person is up to you, and it may take some time. If you're not sure, run some A/B testing with different "from" names to see which performs best.

Campaign Monitor says that "trusting the sender is the single most important factor in whether an email is opened or not."

As long as you use a real person (and never ever use "noreply"), you should have favorable results.

## THE PROOF

### There are bad ways to handle your email marketing

I know you see many horrible examples of email marketing in your inbox every day, so the main lesson is to simply avoid behaving as those companies do.

A few years back, I was on our local Subaru dealer's website and had to enter my email address to get a quote. I did; they provided the quote, and we went our separate ways. However, they also added me to their newsletter list (which I wasn't told about and certainly didn't opt in to), and they sent everything from a "noreply" address because they really weren't interested in a conversation. That turned a previously enjoyable conversation with them into a way of thinking about them in an entirely different light.

The same just happened to me at a local restaurant. I did the "QR code to pay" thing, which is fine, but they took my info from that and added me to their mailing list.

The "add emails to our list at all costs" is becoming an epidemic, but there are signs that it may begin to slow.

### Done well, it can work quickly

If you've properly built a large and relevant list, using it appropriately can produce amazing results. We worked with a local HVAC company a few years back that had a solid history but hadn't done anything with email in quite a long time. We took their existing list, cleaned it up, and sent out a short message to their previous customers. That one little email brought in $50k worth of business almost immediately.

## THE ACTION

The main action you should take is pretty simple: dust off your list and send out pure value to people who are already expecting to hear from you.

### Focus on a single topic

When you send an email, choose one topic and dig into it. You may have seven things you want to share, and they might all be important to you, but if you send seven topics in an email, most people will read zero of them.

Pick the one that will be the most valuable for your audience and roll with it.

### Be careful who they're "from"

When we send an email out to our list at GreenMellen, you can click reply, and it'll come directly to me. If I'm going to ask you to read an email from us, I should be willing to read one from you. The fact that most companies intentionally avoid this is baffling to me.

I want to hear back from people on our list, and you should too.

### Be consistent

Ultimately, just be consistent. You don't need to send emails to your clients constantly, but waiting a year between messages isn't good either. Shoot for something consistent but not overwhelming, like perhaps once or twice a month.

As Seth Godin has said, *"persistent, consistent, and frequent stories, delivered to an aligned audience, will earn attention, trust, and action."*

03

PILLAR THREE

# LOCAL

*"Reviews are useful for potential customers when they're honest and objective. Customers find a mix of positive and negative reviews more trustworthy. You can always respond to a review to show the customers that you care and provide additional context." - Google*

If your business tends to show up when users have "local intent" (meaning that Google thinks they're looking for someone nearby, whether or not they include a location or "near me" in their search), then ranking well in Google Maps is vitally important.

## THE MYTHS

### "You need to have five stars"

When looking at the rating for your business on Google or your product on Amazon, what's the ideal score you should have? Most think that a 5.0 rating is the goal, but it probably shouldn't be.

When consumers see a perfect 5.0 score on a product or business, they instantly become skeptical. There are cases where a business or product could be a legit 5.0, but according to a study out of Northwestern University, a score between 4.2 and 4.5 is the most trusted.

In fact, many users (myself included) will look specifically for the bad reviews to see what people's complaints were and how well the business addressed those issues.

From a business perspective, bad reviews can often provide valuable feedback on areas where you can improve.

That's not to say you should intentionally try to get bad reviews for your company, of course, but having a few 3- and 4-star reviews mixed in with your 5-star reviews is likely more beneficial than you think.

Trust me, I know the feeling of getting a less-than-5.0 review, and it stinks, but at the end of the day, if handled well, it might make your business even more appealing to the next person that comes along.

### "I don't have a physical storefront"

Even without a physical storefront, ranking well locally can be a huge piece of your business. While our agency has a physical office, it's not intended as a place for prospective clients to drop in. We work hard to rank for local keywords (like “marketing firms in Atlanta”) and find new clients that way.

Local SEO is essential if you have a storefront, but still very important even if you don’t.

## THE PROBLEMS

### Local is zero sum

As I mentioned in the intro to this book, local SEO is one of those things that is zero sum. If a few of your competitors are in the top map listings, you can’t be. You need to take action to ensure you show up prominently when your prospective customers are searching for you.

### Google extracts “near me” from search phrases

It feels like adding the phrase “near me” to your website could be helpful, so that if someone searches for “dentist near me,” your site has a better chance of appearing. Unfortunately, it doesn’t really work that way because Google essentially removes the phrase “near me” from your search, and then just looks for “dentist” in your local area (using “near me” to guide its radius, not as a specific keyword).

For example, if you search for “sushi near me”, Google will run a local search for “sushi”. Whether or not any of those companies have the words “near me” associated with them is of zero value. Instead, it comes back to a traditional search result based on location, rankings, other keywords, etc.

