SAILING DIRECTIONS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

Marketing your small business

Social media, email and meeting people face to face. What works for a small local business, what the law says, and how to fit it into an hour or two a week.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Picking your platforms, what to post and local groups

EMAIL

Building a list, the law, and emails people open

FACE TO FACE

Networking, markets, word of mouth and referrals

AT THE BACK

A weekly plan and a checklist you can tick off

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BEFORE WE START

Hi, I'm Rob. Marketing is mostly turning up.

Most small businesses don't need a big budget or a clever campaign. They need the right people to see them often enough to remember them when the moment comes.

I build websites, tills and software for small businesses in Lincolnshire, and the same question comes up again and again once a site is live: "How do I get people to it?" This guide is my answer. It covers the three things that work for almost every local business: social media, email and meeting people in person.

None of it needs a marketing degree or much money. It needs a bit of time every week, done steadily. An hour a week for a year beats a frantic fortnight followed by nothing, because people trust the businesses they keep seeing.

THE ONE THING THAT MATTERS MOST

Be useful and be consistent. Show people what you do, help them with something, and keep doing it. The businesses that do well online are rarely the cleverest. They're the ones that never went quiet.

How to use it: section 1 takes ten minutes and makes everything after it easier. Sections 2 to 4 cover the three channels, each with the rules you need to know. Section 5 puts it all into a weekly routine, and the checklist at the back keeps you on track.

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01 WHO YOU'RE TALKING TO

Ten minutes on this saves you hours later

The most common marketing mistake is talking to everyone. Your posts end up bland, and nobody feels they're meant for them. Before you post or send anything, get clear on three things.

01 Who your best customers are

Think of the three customers you'd most like more of. Where do they live? How old are they, roughly? What were they trying to sort out when they found you? A dance school's best customers might be parents of 4 to 10 year olds within a twenty-minute drive. A kitchen fitter's might be homeowners in their forties planning a renovation.

02 Where they already spend time

You don't need to be everywhere. You need to be where those people are. Parents are in local Facebook groups. Tradespeople's customers search Google. Younger customers are on Instagram and TikTok. Other businesses are on LinkedIn and at networking events.

03 The one line that says why you

Finish this sentence in plain words: *"I help [who] to [what], and unlike most, I [the thing that's different]."* It's not a slogan for your sign. It's the thought behind everything you post, send and say.

TOO VAGUE

"We offer quality cakes for all occasions at competitive prices."

CLEAR

"I make celebration cakes for families on the coast, and I'll deliver and set up on the day so you don't have to carry a three-tier cake in the car."

Ask every new customer one question

"How did you hear about us?" Write the answer down, every time. After a couple of months you'll know which of the things in this guide are working for you, and you can do more of those and less of the rest.

DON'T SKIP THIS

If you only do one thing from this page, do the question. Without it, you're guessing where your customers come from, and most people guess wrong.

02 SOCIAL MEDIA

Pick one or two, and do them well

Being on six platforms and posting once a month on each does less than one platform every few days. Choose by where your customers are, not where you feel you ought to be.

PLATFORM	GOOD FOR	WORTH IT IF
Google Business Profile	Being found when people search for what you do nearby, and collecting reviews	You serve local customers. Do this one first
Facebook	Local customers, community groups, events and families	You're a local shop, trade, class or venue
Instagram	Anything that looks good: food, beauty, crafts, interiors, fitness	You can take a decent photo every few days
TikTok	Short, honest videos of you at work, often to younger customers	You're happy on camera, and it's not your first platform
LinkedIn	Selling to other businesses, and being known in your trade	Your customers are businesses or professionals
Nextdoor	Neighbours asking for a recommendation	You're a home service, like cleaning, gardening or repairs

My free guide *Your Google Business Profile* covers setting one up and looking after it, step by step.

Post as the business

Make a proper business Page or account, rather than posting as yourself. Facebook expects a business to have a Page, and a Page gets you messages, reviews and statistics a personal profile doesn't. Put two people on as admins, so you're never locked out if one of you loses a phone.

