

the small town **MARKETING HANDBOOK**



by Leslie Saint McLellan

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*I*n a small town you know what's going on. You know who lives there, what they do, who they work with, who they are friends with. Over the last year, I've come to the conclusion that we're going back to Mayberry! Small town values and virtues live and live big thanks to social media. Social media has made the world a smaller place, virtually (no pun intended) overnight – or so it seems. The explosion of social media in 2009 brought those involved new friends from all

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over the world and all of a sudden our own virtual communities became our own small towns. Yes, we're going back to Mayberry and, for anyone involved with marketing, we are all experiencing a renaissance of “small town” habits that are changing the way we market. It's an exciting time to be a marketer, but much more

than that, we are in a cultural shift where old marketing rules are out and a “small town” marketing atmosphere lives. Right here, right now, we are all looking at our business values and our business relationships and re-evaluating how we are going to proceed in the future.

I have spent the better part of my career living and marketing a small resort town as well as a variety of businesses, both large and small, that operate in our region. We're not a city, we're not incorporated, we are a bit of a modern-day Mayberry. Our residents embrace small town values and the small town way of life. So, early in 2009 when I first started to test the waters with social media, I was so surprised to witness world-wide the resurgence of small town ideals. Here are my observations and comparisons as to how a world-wide movement has made the world a much smaller place indeed:

3 Small Town Observations

If you are involved in social media, you have no choice but to become an active member of your community ~ much like what happens in a true small town.

1. Social media drives the small town marketing mentality which can be summed up as being sociable, helpful and insightful. Social media encourages “niche” marketing which in essence is a step back in time to a marketing philosophy of days long past. When you focus on your niche, you are focusing on your true community, your own small town. You are no longer trying to appeal to the masses and your community becomes much smaller, albeit much more active. If you are involved in social media, you have no choice but to become an active member of your community – much like what happens in a true small town. In addition, each of us in our own niche has the opportunity to go from being ordinary to being extraordinary. In a small town, you have a wonderful chance to standout. Social media encourages each of us to standout in our community via interesting posts, insightful comments and helpful links.
2. Social media is driven by communication. In a small town, communication is generally easy to do. Whether it's at the grocery store, on Main Street or in the post office, those that live in a small town can easily keep up on everything going on. The same holds true with the small town marketing ideal. You have your niche that you focus on, you are continuously communicating with those in your virtual community and as a result of real time searches and real time conversations, you are kept in the loop regarding your particular community.
3. Social media promotes sharing. The small town way of life upholds the value of your friends and neighbors. In a small town, you rally together for the betterment of your community. The same holds true with social media. The sharing of information for the greater good of the niche is promoted heavily with retweets and postings of great informative articles and videos that help everyone within that particular niche neighborhood.

Social Media's Marketing Shift

In the 1990's when the internet was taking off, as a destination marketer, with nearly no advertising budget, I was thrilled with the prospect of being able to market to the masses for free via the web. Our destination website was up and running in 1995 and by being able to spread the word world-wide, we were able to compete with tourist destinations with huge marketing budgets. But going to the masses had its downfalls, there's no doubt about that. We were trying to be something to everyone, regardless of where you lived, as we focused on the quantity not quality of those we were reaching. At that time it was exactly what we needed. There is no doubt that we would not have survived as a strong tourist destination had it not been for the internet simply because we did not have the budget to compete with big destinations via print, television and radio. The internet leveled the playing ground to some extent.



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Now though, we are all experiencing a wonderful marketing shift as social media is allowing us (regardless of our type of business) to get back to small town roots and market to those that really have a desire for our services, those who really have a desire to connect with us and use what we offer. This is exactly what those who live in small towns do, they want to support those businesses within their town boundaries and make them successful as that sustains their small town economy. We are now doing the same thing virtually via social media as we are all working together in our virtual communities.

I was raised in a small town, lived a big city life for a while and then ultimately returned to a small town. In my adult life I experienced the excesses of the 80's, the impersonal 90's, and now a return to the small town way of thinking in the late 2000's. In my mind there is nothing like the "sense of community" we are experiencing through social media currently.



The Renaissance of the Small Town Culture

*M*arketing is becoming more thoughtful. Those in marketing are thinking simpler, kinder and gentler. The days of “in your face” marketing are gone. We are becoming much more personalized, customer service rules and we have the Cheer’s bar philosophy “where everybody knows your name.” This is a renaissance of the small town culture.



I believe social media and the marketing profession in general is changing the culture of a variety of things in our world. Going back to being more personal, to living a small town way of life, is bringing back a resurgence of social etiquette – something that we have not seen in a long time. For way too long simple kindness and general manners have been set aside. As our world gets smaller and smaller due to social

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media, we must work harder to engage our customer, we must try harder to make sure we connect with our customer and as a result the overall friendliness and helpfulness found in small towns is making a comeback. If you don't embrace the ideals of small town marketing, your customer might very well move on to someone who does.