Chris Silver Smith summed it up nicely in a post on the Search Engine Land website:

> *Google has made it so that a "near me" query will return the closest matching local businesses for one's search terms within the Maps listings. To do this, Google extracts the "near me" portion of the user's query and matches the remainder of the query with businesses it believes are closest in location proximity to the user. This handling negates the efficacy of performing keyword optimizations with "near me" phrases for Google Local search.*

Putting the words "near me" on your website won't necessarily hurt you, but it's of no value, and you'd likely do well to make better use of that space.

### Ranking first isn't always useful

Many people make it a goal to rank first in Google, and it's not a bad plan. The problem is what you're trying to rank first for.

This is a common tactic that spammers use — they can promise you a #1 ranking as long as they don't promise exactly what you'd be ranking #1 for, and that's the key. If you have a website, you almost certainly already rank first for something, but it may not be what users are actually searching for.

For example, if you search for "weekly previews inefficient", a post of mine from a few years ago is likely the first one you'll see. But is that of any value? Probably not, as it's probably not something that people search for very often. But hey, I'm #1!

It takes some effort to find the right keywords and develop great content to help surface them, but it's worth it. After all, anyone can rank #1 for something, so make it worth your while to rank #1 for something great.

### Citations are tricky and weird, but essential

An oft-overlooked aspect of local SEO is getting many other directories to cite your listing, which lends you more credibility in Google's eyes. This is not only frequently missed, but kind of weird to resolve. We'll unpack it more in a few pages.

## THE FRAMEWORK

### Match local content on your site

Your website should include information about the area you serve and align with what you're saying on your Google Business Profile. While having dozens of local pages for each city in your area is less helpful than it was in years past, keeping your location references consistent across your website and Google Local listing is essential.

### Keep reviews coming in and reply to all of them

Reviews are still the lifeblood of solid local rankings, and you need to keep them rolling in. As I mentioned above, you don't need a perfect 5.0 rating, but you should certainly strive to be well above 4.0.

Perhaps more importantly, you should reply promptly to every review that someone leaves. Replying to positive reviews is easy and helpful, but replying to negative reviews is where you can really move the needle. By showing empathy and patience with people who had a poor experience with your company, you actually can gain more business as a result. Every company has bad reviews from time to time, and your reaction to those reviews speaks volumes about how you run your company.

### Customers buy from brands that they already know

Most customers have some idea of the companies they might want to buy from before they even begin their research, so traditional best practices make sense: provide quality content, answer questions, and serve as a guide as customers research.

In fact, prior to their research, 80-90% of customers already have a short list of vendors in mind, and 90% of those people end up purchasing from one of those vendors! In short, **if you're not in your buyer's mind before they start their research, you have no chance with more than 75% of your potential customers.**

So how do you get into their mind before the research? Spend time in the same places as them online.

Ultimately, you need to be present on podcasts they listen to, on social media sites they frequent, in videos they may want to watch, in blog posts that provide information, and in email newsletters they consume.

The best part about this kind of work is that it's a win-win-win:

- You show up where they already are.
- You're providing content and value to help them make the decision ahead.
- AI models like ChatGPT will eat up your content and make it more likely you'll show up there, too!

So much of marketing these days involves simply staying top of mind. When a customer is making a list of vendors like you to consider, make sure you're already one that they've thought of before, or else you'll never even have a chance.

## THE PROOF

### Slow and steady wins the race

We were recently working with a client that had a handful of massage studios in the area. Before working with us, they had issues with their Google Business Profile, so they created another account. They had issues again, so they created a third. It became a big mess.

Each time, they were understandably anxious to get things fixed, and each time they made things worse. We had to insist that they slow down, take a breath, and then work through them slowly. Over the following weeks, we merged the other two locations into their main location, preserved all their reviews, and now they're humming along again.

Google can do some very frustrating and confusing things with local business profiles (often suspending them for no apparent reason), but being reactionary will only make things worse.

### Use your local advantage

Last year, we wanted to refinance our house, so we found a local broker that came recommended, and he did a nice job. There are literally thousands of seemingly identical brokers we could have used, but we went with a local company so we could work with someone we knew and trusted.

A few months later, "he" called my cell phone, but it turned out to be an AI bot he had purchased that called all of his clients to see if they wanted to refinance again.

This was a huge mistake on his part.

He undoubtedly got suckered in by a company promising to have AI "bring in tons of business", but he forgot who he served. In a business like his, **relationships are everything**, and that random AI in between him and us was super weird.

This doesn't apply to all businesses, but for most small businesses, your local presence is incredibly valuable. Lean into it, be human, and avoid shortcuts that put you further away from the people that you love to serve.

### There can be huge gains if your citations are weak

I mentioned local citations a few pages back, and you can find huge gains if your citations are weak and you bring them up to speed.

These "citations" are simply your business listings on other directories, such as Yelp, Yellow Pages, Apple Maps, Foursquare, and dozens more. You are unlikely to get much traffic directly from any of these, but your listings on those directories give you more credibility in the eyes of Google and can help you rank better with them.