What to post

- **Your work.** Before and afters, finished jobs, today's bake. Real photos beat polished ones.
- **Behind the scenes.** Setting up, a new delivery, the workshop at 7am. People buy from people.
- **Answers.** The questions customers always ask, answered in a post. "How long does a kitchen take to fit?"
- **Customers' words.** A real review, shared with their permission.
- **What's coming.** Events, new stock, booking dates, and when you're closed.

Local Facebook groups

Town and village groups are where people ask "Can anyone recommend...?" Those posts are some of the warmest leads a small business ever gets, and they go quiet within a few hours.

01 Join the groups for the places you serve, and read each group's rules. Many only allow business posts on a set day.

02 Check them once or twice a day for posts asking for what you do.

03 Reply quickly and briefly, in your own words. Say who you are, that you can help, and where to see your work.

04 Leave it with them. Don't send private messages unless they ask.

05 Be a neighbour the rest of the time. Answer questions you know about, even when there's no sale in it.

How often, and when

TO START

Twice a week

Two good posts a week is plenty, and much easier to keep going than one a day.

SAVE TIME

Batch them

Take the photos as you work, then write and schedule a week's posts in one sitting.

EVERY DAY

Reply

Answer comments and messages within a day. A quick reply often matters more than the post did.

Reviews

Reviews are the most persuasive thing you can have, and most happy customers will leave one if you ask at the right time. Ask in person when they're clearly pleased, then send the link the same day so it's one tap away. Reply to every review, good or bad, politely and by name.

ROCKS AHEAD: THE RULES PEOPLE BREAK WITHOUT KNOWING

Fake or paid-for reviews. Since April 2025 fake reviews are banned outright in the UK, and so is hiding genuine bad ones. Google's own rules also forbid offering anything in return for a review, even a small discount.

Gifted or paid posts. If you give someone free products or pay them to post about you, the post must be clearly labelled as an ad, for example with #ad at the start.

"Share to win" competitions. Facebook's rules for Pages don't allow "share this post" or "tag a friend" as a way to enter. "Comment to enter" is fine.

Photos of customers. Ask before you post anyone, and get a parent's permission for children.

Paid ads

They can work, but get the free things going first. Ads send people to your Page and your website, so those need to look busy and cared for before you pay to send anyone there.

03 EMAIL

The one audience you actually own

Facebook can change what your followers see overnight. Your email list is yours. A short, regular email to people who already like you is often the best-value marketing a small business can do.

Building your list

- **Ask in person.** "Would you like to hear about new dates and offers by email?" at the till, at the end of a job, or at a market stall.
- **A sign-up box on your website**, with one line on what people get and how often.
- **A QR code** on your counter, receipts or flyers that goes straight to the sign-up form.
- **A reason to join.** First to hear about booking dates, a seasonal recipe, a monthly tip. Keep it honest.

The law, in plain English

Marketing emails come under the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations (PECR), alongside UK GDPR. The short version:

SENDING TO	WHAT YOU NEED
Members of the public	Their clear consent: an unticked box they tick themselves, or a sign-up form. A pre-ticked box isn't consent.
Your existing customers	You can email them about similar things you sell (the "soft opt-in"), as long as you gave them a chance to say no when you took their details.
Limited companies and LLPs	You can email their work addresses without asking first. Sole traders and most partnerships count as members of the public.
Everyone	Say who you are, and give an easy way to unsubscribe in every email. Act on it straight away.

ROCKS AHEAD: TWO COSTLY MISTAKES

Putting everyone in "To" or "Cc". It shows every address to every reader, which can count as a data breach. Use a mailing tool, or "Bcc" for a handful of people.

Buying a list. The people on it haven't agreed to hear from you, it hurts your email reputation, and it can break the law.

More detail is on `ico.org.uk`, under direct marketing. This is a summary, not legal advice.

What to send

Keep it short, useful and about them. One main thing per email works better than five.

```
From: Sam at Moorside Dance                      <- a person, not "info"
Subject: Spring term booking opens Monday        <- the news, plainly
---------------------------------------------------------------------
Hi Jo,                                           <- their name, if you have it
Spring term starts on 12 January, and booking    <- the main thing first
opens to everyone on this list first ...
[ Book a place ]                                 <- one clear button
Also this month: our showcase photos are up ...  <- one extra, at most
See you soon, Sam                                <- sign off as you
Unsubscribe . Moorside Dance, Louth              <- the way out, always
```

FIG. 1 · A NEWSLETTER THAT GETS READ. MOORSIDE DANCE IS MADE UP FOR THE EXAMPLE.