10 Steps for a Successful Small Town Marketing Program

*S*o where do you begin? Perhaps it all seems a bit daunting. To get you started, here is a list of 10 steps that can help you jumpstart your efforts and be successful with your own Small Town Marketing program:

1. Communication – Listening is the Key

It's all about what your customer wants. Period. The days of pushing information to your customers are long gone. They want to have a say in what you are doing. You need to listen to what they want and are saying about you, your company and your brand. Think of your customers as your neighbors in your community. Speak with them. Engage them. Include them in your conversation. Whether you are using print media or social media, 2-way communication is a big key to your marketing success.

2. Partnerships

In your daily life do you do everything by yourself? No, of course not. You have partners to help you get through your day. The same should hold true with your marketing program. Partnerships expand your marketing reach. Define who your partners are. Make a list and keep adding to it. Whether you partner with a variety of media outlets, partner with your social media community, partner with other businesses, it is vital to have partners. Partners help you stretch your marketing dollars, your word of mouth advertising and provide valuable input to your business. And don't forget that your customers are your partners too! A rule of thumb in small towns is that citizens band together to help each other out. This is the exact same premise of marketing partnerships. The more partners you have, the larger your reach will be.

3. Stretching Marketing Dollars

The web and social media allow all of us to get our message out with little cost. Gone are the days when we have to pay big bucks for advertising in publications in order to be seen. Before the web, our small town had a very difficult time competing with larger tourist destinations. Once we hooked into the internet (which we did very early on) things changed dramatically as we could promote ourselves effectively using only a small portion of our very small marketing budget. Now with social media it is even easier to be seen and heard. The bottom line is that it is absolutely crazy for a small business not to be involved in social media.

Another way to stretch marketing dollars is to join local, regional, state and national organizations that can be an extension of your marketing plan. As an example, I have been a member and on the board of directors for our regional tourism organization for years. The \$500 I pay annually allows my material to be displayed at trade shows and other tourism marketing opportunities that I could not afford to attend on my own. Yes, this could also be listed under partnerships, but I use this example as a

wonderful way to stretch marketing dollars. Look for and join groups that can benefit your marketing efforts and your business. Be active in these groups. This is a great way to market smart.

4. Working With Traditional Media in a Variety of Ways

With all the emphasis on social media today, it's easy to push mainstream media to the side. That is a mistake. A well-rounded marketing program is what you must have. Small towns thrive on their traditions. It's part of what keeps that sense of community alive. Partner with established print publications, work with your local newspapers, radio and TV stations as much as you possibly can to build your brand and give support to your local media outlets.

When talking about media, dollar signs naturally pop into your head. But media doesn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money. Develop your own media list that includes everyone you would like to keep up to date in your "community" via press releases. Emailed press releases are free and can be a huge benefit if done properly. Take the time to find out exactly who your releases should be sent to and start to build a relationship with that media person. This takes time. Think of it like you are moving into a small town. You have to make new friends and that is how you should approach the media. They are your new friends and you have to build a relationship with them.

5. Looking for "Other" (Out-of-the-Box) Ways of Doing Things

This is probably the most difficult of the 10 steps, but if you keep your mind and your eyes open, you never know what you might find. Collaboration and looking at things slightly differently are great ways to begin this step. There is no reason to try to go things alone. Speak with others in your community. Ask questions and get input. Tweak an old way of doing things slightly. Continually ask yourself "How can I make this better?" Here's a good example of something that worked for me – I volunteered at a career day for our local junior high. I was working on a brochure at the time of things to do in our area. For part of my presentation I prepared a worksheet for the kids to write down things they like to do. Several simple activities were brought to my attention that I had not thought of! It was an awesome experience and an easy way to get new ideas.

6. Asking for Help When You Need It

In 2003 and 2007 my small town and our local businesses suffered 2 devastating forest fires. We received world wide media coverage of our disaster. While our tourist areas remained mostly unscathed, other areas of our community were burned to the ground and many of our friends and neighbors were left with nothing. Small towns rally to help their own. That is a perk of the "small town way of life." Your friends and neighbors are there for you.



After the fires were over and the world thought there was nothing left of our mountain community, I took our small town mentality of helping those in need and asked the media, my marketing community, for help. The media's support in helping us get the word out that we were open for business was overwhelming and our small town was back up and running, with tourists coming, in a short time. The 2007 fire even brought Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to our town to proclaim that we were "open for business." Had I not asked the media for help, this would not have happened. Don't be afraid to ask for help from those in your community. You will be surprised at the support you will receive.

7. Share Your Enthusiasm, Be Active in Your Community and Spread Good News

Word gets around in small towns. People want to share in good news. By being a positive, active member of your community you will draw people to you who want to share your enthusiasm.

How are you active in your community? You should look at community here on two levels.

