



# The Missing Step in Most Marketing Strategies

## Introduction

Few companies would expect success without a solid business plan, yet when it comes to marketing, it's common practice to proceed without a developed strategy. Whether it's attempting to jump straight to an action plan without a comprehensive strategy and plan, or the abandoning of a marketing strategy altogether, companies tend to deprioritize this important part of developing growth.

Even for companies that spend adequate time and resources creating a marketing strategy, failure is common. In too many situations, marketing professionals make the mistake of imitating a

competitor's strategy, misunderstanding the needs and desires of their target audience or misunderstanding who their target audience is.

When all of these pieces are in place, there remains what may be the most formidable challenge: distinguishing a brand and creating a memorable message around it. Companies often struggle to find a unique voice, message and campaign that will help them gain an edge. This white paper will discuss the need for a marketing plan, common reasons for failure and what companies can do to set their brand apart in a crowded, noisy marketing setting.

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# The Importance of a Marketing Strategy (and How to Get One)

Most companies do not need to be convinced of the need for a marketing strategy, but they may need to better understand the need to prioritize a marketing strategy and dedicate the necessary resources to it, as well as encourage buy-in across other departments, such as sales and finance.

A study by Smart Insights notes that 46% of companies don't have a digital marketing plan in place, and 16% have a strategy but aren't actively executing it. These companies are missing some important advantages of having a marketing strategy, including:

- It allows marketing and sales teams to identify opportunities that should be prioritized, as well as areas of the market that should not be pursued.
- A marketing strategy ensures the company spends its marketing dollars on channels and content that are most likely to help them gain market share, maximizing the marketing return on investment (ROI).
- The marketing strategy identifies the distinguishing values and characteristics of the brand, so it can be effectively marketed as a superior alternative to that of competitors.
- An effective marketing strategy creates consistent messaging and communication across all internal and external interactions.
- The marketing strategy communicates the company vision, missions and objectives into actionable goals to deliver growth to the company.

A 2019 survey by Outbound of 350 businesses finds that 50% of all small and mid-size companies do not have a marketing plan, but they may wonder how to get started.

Once a company has prioritized the importance of creating a marketing strategy, there are multiple, complex steps that must be executed. While the level of detail included in this document is not sufficient for the full discussion of a comprehensive strategy, the basic process is as follows:

**Determine your brand messaging and values.** It is critical to have a deep understanding of what makes the brand different from its competitors and the values that shape the brand messaging. The company must establish a brand personality and voice, as well as a message that clearly communicates what makes it distinguishable in the market.

**Identify the target audience.** This step may be occurring simultaneously to the brand messaging process, because in order to create an effective message, it's critical that the company understand who is most likely to welcome that message. This step includes identifying the parties most likely to have a need or desire for the product or service and learning as much about the audience as possible.

Data should be gathered related to gender, age, income, occupation, hobbies and more to further refine the brand message so that it is tailored to this audience. Marketing teams break the target audience into market segments, with clear buyer personas for each segment so that every piece of marketing material is specifically speaking to a personalized audience.

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**Create measurable goals.** Before creating content and distributing it out to audiences, the company needs to establish clear goals that can be easily assessed for their effectiveness. Many companies pursue what are called SMART goals, which stands for Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Time-Bound. When creating an Instagram contest, for example, the company should know what the contest purpose is, how many people they hope to engage and clear parameters for whether the goal has been reached. Otherwise, they don't know whether it was a good use of resources.

**Size up the competition.** While it's never a good idea to become too focused on the activity of a competitor, it's also not wise for companies to not be aware of the strategies others in the market are using. Before getting into the details of channels and formats, it's a good idea for companies to evaluate what seems to be working well for competitors.

**Determine formats and channels.** The next step is to determine what kinds of marketing the company will engage in and how they will distribute their content to reach the target audience. For instance, a company may determine through data analysis that their target audience prefers to consume content in video format, and they favor Facebook over other types of social media. The audience segment also has a preference for email newsletters over direct mail, so the company knows they will likely receive the best ROI with a mix of Facebook video content and a regular email newsletter.

**Review and refine.** An important step of any marketing strategy is the critical decision of whether to continue shaping and refining the marketing plan according to available data, or shelve it until it resurfaces in future years. The most successful marketing plans are treated as a living document, with adjustments applied for continued improvement.

## Why Marketing Plans Fail

Even when companies follow the above steps, many marketing strategies fail. In fact, the Sales Benchmark Index (SBI) discovered in 2014 that over 71% of all marketing plans don't utilize effective methods that deliver company growth. Listed below are some of the most common reasons marketing strategies fail to deliver on their objectives:

**Copycat Campaigns:** Too many companies begin researching their competitors, but then fail to establish themselves as a distinctive brand, choosing instead to mimic the brand messaging that's already out in the market. It's important for companies to do a bit of stealth work to understand the opportunities competitors are leaving on the table, or to be familiar with their most effective channels, but it's not necessarily a good idea to imitate the marketing strategy of another company.

**Misunderstanding Brand Perception:** In some cases, companies have a view of what they would like their brand to be, but it's not how the public perceives their brand. There are many brands that insist they are a luxury brand, a value brand or that the brand is known for environmental responsibility, but the public feels differently.