How often

Once a month suits most small businesses. Seasonal ones can do more in their busy months and go quiet in between. What matters is that people know roughly when to expect you, and that every email is worth opening.

Use a proper mailing tool

Services like Mailchimp, MailerLite and Brevo handle the sign-up form, the unsubscribe link and the design for you, and most have a free plan for a small list. They also make sure your emails come from a properly set up address, which helps them land in the inbox rather than junk.

Subject lines

GETS IGNORED

"October Newsletter" · "Don't miss out!!!" · "Exciting news from us"

GETS OPENED

"Christmas orders close on 12 December" · "New Saturday class for under 5s" · "We're closed next week, here's why"

What to watch

Your mailing tool will show how many people opened each email and clicked, and who unsubscribed. Don't chase the numbers. Look for patterns: which subjects got opened, which links got clicked, and whether a jump in unsubscribes followed a change you made.

BE WARY OF

Sending only offers. If every email is "20% off", people learn to wait for the discount. Mix in news, tips and things worth knowing.

04 FACE TO FACE

Still the strongest way to win trust

Someone who's met you, shaken your hand and seen your work is far more likely to buy, and to tell their friends. For a local business it's often where the best customers come from.

Where to go

WHERE	WHAT TO EXPECT
Networking groups	Your local Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), and breakfast groups like BNI and 4Networking. Try a couple as a guest before you join one.
Markets, fairs and shows	Farmers' markets, craft fairs, Christmas markets and wedding fairs put you in front of customers directly. Bring things people can see and touch.
Community events	Galas, school fêtes, charity days and open days. Sponsoring a local team or event keeps your name in front of the same people all year.
Talks and demos	A short talk at the WI, a library or a business club, or a free taster session, shows what you know without a hard sell.
Other local businesses	The café next door, the estate agent, the wedding venue. Businesses whose customers need you can send them your way.

What to bring

- Business cards or a small flyer with a QR code to your website or booking page
- Your phone, with your best work ready to show
- A sign-up sheet or QR code for your email list, with a line saying what people are signing up to
- Something to remember people by: a notebook, or notes on your phone straight after each chat

TAKING PEOPLE'S DETAILS

A business card handed to you is fine to follow up with a personal email about your chat. Before adding someone to your mailing list, though, ask them. "Can I add you to my monthly email?" takes two seconds and keeps you within the rules on page 6.

What to say

Have a 20-second answer to "So what do you do?" ready, built from the one line in section 1. Make it about the people you help, not your job title.

EASY TO FORGET

"I'm a bookkeeper."

EASY TO REMEMBER

"I do the books for small cafés and shops, so the owners get their evenings back."

Then ask about them, and listen. Most people enjoy talking about their business, and it takes the pressure off you. Good questions:

01 How long have you been doing that?

02 Where do most of your customers come from?

03 What's the busiest part of your year?

If what they say connects with what you do, tell them how, and show them an example on your phone. If it doesn't, think of someone else who could help them. People remember who helped them out.

Following up

Within two days, send a short email or message that mentions something from your conversation. "Lovely to meet you at the market on Saturday. Here's the photo of that oak table I mentioned." It turns a brief chat into a contact.

Word of mouth and referrals

Happy customers telling their friends is the best marketing there is, and you can help it along.

- **Ask.** When a customer's clearly pleased, say "If you know anyone else who'd like this, I'd really appreciate you passing my name on."
- **Make it easy.** Give them a couple of cards, or a link they can forward.
- **Say thank you.** A handwritten card or a small thank-you when someone sends a customer your way. Thanks for the recommendation is fine. Payment for a good review isn't.

IF NETWORKING MAKES YOU NERVOUS

You're not alone, and most of the room feels the same. Arrive early, when it's quiet and easier to start a chat. Set a small goal, like three proper conversations, and let yourself leave once you've had them. And lean on your questions: asking is much easier than selling.