When building those citations, just remember your NAP - Name, Address, Phone:

- **Name:** Your business name should be identical everywhere. Are we "Green Mellen Media, LLC" (our legal name), "Green Mellen Media" (remove the LLC), or "GreenMellen" (what we usually go by)? None are better than the others, but consistency is key.
- **Address:** Same goes for your business address. Are you "123 Main Street" or "123 Main St NE"? Are you in "Suite 200" or "# 200"? Again, there is no wrong way to do it, but you need to be precise with every listing.

- **Phone:** Lastly, make sure your phone number is identical across all of those listings. This is often the easiest for companies to be consistent with, but just be aware that it matters.

Ok, so how do I "build citations"? Fortunately, it's pretty easy.

If you're working with a marketing agency, they likely have already purchased a tool that can help you with that and can help update those (and keep them updated) for a low monthly cost. If you aren't working with a company for that kind of thing, there are plenty of tools you can use.

## THE ACTION

You should have a pretty clear idea of some simple next steps, but let's walk through them.

### Reply to every review

As mentioned above, reply to every review that comes in. Personally, as a customer, I try to find some of the non-5-star reviews, see what the issue was, and then see how the business responded. Heartfelt responses from a business can mean a lot, and if you combine that with a ~4.5 kind of average, things should work out pretty well for you.

This is backed by Chris Malone in his book "The Human Brand", where he says that *"people want to see your replies to bad reviews"*. Perceived warmth and competence can drive loyalty.

### Make sure your website keeps current

While you're working hard on your Google Business Profile, make sure your website stays up to date as well. Continue to post content on your site that reflects your work in the local area and supports what's happening on your local profile.

### Get those citations tightened up

Your local citations might already be in decent shape, but if you've never done any specific work to improve them, they're unlikely to be. This is a pretty easy fix, and it's mostly hands-off (your agency or the tool you purchase will do the bulk of the work), and it can make a big difference for a lot of companies.

# 04

PILLAR FOUR

## DATA

*"You're going to look at lift, not attribution."*

*- Rand Fishkin*

When talking about data, there are a variety of ways we could go. For the purposes of your business, we're really talking about two things:

**Measurement of your marketing**, with tools such as Google Analytics and other native measurement tools inside of email marketing and social media platforms.

**Tracking of your leads and customers**, typically via a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) tool.

Both are essential, and we'll explain why throughout this chapter.

This isn't to suggest that we should collect gobs of data on every user who visits your website. As Jodi Daniels shares in "Data Reimagined":

> *"Companies that collect consumer data without permission are effectively stealing the currency of intimacy … Happily, the very fact of its difficulty makes treating customers' data with respect a powerful demonstration of your company's commitment to them."*

There is also an incessant push to collect and show off ever more data, which often only makes things worse. We'll explore that as well.

## THE MYTHS

### "Data tools are far too expensive"

There are big companies that will sell you complex data tools for thousands of dollars a month, but you don't need that. As shared above, we're only going after two types of data (marketing and customers) and tools for those are either free or very inexpensive.

For data, tools like Google Analytics and basic social media measurement are completely free. For email marketing, you'll generally pay a small fee for a tool such as Mailchimp, but all data is included at no extra cost.

For CRM, you'll likely need to pay a small monthly fee for a solid tool, but tools like Pipedrive start at under $20/mo and can handle everything you need.

**"There is too much data, and it's hard to understand it all"**

This isn't exactly a myth; there is too much data, and it's indeed hard to understand it all, but it doesn't have to be. If you have too much data and can't understand it all, then you just need less data.

The great thing about digital marketing is that it's so easy to measure everything that you do.

The bad thing about digital marketing is the same thing.

All of the data in the world sounds great in theory, but it can quickly become overwhelming. I've seen companies that produce 30-page website data reports every month — they're really impressive reports, but they're hard to take action on.

The other challenge is that those 30-page reports are filled with easy-to-find metrics, while much of what you need is the harder-to-put-together pieces.

For example, here are two stats:

- 1,000 people saw your latest Facebook post.
- Of the people who saw your latest Facebook post, 77 clicked through to your website, and 11 bought your product, spending a total of $754.

The first number is super easy to find and marginally helpful, while the second takes more work to set up and track but provides far more insight.

In "Poor Charlie's Almanack," Charlie Munger (Warren Buffett's former business partner) talks about how to make the best use of data:

> *"A special version of this man-with-a-hammer syndrome is terrible not only in economics but practically everywhere else, including business. It's really terrible in business. You've got a complex system, and it spews out a lot of wonderful numbers that enable you to measure some factors. But there are other factors that are terribly important, yet there's no precise numbering you can put to these factors. You know they're important, but you don't have the numbers."*
>
> *"Well, practically everybody*
> 1. *overweighs the stuff that can be numbered because it yields to the statistical techniques they're taught in academia, and*
> 2. *doesn't mix in the hard-to-measure stuff that may be more important. That is a mistake I've tried all my life to avoid, and I have no regrets for having done that."*

As we work with a client, our goal over time is to reduce the amount of data that we present to them. As we continue to better understand their business, the data we share should become full of those items that are harder to measure but provide much more benefit.

A 30-page report might look impressive, but a single-page summary that hits all of the important metrics is tremendously more valuable.