- a.** Are you making the most of networking opportunities within your physical community? Are you a member of a local service club or trade organization. Are you on a local board for a community organization? This is small town marketing at its finest. Get you and your business out of your office and onto Main Street interacting with members of your community. Build community recognition by being involved.
- b.** You need to be active in your virtual community by posting interesting and helpful information regarding your niche. Be an active participant in blog comments, stay on top of news in your niche, share what you know and engage those in your community. Just as small towns embrace those with an enthusiastic attitude, your marketing efforts will also be rewarded by being a positive, active member of your business community.

8. Branding

What do you and your business bring to the table? What sets you apart from your competition? How are you going to let people know the answers to these questions? That's what branding is all about. In a small town people refer to the corner drugstore, the upscale clothing store in the center of town, the restaurant with the best view. Those businesses have been "branded" in the most simplest of terms. In my small town we were "branded" several decades ago as "Hollywood's Backlot" due to the amount of movies that were made in our area. While that doesn't have much to do with what we are now, the branding has stuck with us and we use it to our advantage constantly. When thinking about your brand, remember that simple is best. Once you decide your branding



point or points, continuously refer to that in your marketing and before you know it, you will be branded. And you will be branded the way YOU want to be.

9. Volunteering

Volunteering should play a role in your marketing strategy. In small towns, everyone pitches in and volunteers when something is needed. In your small town marketing plan, make time to volunteer with a cause of your choice. In this day and age, volunteering comes in two different ways.

- a.** Actual, physical volunteering at events that benefit a cause you have chosen to support. This puts your name and the name of your business out in front of the public, and it costs you nothing but your time or a small, in-kind donation of goods and services. I volunteer in a variety of ways in my community (perhaps this will give you some ideas) – I volunteer my time to our local food bank Operation Provider. I help plan and market their events and donate items to their cause. It is a charity I am passionate about so I have no problem putting in time and money to help this organization. The same is true with our Lake Arrowhead Repertory Theatre Company. I volunteer my time to help them with their programs. I also am active in PTA locally as well as our local Recreation and Parks Foundation. My name is out there constantly as a supporter and it is free marketing for what I do. What are you passionate about and how can you volunteer to help?
- b.** Another great way to volunteer is virtually within your social media community. Be active volunteering information; give tips to those within your community. Get your name out there as someone who shares valuable information and is helpful to those in your niche. This is free marketing for what you do. Make the most of this great opportunity.

10. What's In It for Me (The Customer)?

Never lose site of the main question your customer is asking and that is "If I chose your company, what's in it for me?" You must be answering that question 24/7. How can you help, how can you give your customer true value? The small town way of life centers on being a good neighbor, being helpful and being trustworthy. That's what you need to convey to your customer. Always let them know what value you are giving them - whether it's value in the information you provide, value in the ways you can help them and/or value in the price they will pay when working with you and your company. Customers have a voice in your business and you need to make sure they know that you exist because of them and are willing to listen to what they have to say.



3 Points to wrap it all up

Now that you have some ideas and your brain is spinning, here are 3 last points regarding the Small Town Marketing philosophy:

1. While the internet and social media work at warp speed, we, as marketers, have the opportunity to slow down and focus as our center of attention is our niche market rather than trying to gather the attention of the masses.
2. We can focus more on our customer's needs, listen to what they have to say instead of pushing information to them. We also must take the time to really get to know who we are serving.
3. Whether it's in the fictional town of Mayberry, in a real life small town, or in your own virtual community, we have the opportunity to move the small town way of life, way of marketing, into the mainstream and onto Main Street and change the culture of marketing to get back to "personal."

William James wrote "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does." And I would like to add, especially now – what you do, how you share, how you market will make a big difference to your customers and to your own virtual small town, your niche. The culture of marketing and our values are changing thanks to social media. By embracing the small town marketing ideal, you are setting yourself up for success with your marketing endeavors. If you are not active in your community, you won't get much out of it. But, if you put in your time, in lieu of your money, your small town marketing program will pay off for you.

If you are not active in your community, you won't get much out of it. But, if you put in your time, in lieu of your money, your small town marketing program will pay off for you.

I hope that this ebook has provided you with lots of ideas for your own small budget marketing program and I wish you every success as you become an active member of your own small town whether it is a virtual community or the one in which you live!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*M*arried with 2 boys, Leslie is a mom first, but has successfully balanced family and a marketing career for over 2 decades. She is the director of marketing and tourism for the mountain resort community of Lake Arrowhead, in Southern California. Over the years she has worked with a variety of both large and small businesses but found her niche focusing on smaller organizations struggling to stretch their marketing dollars. As a result she has earned a solid reputation for building successful small budget marketing programs. For Leslie, marketing is fun and always a challenge which is why she enjoys it so much. In her spare time she volunteers for a variety of community and regional groups and loves being “just a small town girl” – for real.

*“Marketing with a small budget forces us to think out of the box, get really creative and be cutting edge.”
Leslie Saint McLellan*



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