

How to Stand Out Online in the Year of the Entrepreneur

by Stephan Aarstol



In the old days, climbing up from the bottom was nearly impossible. The Rockefellers and other Monopoly men of the world had all the power, and the little guy didn't stand a chance.

Today, that's all changed. 2014 is being called "the year of the entrepreneur" by everyone from Richard Branson to Forbes because entrepreneurs have more opportunity than ever to compete in the open marketplace against Fortune 500 brands.

There are lots of free or low-cost avenues to promote your business, such as SEO, multimedia content creation, and social media. Automation is cheap and easy, and the proliferation of productivity software means you can now have a top-of-the-line content management system or e-commerce system. Best of all, entrepreneurs can outsource elements of their business to the huge network of freelancers around the Web at a very affordable cost.

With so much entrepreneurial power at our fingertips, standing out becomes the challenge. You must create only exceptional products, back them up with extraordinary content, and then make it all findable with creative marketing.

While creating an exceptional product and a unique value proposition is extremely difficult, promoting it doesn't have to be. Here's how to

use the Internet to maximize your entrepreneurial potential.

Specialize Your Marketing

There are many inexpensive and highly effective Internet marketing tactics available to entrepreneurs now, but trying to keep up and do them all well is a sure way to set yourself up for failure.

I suggest picking a specialty, becoming a world-class expert at it, and creating all your businesses around your ability to market them through that channel. All my best business ventures have been SEO-centric. I've strayed from this a few times and faltered, so now I examine all potential business through that lens. Whether you want to focus on email marketing, Twitter, or YouTube, it doesn't matter — just pick one and become the very best at it.

Choose Your Battles

Success is as much about what you choose to do as what you choose not to do. It's difficult to build momentum when you're constantly plugging holes like the squirrel in "Ice Age." Focus your sights on obtaining one small slice of the market, and move on only after conquering that particular slice. If you take on too much at once, you'll spread yourself thin and fail to capitalize on important opportunities.

Become Ultra-Efficient and Effective

Productivity is the key to success in a connected world. The barrier

to entry these days has nothing to do with money or resources; it's all about how efficient and effective you are with your time. If you and your team aren't working as efficiently and effectively as possible, you may as well give up because your competition is. Remember the Pareto Principle: 80 percent of results come from 20 percent of effort, so constantly seek to identify and eliminate the 80 percent of inefficiencies in your work.

Leverage Outsourcing

Resources are scarce for entrepreneurs, but sites such as Elance and oDesk make it easy to hire highly skilled creative and technical professionals at a very low cost. There's no reason to shy away from outsourcing tasks to make yourself more productive. Price your options, and leverage whatever resources are available to you.

Invest in Creative

The old marketing model involved dedicating the bulk of your marketing budget to distribution. While you can still spend a large sum on pay-per-click campaigns, if you spend your creative money wisely, it will spread virally to your core audience (who will then help spread it for you).

Take "Will It Blend?" as an example. The company released a promo video of a guy chopping up a 2x4 in a blender. The video went viral, and the blender logged sales — despite the fact that nobody needs to blend a 2x4. Now, just about everyone has seen some variation of that video. Because the creative is noteworthy, the product becomes noteworthy.

No matter what business you're in (or want to start), 2014 is the year to go full throttle. Leveraging these tactics will give your business legs, but remember: There is no substitute for an exceptional product, and all the Internet marketing in the world cannot fix a bad one. Today's low barriers to entry means there's more competition than ever, but there's also infinitely more potential