Over the years at GreenMellen, we've worked to reduce the amount of data we share and instead focus on its quality. Rather than a 20-page report, we'll share perhaps a page or two of data during our review meetings, focused on the most impactful pieces.

In David C. Baker's book, "Secret Tradecraft of Elite Advisors", he summarizes it like this:

> *"You might even look at 40 to 50 data points from time to time, but prioritize them to under a dozen. Overwhelming a client with data can be worse than sharing no data at all."*

The amount of data that we have these days is absolutely amazing, but it can quickly become overwhelming. As a leader, your job is to cull through the data and pull out the gems.

The more unnecessary data you can cut, the better.

## THE PROBLEMS

### Attribution is getting really hard

Data can be messy, but a growing problem is messy data that looks straightforward. Data will clearly seem to show you something, only to end up being completely misleading. Let me tell you about my friend Jason.

Jason runs a firm called Blumer CPAs, and they're excellent. We've been a client of theirs for many years now, and hope to be for many years to come. How did we initially find them? Here's the path we took:

- In 2015, we saw Jason Blumer speak at the WordCamp Atlanta conference. I had heard of him, but didn't know much about him. He did a great job with his talk.
- As a result, I started listening to his podcast and subscribed to his blog.
- He produced solid content on both of those, and at one point had a special offer for a one-hour coaching session, which Ali (my business partner) and I signed up for.
- Not long after that, we decided we needed more help with our finances, and he was easily the first person we thought of.
- So on that day I went to Google, searched for "Jason Blumer CPA", found his site, filled out the contact form, and became a happy client.

If Jason does a great job with his data, what will it show? It will clearly show that I found him on Google and that's how we connected. While that's technically true, you can see that's not really what happened.

**There is literally no way for any tracking system, anywhere, to tell that full story** unless Jason had pinned a tracker on me at that conference in 2015 and watched from there. If Jason has a marketing firm that just looks at the data, they will say *"Wow, Google brought you a great client, so let's double down and invest more in Google Ads and Search Engine Optimization."*

This is the problem with "branded" searches, where people search for the specific company that they're looking for. This is a quickly rising percentage of Google searches, as nearly half of all searches these days are branded. Your data will say they came from Google, but *why were they searching for your name in the first place?* Was it a great social media post that you wrote? Was it word-of-mouth from their neighbor? Was it because you did a great job at WordCamp Atlanta 2015?

### Last touch attribution will lie to you

If you rely on "last touch attribution" (seeing what the user did immediately before they reached out to you), it will often lie to you. In the example with Jason above, our last touch was Google, which was 100% accurate but also 100% misleading.

For example, if someone sees a great video you posted, connects with you on LinkedIn, listens to your podcast, clicks over to a blog on your site, and then contacts you to start an engagement — the blog post receives 100% of the credit for that transaction. This is both understandable and problematic.

As Rand Fishkin shared in a post on his SparkToro blog:

> *"When people watch videos on YouTube, browse news on the Washington Post, scroll through posts on Threads, dig around Etsy, or trawl through the long tail of the web, they're exposed to the ideas, information, problems, and brands that turn into search queries.*
>
> *Can a strategy of building brand awareness, interest, and demand outside of search work? Absolutely.*
>
> *Just be careful not to ascribe attribution or credit to Google when other investments drove the real value. For most brands, a huge portion of search referrals come from branded search queries, and almost none of those originated on or because of Google. Yet so many marketers*

> *throw branded-search-assisted conversions into "sales attributed to Google."*

It may be worth investing in Google, but don't assume so just because the initial data says so.

### Users will lie to you

So the answer must be "ask users how they found you", and that can indeed be quite helpful. The problem is that users answering that question will very often unintentionally give you bad info.

When you ask users, "How did you find us?" some big problems crop up.

First, the top choices in the "how did you find us?" question will always be the most popular, regardless of the order that you put the options in.

Second, users may associate your brand with a particular source, even if they didn't find you that way. There was a company in the Midwest that listed a major YouTube channel in the "how did you find us?" options, even though they were completely unaffiliated, and a large percentage of their users chose that (literally impossible) source as their reason.

### Your "CRM" is Excel, or worse, your inbox

Another big problem is thinking you don't need a CRM, or that you've solved your CRM needs with an Excel spreadsheet or your inbox.

I'm not suggesting you run out and start using Salesforce, because the only thing worse than not having a CRM is having one and just letting it collect dust. A system that is too powerful for your needs will end up being too complex and remain unused.

Find a simple, stable option and dig in.

### We can't track "it"

I recently saw a popular post on LinkedIn that said, *"To kill a great marketing idea in six words or less, just ask 'how will we track it?'"*

Initially, it sounds like a valid thought. If you can't track it, why do it?

Tracking can be quite important, and we track all that we can, but it can lead to bad decisions. **Rather than choosing the direction that is best, we often resort to choosing the direction that is easier to track.**

It's related to the idea of lift vs attribution, which we'll discuss in a moment. It's convenient to do only things where you can track attribution all the way through, but you'll often miss great opportunities if you focus too hard on that.