05 PUTTING IT TOGETHER

An hour or two a week, done every week

Here's a routine that fits around running a business. Start with this, see what brings customers in, and give more time to whatever works for you.

WHEN	WHAT	TIME
Every day	Reply to comments, messages and reviews. Glance at local groups for "can anyone recommend..." posts	10 min
As you work	Take photos and short videos of jobs, products and behind the scenes	No extra time
Once a week	Write and schedule two or three posts for the week ahead	30 min
Once a week	Ask your happiest customers for a review, and send them the link	10 min
Once a month	Send your email newsletter	45 min
Once a month	Go to one networking event, market or community event	2 hours
Every three months	Look back at "How did you hear about us?" and do more of what's working	30 min

What good looks like after six months

ONLINE

Busy, not perfect

A Page and a Google profile with recent posts, real photos and replies to every review.

EMAIL

A list that grows

A monthly email that people open, and a few new sign-ups every month.

LOCALLY

Known by name

People at events recognise you, and other businesses send customers your way.

ROCKS AHEAD: GOING QUIET

The most common way small business marketing fails isn't a bad post. It's stopping. A Page whose last post was eight months ago makes people wonder if you're still trading. If you're too busy to post for a while, put up one line saying so, then come back to it.

YOUR WEBSITE IS THE HUB

Every post, email and conversation should point somewhere people can find out more and get in touch. Make sure your website works well on a phone, shows your prices or a guide price, and makes booking or contacting you take one tap.

06 THE CHECKLIST

Tick these off as you go

Print this page and keep it somewhere you'll see it. Getting started takes a few evenings. After that it's a few habits.

Getting started

- [ ] I've written down who my best customers are
- [ ] I've finished my one line about why me
- [ ] I ask every new customer how they heard about me
- [ ] My Google Business Profile is set up and complete
- [ ] I have a business Page, with two admins
- [ ] I've joined the local groups for the places I serve
- [ ] I have a sign-up form for my email list

The rules

- [ ] No pre-ticked boxes on any sign-up form
- [ ] An unsubscribe link in every marketing email
- [ ] Email lists sent from a mailing tool or Bcc, never To or Cc
- [ ] No bought lists
- [ ] No reviews paid for, swapped or made up
- [ ] Gifted or paid posts labelled #ad
- [ ] Permission to post photos of customers

Every week

- [ ] Two or three posts, with real photos
- [ ] Every comment, message and review answered
- [ ] Local groups checked for recommendation posts
- [ ] At least one happy customer asked for a review

Every month

- [ ] One email to my list, with one main thing in it
- [ ] One event, market or networking meeting
- [ ] New contacts followed up within two days

Every three months

- [ ] Looked at where customers came from
- [ ] Dropped one thing that isn't working
- [ ] Given more time to one thing that is
- [ ] Checked my website still works well on a phone

IF YOU GET STUCK

Write to me. A quick question is free, and you don't need to be hiring me.

If you're not sure where to start, or something in here doesn't fit your business, send me an email. It's just me here, so the reply comes from me.

robert@tideswell.dev tideswell.dev

And if your website isn't pulling its weight, that's what I do, here in Lincolnshire. The web address and hosting are in your name, so the website's yours to keep whatever happens.

WEBSITES

Web design

Built for phones first, set up for Google, and easy to update yourself. Online shops and bookings too.

TILLS

EPOS and tills

A till that handles your stock, use-by dates, rota and cash-up as well. No monthly fee.

SOFTWARE

Custom software

Swap the spreadsheets and paper forms for one system the whole team can use.

Good luck with it. I hope it brings you plenty of new faces.

Feel free to pass this guide on to anyone it might help. Edition 1, October 2026. Rules were checked in October 2026, but they change, so the ICO, the CMA and each platform's own help pages have the latest. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, Nextdoor, Google, Mailchimp, MailerLite and Brevo are trademarks of their owners. This guide isn't connected with any of them.

Tideswell has no tide. It's a village in the Peak District, nowhere near the sea, and the name means *Tidi's well*. There is a well, as far as anyone knows.

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