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Small businesses shouldn't trim ad budget

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During economic downturns, marketing and advertising funds often are the first budgets cuts implemented by small businesses.

But experts say promoting products or services is even more vital to the health of small businesses.

That's because the ability to build a brand and push a product or service to the public is

more critical as consumers tighten their belts.

Unfortunately, many small businesses, especially startups, often don't have the resources to promote themselves or their products regardless of the state of the economy. They are left to fend for themselves in an increasingly complicated advertising world.

Choosing between social media marketing, online advertising, or print, radio or TV promotions further complicates

the equation, as business owners scramble to figure out the most effective way to invest their advertising/marketing dollars.

There often is not just one solution to a company's marketing needs. It often requires a balance — in the age of search engine optimi-



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radio and television ads.

When invested wisely, advertising dollars can produce the kind of results that help entrepreneurs take their businesses to the next level in arguably the most difficult market in recent history.

The *Arizona Business Gazette* spoke with three leading officers of successful Valley advertising firms to see what advice they had for those small businesses looking to make a splash in the market.

SMALL BUSINESS

Company	What's the most inexpensive, yet effective, way to promote a small business?	What are the most common mistakes to avoid when advertising/marketing a business?	What's the best way to identify what advertising/marketing firm is the best fit?
Eric Zion CEO of Zion and Zion, Tempe	While it depends on the type of small business, online marketing, social media and public relations hold the most promise. The latter two due to their ability to "get the word out" and online marketing due to its measurability.	Whether big or small, the biggest mistake we see businesses make is not implementing adequate ROI (return on invested capital) tracking. Even the businesses that have such systems in place often stop at "cost per lead" as opposed to carrying it all way to ROI.	You have to consider the same things to be important. If they keep talking about creative, and you keep thinking about results, then there's a problem. If their backgrounds are as designers and art directors and your background is heavily analytical — again, there's a problem. Look for people who seem to get you and have more than just "pretty" creative to bring to the table
Ron Meritt COO of PRfect Media, Phoenix	Viral marketing is an inexpensive and effective way to promote a small business. Online promotions and daily sales items for retail business get your message out and stimulate on-the-spot purchases. Both retail and service businesses should concentrate on developing e-mail lists of their current customers as well as develop a referral program to attract new customers.	A common mistake made when advertising or marketing is the inability of a business to be consistent in their image and brand. This can confuse consumers about the reliability and credibility of the business. Consumers do not know what to believe, and if there is a question in their mind about the reliability of the business, they will not do business with you.	It is important that the firm you work with understands your product or service and has experience working in your industry or a similar industry. Advertising/marketing firms tend to specialize in either business-to-business or business-to-consumer products and services. It is important to interview more than one firm to make sure you are getting the most experienced firm at the best price.
Matthew Owens Senior Partner of Owens Harkey and Associates, Phoenix	Social media and public relations is a great way to go when you have a limited budget. Neither has to cost a lot of money but both require time, effort and research. Both provide genuine value and cultivate supporters and promoters of your business. Another affordable option is Google pay-per-click for online advertising.	Relying on tactics without a strategic plan that has well-defined goals and objectives is by far the biggest and most common mistake. Once the strategy is determined, choosing tactics and executing the plan is easier and more effective. Getting outside help with the strategic plan is a great investment and usually saves money in the end.	Great marketing companies are based in philosophy. When interviewing them learn how they think and how they approach complex problems. Beware of companies selling speculative creative executions or tactics — they are trying to sell you, not your customers. An agency should work to understand your business well before they make recommendations. Don't forget to ask for and check client references.