Track everything you can, for sure, but don't let that be the deciding factor for your next marketing idea.

## THE FRAMEWORK

### Treat customer data with respect

The default action for the past few years has been *"collect every bit of data you can, and add people to your email list any time you find an address"*. This is short-sighted, and in many cases, illegal.

One of the biggest assets many companies have is customer data. By collecting, storing, and using large amounts of data about their customers, they can often turn it into additional profit.

In fact, at this point, it's almost easier to collect too much data, so those companies that work hard to limit it deserve some respect, as I shared from Jodi Daniels a few pages back.

### Less data is more

Not only is it wise to collect less data from both practical and legal standpoints, but it is often all you need. The 20-page report you generate will be largely ignored, but a solid single-page summary with strong data and clear calls to action will go much further.

It's common for data collection to grow over time. You get new tools or want to see new metrics, and the reports keep getting longer and longer. You should take the opposite approach and work to slowly remove items from those reports.

## THE PROOF

### Lift versus attribution

As I've shared in this chapter, it can be very difficult to track precise attribution. The story of Jason Blumer earlier in this chapter was a great example, but I also heard another story recently that drove this home.

There was a company spending roughly $50k/mo on podcast ads, but their data showed it was driving only 1.8% of conversions, while Google Ads drove 58%. Cutting the podcast spending seemed easy, so they did.

The result? Their cost per acquisition through Google Ads skyrocketed. Why? The podcasts were building awareness and trust, and then people would search for the brand and click the ads. By the time the user clicked the ad, they were already well on their way to being a customer. Without the podcast to warm them up, all of the ad clicks were raw leads and converted at a much lower rate.

Sadly for this company, while it took minutes to cancel the $50k/mo podcast spend, it took them the better part of a year to get it all back up and running as efficiently as before.

### Don't ascribe attribution to Google when other investments drove the real value

As I've said, when monitoring your website traffic, it's easy to look at your sources and see that Google has sent you the most traffic, which can lead you to think you should double down on it. Maybe you should, but maybe not.

There are certainly people that Google sends to your site that you should be thankful for. If someone searches for "plumbers near me" to find your plumbing company, that's fantastic! However, there are many cases where it may look like Google is sending you traffic, but it's not really coming from Google.

If your reputation is strong enough that people search for you by name, that is awesome! Really, that should be your main goal. It's great when people find you for unbranded searches like "plumbers near me", but **if they know to search for you directly, you win**.

Google may still find itself in the middle, but you didn't get that customer via "SEO," even though they technically came from a Google search. You need to find out how people really discovered you and why they searched for you by name. Double down on that instead.

Tracking down precise attribution can be nearly impossible, but that doesn't mean you should default to attributing it to Google. Work hard to figure out where your best customers are really coming from, and focus as much effort there as you can.

## THE ACTION

There are three simple things you need to be doing when it comes to data.

### Don't ignore this stuff, but don't overanalyze

First, keep it simple. Don't ignore your data, for sure, but don't overanalyze it. I see companies that spend hours poring over their data when that time could have been better spent creating fresh content, attending some in-person events, or myriad other activities beyond playing with spreadsheets.

Work to see where your traffic is coming from and know which pieces of social content perform the best. Just don't get too wrapped up in every little click.

### Get a simple CRM

If you don't have a CRM yet, get one, but keep it simple. The only thing worse than not having a CRM is having one and just letting it collect dust. While a big fancy Salesforce setup might be effective, if it's too cumbersome, your team won't use it, and you'll be back to essentially lacking a CRM (but paying big dollars for one that's collecting dust).

Track your pipeline, keep up with your sales process, and stay on top of what the next 6-12 months look like for your company. If the health of your company is only measured by your bank account, you're in big trouble. A healthy bank account is crucial, of course, but it only tells you how well you've done in the past. With a simple and solid CRM setup, you should be able to get a decent glimpse at what the future looks like, so you can take action before it's too late.

### Set up some basic dashboards

The lesson of this chapter is simplicity. If you're trying to log into Google Analytics to understand what's going on with your website, you're gonna have a bad time. There are many tools that can aggregate your data from Analytics (as well as your email and social media tools) into one place. Your marketing company should be able to provide that for you at little to no cost, and if they can't, you may want to start looking for a new partner.

As with everything in this chapter, you need to find a healthy balance. If your website traffic falls from 10,000 visitors/mo to 800, you need to dig into that right away. However, if you're concerned because it dropped from 10,000 to 9,867, you have better things to do with your time.

Also, never forget that these dashboards will lie to you. They'll (hopefully) be giving you pure data, but that pure data can't tell the entire story. Among other things, the bulk of the traffic from Google was probably routed through Google, but the *true* source was elsewhere. You can't usually measure it directly, so save your time (and your money). Keep putting yourself in front of the right people with the right message, and things have a way of working themselves out.