**Misunderstanding Buyer Needs or Preferences:** Companies also make the mistake of telling consumers that they are solving a particular problem, but it's not the problem that the consumers want solved. For instance, a pharmacy may target young consumers with messaging about being their local pharmacy that knows their name, but the target audience prioritizes items like mobile access to prescription refills or 24-hour customer service over the benefit of familiarity.

**Misalignment With Other Departments:** If the marketing strategy is not enjoying buy-in from departments like sales, finance, and at the executive level, it may be challenging to effectively execute the strategy. A marketing team may celebrate the leads they are feeding to the sales team, but if the leads are not qualified, or if the leads are not truly a part of the target audience most likely to convert to a customer, the sales team will not see the marketing strategy as effective.

**Failing to Provide Value:** Marketing strategies often make the mistake of trumpeting the brand's benefits and features in their content, rather than focusing intentionally on providing value. Effective content marketing plans seek first to provide insightful information and expertise without any direct product or service promotion.

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Failing to Create a Distinctive Brand Message, Content or Distribution Plan: There is a broad range of marketing accessible to brands even with a small budget, but that means there's a high level of competition to gain the consumer's attention. If a company does not have a distinctive message and creativity in their approach, their marketing strategy may fall flat. In the "noise" of digital marketing, companies need a strategy that moves outside the box to deliver a unique and compelling message.

## Thinking Outside the Box for a Successful Marketing Strategy

Succeeding with a marketing strategy requires more than the established steps that every company follows. If a brand is to eclipse its competitors, it's going to take more than simply defining the messaging, audience, goals, content and distribution. While these steps are indispensable, they are the bare minimum for executing a marketing strategy.

The most effective strategies go far beyond the basic steps, developing messaging that gets outside the box, exploring formats, and creating content that is unexpected, humorous or shockingly transparent. In all of this, it requires the critical step of hitting the consumer in a way that causes them to say, "this is my brand," or "this brand gets me."

Great content rides on an emotional connection that the brand makes with the consumer. It's not enough to

be funny; it's not enough to be unexpected. There has to be an emotional connection that taps into the needs of the consumer. The following are specific ideas that a company might utilize to lead to creative brainstorming of an outside-the-box content plan or brand messaging:

**Giveaway:** This should be audacious, seemingly bordering on giving up profits in order to give away a nice gift. The company Diamond Candles has landed on a unique perk to differentiate itself from the countless other candle producers: every candle includes a ring. While most are simple pieces of costume jewelry, customers can play the odds that they may receive an opportunity to get a ring worth hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

In order for this plan to be effective, a giveaway should be unexpected and valuable to the consumer.

**A Cause:** Companies often distinguish themselves by embracing a cause that's also important to their target audience. The differentiation often comes in the way they execute these plans. For instance, a pet shop could support local shelters with monthly donations and providing awareness materials at the checkout, but they could think outside of the box by holding an annual pet parade to benefit the shelters or a pet costume contest.

**Promotional Items:** This is another area in which the concept is not outside-the-box, but the execution could deliver an unusual spin. A company could pass on the typical koozies, key chains, pens and other typical promotional items, instead considering an item that's not at all associated with their product or service, but that the consumer might reach for often, such as an accounting firm that promotes their brand on high-quality lip balm. A resale furniture shop might elevate their key chain give away with key chains that hold a quarter for Aldi carts, recognizing that the target audience for both resale furniture and discount groceries likely overlaps.

**Trade Shows:** Trade shows are not a new idea, but they are an opportunity for creating an unusual excitement around a brand with unique ideas. From an unexpected

perk for dropping by the booth to messaging that's unusual for a trade show, brands can use an unlikely venue for brand differentiation to gain traction with new audiences.

There is also a plan that companies can put in place to avoid getting into a rut with their marketing strategies and force themselves to get creative:

- 1.** Companies can schedule time for creativity. Whether it's individual time to simply contemplate new angles or a team brainstorming session, one of the ways in which out-of-the-box thinking happens is by prioritizing it.
- 2.** The next step is to evaluate ideas, which should happen separately from an idea-generation session. That means that a company should brainstorm without determining immediately whether the ideas are good ones; instead, the ideas should be evaluated in a separate meeting.
- 3.** Schedule mandatory experimentation. One of the ways a company can ensure their marketing strategy remains fresh is by requiring that it include some pushing outside of the normal marketing plans.

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## Conclusion

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Consumers must sift through a lot of digital noise to identify brand messaging that resonates with their needs and their values. While companies may anticipate successful growth through an organized marketing strategy, it may require more than following a complex set of steps.

Being ordered to "think outside the box" can be a daunting assignment for any company, but it's imperative for companies to get beyond the basic marketing strategy and find new ways to differentiate themselves in the market. Whether that's from pursuing a new angle on an old plan, such as an unexpected promotional item, or if it's through scheduled creativity, companies must prioritize differentiation.

Fortunately, tapping into creativity for a marketing strategy can be a fun and exhilarating experience, particularly once the company hits upon a message that's enthusiastically embraced by their target audience. Thinking outside the box may take some effort, but it comes with marketing strategy success.



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## About SJC Marketing

SJC Marketing is a full-service marketing, communication and content creation company. They offer professional communication solutions for small businesses and non-profits. With a team of writers, marketing professionals and social media experts, they offer targeted and highly-focused content and marketing plans. The focus of SJC is delivering high-value strategies and unique content that are backed with research and creativity.