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When it comes to marketing a small business, the options can be overwhelming and costly. However, with a solid plan, it's possible to get results on a budget.

Jeremy Sisk, president of Xperience4Higher, Inc., a full-service marketing firm in Durham that focuses on small businesses, said new businesses need to assess the market they plan to serve and identify an appropriate channel. Established businesses need to build on what is already working and experiment with new methods.

Sisk talked with Shop Talk reporter Virginia Bridges about how to chart and build a marketing plan, and how to get the biggest bang for your buck. Here is an edited version of his comments.

Q: What are key components in marketing that business owners should understand before they start spending money?

A: Having a plan and deciding on your budget is No. 1. It's a real mistake not to have a marketing budget.

If you are starting up, there is more marketing spend than on an established business. Typically, the marketing spend is somewhere between 2 to 10 percent of the total operating budget.

That varies by business, but for the most part they're all going to fall within that range, except for folks who don't have any overhead costs.

Typically, folks such as a retail shop, or a car dealership are going to have a lot of

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spend in a given area. In a wired area, like Raleigh-Durham, you are probably going to spend more on Internet than you would on more traditional methods, such as print and radio.

In a rural city like Lake Lure, N.C., you are going to spend more on print or radio than on Internet marketing.

So, it basically boils down to knowing where you are and knowing your audience.

Q: When should a business owner consider hiring a marketing firm?

A: Look at how much money you're spending. If you're going to spend a few hundred dollars, it's going to be very hard to hire a consultant.

If you are going to spend several thousand dollars, you need somebody to guide you through the process — at least the first time.

Q: Are there essential marketing steps that all businesses should take?

What I am seeing, especially for small businesses, is that if you are not doing Internet marketing, you're leaving a lot of cash on the table .

If you need to look up a florist or you need a new salon, do you turn to the Yellow Pages or do you go to Google or Yahoo?

Probably a little less than half of the small businesses around here have a website. Even less than half of those folks have a mobile website.

These days, one of the biggest benefits to any small business would be to have a mobile website that looks good on both a tablet and a desktop. From there, you need to do things such as local news directory marketing by sponsoring ads on Yelp or

Citysearch. Maybe pair that with some sort of search engine optimization, which

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Typically, if you get a really good firm to do your Internet marketing, you are going to see at least a 400 to 500 percent return on the money you spend.

Q: Can you give an example of a marketing strategy on a budget?

A: For the businesses starting out, I would decide which of the four channels to use. If I am going to spend \$100,000 to open my dry cleaning business in Apex, I would probably spend \$5,000 to \$7,000 on marketing in my very close-knit area.

However, if I was going to start a bistro and bar in downtown Raleigh with a much higher budget, 5 to 7 percent may be \$50,000, which allows me to market to the entire Raleigh-Durham area.

If I'm an established business, I need to look at what is working and not working. You're already doing some form of marketing, even if it's just word of mouth. I would look at the things I am doing well, and try to leverage an area I am currently not in that is proven, such as print, radio, or Internet.

Q: What are common marketing mistakes that small business owners make?

A: First, don't do it all, and expect by doing the fanciest product or store in the area that people are just going to show up.

The second mistake is a lack of planning, and advertising in a haphazard way. A lot of advertising channels say they will build a logo, a jingle or create content for you. That is a bad mistake. Figure out the three things that make you better than everybody else or what differentiates you.

Maybe you are family-owned, have the cleanest rooms, or guarantee your service.

You need to get that message out. It doesn't mean that channel representatives can't

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