# 05

PILLAR FIVE

## SOCIAL MEDIA

*"Social media is just an empty vessel; you only get out of it what you put into it." - Gary Vaynerchuk, "Day Trading Attention"*

I'm calling this chapter "social media", but that may not really be a thing anymore. Sure, there are "social" platforms that you can visit, but their overall behavior has changed dramatically. Rather than being built on the social graph to show you content from people you know and follow, the vast majority of the content you see comes from what their algorithms recommend. These days it's more "interest media" than "social media".

Instead of focusing on growing your follower count, focus on producing amazing content. The goal of creating amazing content always should have been a high priority, but it's the only priority these days. The value of having "followers" has been dropping for years, and that trend will only continue. Getting more followers isn't a bad thing, but it's simply not nearly as valuable as it once was.

As Seth Godin has frequently said, *"persistent, consistent, and frequent stories, delivered to an aligned audience, will earn attention, trust, and action."* Social media is just an empty vessel, and you'll only get out of it what you put into it.

The shift from social media to interest media is not a great thing, but there are some advantages to it. Let's dig in.

## THE MYTHS

### "You have to be a dancing influencer to be found"

I've talked to many companies about creating a presence for themselves on TikTok, and I've heard far too often that "it's just full of dancing teenagers". While that may often be true for the most popular content, there is a place for every kind of person and company. The difference is that your content needs to be compelling. It doesn't need to be dancing, or music, or action, or anything specific, but it needs to be something that resonates with people.

TikTok's algorithm is amazing and brutal: if the first few people who see your content don't watch the full video (and ideally engage with it by liking or commenting), TikTok won't even bother to show it to anyone else.

### "It's all changing too quickly"

The other thing I often hear is that the world of social media is changing too quickly and they can't keep up. Too quickly? Facebook has been around since 2004, and it's still relevant today. It may disappear soon, but when platforms have a multi-decade lifespan, "changing too quickly" isn't the problem.

It's about making great content and getting it in front of the people that need to see it. As Gary Vaynerchuk says in "Day Trading Attention":

> *"You can even take this concept back to the Stone Age. I bet if somebody wanted to sell you a new club, they would draw on the cave walls because that's where all the cavemen were most likely to look."*

The details of social media are indeed changing very quickly, but the core concepts aren't going anywhere. Produce great content that is interesting and valuable to people, content that they want to engage with and share, and you'll find yourself doing very well on any social network you can find.

## THE PROBLEMS

### You don't have time

The lack of time for generating high-quality social media content is indeed a problem for many businesses. AI can help to a degree, but as AI-generated content becomes more and more popular, authentic content will have a great chance to shine, but it takes time.

Your time has a cost. In his book “The 1-Page Marketing Plan”, author Allen Dib explains:

> *Some people have the perception that social media marketing is “free.” It’s only truly free if your time is worth nothing.*

Your time has value. There is a good chance that it’s a smart investment, and most businesses should probably spend some time on social networks that are appropriate for their company, but don’t do it simply “because it’s free”.

### It’s getting messy

As I just mentioned, AI-generated content has taken over much of social media, creating new content at an unbelievable pace. Writer Jay Acunzo often shares advice on staying out of the “commodity cage,” where you produce overly general, not very insightful content. You can’t hope to compete with the volume of content out there, so your best bet is to create more specific, highly insightful content.

Social media networks always reward content that users find engaging (because their goal is to keep people logged on the platform), so if you can produce content that is useful to those who receive it, it’s a win for everyone.

The key is to actually create quality content, not just hop on the latest trend and hope to pick up some cheap views. There’s a phrase for that known as “algo simping”, explained in Jared Fuller’s book “Nearbound”, where he says:

> *You have to be especially careful of what my business partner Isaac calls algo simping—contorting all your content*

> *in a desperate attempt to win the algorithm's favor and get more reach. The danger of algo simping is that the benefits are seen while the costs are unseen. It may drive up impressions or engagement, but it also works at diminishing your influence with the very types of decision-makers most valuable to your goals. When they see an obvious algo simp, they won't tell you or post a negative comment. They may even click the like button. But they also silently slot you into the "unserious attention-seeker" section of their mental filing cabinet.*

Similar to writing slop that ranks well on Google, algo simping can seem successful at first. Your content is getting more impressions and perhaps some extra engagement, but there's a cost that you don't see. As Fuller mentions in the book, you'll be seen by some as being unserious, which is generally a bad place to be.

Paying attention to social media algorithms and adjusting your strategy is wildly important, for sure. But changing who you are and how you act just to try to win some internet points is likely to fail in the long run. You're trying to win for the future, not just for today.

### Tracking is getting harder every day

Social media sites hate links. They always have, and every update they make punishes links a bit more. Charlie Munger famously said *"show me the incentive, and I'll show you the outcome"*, and that is absolutely true of social media sites.

Their primary incentive is to make money, and they do that by keeping you on the site. If you find a great link and leave the site, they'll likely earn less money because you're no longer on the site clicking around. Their incentive is to keep you on the site, so that means they see links to external websites as the enemy.

Links on your post can make a huge difference. According to a few studies, social media posts that contain links will see their reach (and therefore potential engagement) drop by as much as 90%!

This has led to some creative link sharing over the years, but those techniques (such as the famous "link in comments") generally lead to the same results. To think that a hugely complex algorithm like the ones on Facebook would be fooled by "link in comments" is not very likely.

So what can be done? The end result is much of what we talked about in the "Data" chapter, where you just can't trust the data, and you need to look at overall lift versus precise attribution. You may not see much direct value from your efforts on social media, but like the company that discovered the hidden value in their podcast ads, your work on social media is likely manifesting itself through more clicks through Google.

## THE FRAMEWORK

### Always show value

The content you share on social media needs to provide real value to the person viewing it, for a few reasons.

First, if your content is all self-serving, you'll be ignored. It's a bit of a paradox, but the more you post about yourself, the fewer people will actually see it.

Second, sharing value is the perfect way to build trust. All great business relationships have a foundation of trust. If social media is your first interaction with someone, it's a great time to build that initial layer of trust. I'll share some good examples in "The Proof" section of this chapter in a moment.

### Don't be a sharecropper

If you understand the history of sharecropping, it looked advantageous to the sharecropper (getting to use land for farming for no money up front), but generally ended in a very bad situation. It trapped farmers in a cycle of debt and poverty from which they often couldn't escape.

Social media can be seen in largely the same way. From Seth Godin's book "This is Marketing":

> *"Facebook and other social platforms seem like a shortcut, because they make it apparently easy to reach new people. But the tradeoff is that you're a sharecropper. It's not your land. You don't have permission to contact people; they do. You don't own an asset; they do."*

Investing all your time and effort into something you don't own can be a dangerous game to play, because all your work could be taken away at a moment's notice.

Granted, social media certainly has some major benefits, so I'm not saying to avoid it entirely. In fact, we work with many of our clients to improve their content and help get more visibility (and traffic, and sales) as a result.

However, in every case we make sure they own the stuff that really matters, primarily their website and email list. Social media can be an amazing tool for driving traffic, but at the end of the day, you always need to fully own the digital assets that are most important to you.

### Social media is vapor

I wrote a blog post about this back in 2021, and it's still super easy to find on my website. However, at this point, my social posts promoting it are long gone, just like millions of other posts every day.

I wrote my first blog post back in 2004, and every post is still readily available today. There's no reason to think it won't exist for at least 20 years more. There are no guarantees, of course, but it seems feasible.

Social media posts, as you know, have a very short lifespan. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's something you always need to consider. When I first started my blog, Friendster, XING, and Myspace were the top social channels. Any content I had published on any of them is long gone by now.

What will the landscape look like 20 years from now? It's hard to know. Even so, while sites like Facebook and Twitter may keep most of your posts forever, finding those old posts can be very difficult.

The problem is that social media posts come and go. If you have something worthwhile to say, publish it on your own blog and share that post with the world. This is likely one reason why Seth Godin doesn't tweet — rather than share quick insights that come and go, he turns his quick thoughts into deeper insights that can stand the test of time.

Beyond that, it's fairly difficult to back up your social media posts in a way that allows them to be republished. With a blog, you can create a quick, full backup of everything, and move it elsewhere. My blog has been on a number of hosts over the years, but moved without a change in address or even a tiny hiccup. That alone is powerful.

Enjoy social media, but don't let your insights drift away. Social media is often compared to a river; take a dip when you can, but the content will keep sailing away whether you're there or not. Those dips are fun, and I'll continue to pop in frequently, but take the time to set up your own platform that will outlast your social media platform of choice.

### Social media isn't for content; it's for distribution

Taking it further, Mark Schaefer has said that *"LinkedIn is not a content platform. It's a distribution system."*

In a post on his Medium account, Schaefer said:

> *"If you're only posting your content on LinkedIn, you're grotesquely sub-optimizing your personal branding and content marketing effort. LinkedIn and other social media platforms can play a crucial role in personal branding. But please post all of your content on your website first and then send it into the social media distribution system."*

I post on LinkedIn frequently, as it can be a great place for people to see your content, but virtually everything I post goes on my website first, and then I copy it to LinkedIn. LinkedIn is great for short-term exposure, and the website is great for long-term traffic.

## THE PROOF

### Show more value with what you post

I have a friend who recently decided to go all in on social media to try to build up his business. Over the next few days, he published nine times (on LinkedIn, in his case), and every single one was a variation on “hire me”. As you might expect, the posts received literally zero engagement.

Another friend has a total of two posts. A year ago, he posted “here’s why you should hire me,” and five months ago, he posted “I’m looking for work.”

Neither of them have provided any insight into how they solve problems or what they’re passionate about, much less provided any value to anyone reading their posts.

In contrast, Jason Blumer (who I’ve mentioned a few times in this book) brings value with his last six posts on LinkedIn where he:

- Shared a recent podcast episode of theirs.
- Shared an episode from another of their podcasts.
- Shared a recent post from Gary Vaynerchuk about having purpose in your work.
- Shared a bit about their firm.
- Shared a tax reminder for small businesses.
- Shared a helpful product that one of their clients is offering to litigators.

He certainly mixes in some posts about why one should hire his firm, but they’re surrounded by ideas, tips, and news that make him worth following and trusting.

### Social Media → Interest Media

As I mentioned in the intro to this chapter, people still call it "social media", and I do in this guide as well, but it's really becoming "interest media". Social media isn't showing you what your friends said (social), but instead what it thinks you want to see (interest).

The nature of social media is undergoing a huge change. All of the major social networks are changing to show less content from those you follow, and more posts they think will interest you. This approach has worked wonders for the growth of TikTok, and we'll see how it does for the other platforms.

In a podcast, Gary Vaynerchuk summarized it well, saying:

> *I believe we're no longer in the era of social media but in the era of interest media. Social was like "who are your friends?" and now it's "what are you interested in?".*

There are pros and cons to this shift, but we ultimately need to simply accept that it's happening. Unless you personally control the algorithm at Meta, you can't change where this shift is heading.

The main takeaway is this: instead of focusing on growing the number of followers you have, focus on producing amazing content. The goal of creating amazing content should have always been a high priority, but it's the only priority these days. Getting more followers isn't a bad thing, but it's simply not nearly as valuable as it was a few years ago.

You no longer need a "big spark" to have a chance to go viral. Your next post (or even your first) on social media could reach millions.

Make awesome content that attracts interest, and you'll tend to do very well.

### My lucky TikTok

I'm not on TikTok very often. I'll post some marketing insights from time to time, but it's not my kind of place. Most of my posts will get perhaps a couple hundred views at most, and I'm fine with that. I have a whopping 121 followers, which is perfectly fair.

Last year, though, a simple video of mine received 178,000 views. It caught the right angle, and TikTok decided many people would be interested in it. It wasn't very special; it was literally me just reading a quote from a book, but it resonated. I think I have other videos on there that are far better, but it's not up to me to decide what gets spread. Put in the reps and good things can happen.

## THE ACTION

### Set a calendar to be consistent

Figure out what cadence works for you and then stick to it. Posting a few times a week is ideal, but even posting once a week (consistently!) will put you in rare air compared to other small businesses.

A content calendar can be your secret weapon, and it's really easy to do. There are various apps you can use to help, but Excel can do the job too. Write out the dates for your next few months' worth of posts, and then start dropping in some ideas. Not only will this give you content ideas when the time comes, but it also allows you to think ahead. If your calendar shows that important conference in three months, you can plan to start promoting it in the weeks ahead. With a proper content calendar, things will no longer sneak up on you.

# CLOSING

Here are a few final thoughts as we leave:

**Consistent attention beats occasional overhauls.** There are cases where a website is simply so outdated that a replacement is the best move, but 90% of the time an afternoon of content updates (and a plan to revisit frequently) will have a much bigger and less expensive impact.

**Slow growth is stable.** When we're starting something new, many of us dive in completely. Workouts go from 0 to brutal. Reading goes from 2 books/year to 2 books/week. Running goes from never to 20 miles/week. Most often, we burn out and these all end quickly and poorly. You need to decide, particularly early on in a new venture, to choose consistency over intensity.

**Market for sales, not vanity.** I love this quote from the great David Ogilvy: *"Now what do you want from me? Fine writing? Do you want masterpieces? Do you want glowing things that can be framed by copywriters, or do you want to see the god damn sales curve stop moving down and start moving up?"*

Beautiful work can be a good thing (and can be beneficial), but that's not the goal. You're trying to get more sales, so let's focus on getting more sales.

**Word of mouth dominates marketing.** Everything we've talked about in this book is vitally important, but at the end of the day, word of mouth is your best asset. When you get all five pillars working, word of mouth sales will show up in droves.

As AI continues to grow, your brand will become your lifeline. Which statement will users ask from their AI?

- "Order me a pizza" or "Order me a pizza from LaBella's"?
- "Find a company to fix my hacked website" or "Contact GreenMellen to have them look at my hacked website"?
- "Get me an HVAC company out here to fix our A/C" or "Have Summit come out to fix our A/C"?

Many people will opt for the first type of examples, which will simply take an ever-growing pile of money to stay on top of. However, many other people will do the second kind of search. Will you be the company that they search for?

I'll leave you with a fantastic message from the book Atomic Habits. In the book, James Clear says:

> *"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."*

Now you have a system, and it'll help you reach your goals. If you get it in place and stick with it, "falling to the level of your systems" will put your business in a fantastic place.

If you have questions or need any help with what we've shared in this book, flip to the back cover for my contact info and please reach out.

## We believe every small business should have a partner that can support their digital growth, allowing them to focus on what matters most.

Mickey Mellen has spent his career selflessly giving of his time, knowledge and experience to help other businesses succeed in marketing and technology. His relentless curiousity has allowed him to rise to the position of a thought-leader in the industry. His consult is trusted by many, including the hundreds of businesses served by his company, GreenMellen.

Effective marketing tactics are always shifting, making it difficult to stay ahead. In this book, Mickey breaks down the five pillars of marketing and how they're relevant in 2027.

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