

THE

# SCRAPPY MARKETING PLAYBOOK

5 Tactical Moves From the 2026  
Small Business Marketing Survey

1,000

5  
MOVES

2026

*Real data from real small business owners on how to market through 2026's squeeze.*

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This playbook is the practical companion to our 2026 Small Business Marketing Survey. Inside, you'll find five tactical moves backed by data from 1,000 U.S. small business owners — and what each one means for the decisions you're making right now.

## INTRODUCTION

# Five Moves That Define Small Business Marketing in 2026

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Small businesses are entering 2026 under real pressure. The smallest firms shed more jobs in 2025 than at any point since the pandemic. The NFIB Small Business Optimism Index recently dropped below its 52-year average for the first time in over a year. Every owner is making the same hard calculation: what to do with the marketing budget.

We surveyed 1,000 U.S. small business professionals to find out. The full findings are in our *Scrappy Small Business Playbook* survey report – the trends, the demographic patterns, and the surprises across generations, gender, and ethnicity.

This playbook is the practical follow-up. If you run a small business, here's what the 2026 data actually means for the decisions you're making right now and five tactical moves you can act on this quarter.

# 52.5%

**of small business owners**

believe their marketing has, at some point, looked "cheap" enough to cost them customers.



# 01 Stop Assuming the "Scrappy" Move Is the Smart One

## THE DATA

33% of small business owners say designing their own marketing materials is their scrappiest cost-cut. In the same survey, 52.5% admit their marketing has looked cheap and they suspect it cost them customers. Among postgraduate-educated owners, 42.5% say they're certain it did.

### What to do about it

Audit your marketing through a customer's eyes once a quarter. Pull up your Instagram grid, your website homepage, and whatever someone sees in the first 10 seconds of meeting your brand. Ask one honest question: would you trust this business with your money?

If the answer is no, you don't need to fix everything. Fix the highest-visibility piece first. For most small businesses, that's your logo, your packaging, or whatever shows up at the top of your website. Outsource one of those this quarter. Keep DIY-ing the rest.

The owners who escape the cheap-looking trap aren't the ones who hire designers for everything. They tend to pick one or two assets that customers actually see and invest there.

## STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

Pick the one customer-facing asset that matters most — your logo, your packaging, or your website hero — and invest in making it look professional. Then keep DIY-ing everything else.



# 02 Protect Time the Same Way You Protect Cash

## THE DATA

42.9% of women small business owners do everything themselves when budgets get tight, compared to 36.6% of men. Among Baby Boomer respondents overall, that figure hits 56.4% – the highest of any demographic group.

### What to do about it

Track your marketing hours for two weeks. Just write down every hour spent designing posts, taking product photos, or fixing your website. Most owners are shocked by the total.

Then run the math the way you'd run it for any employee. If you bill or earn \$75 an hour in your actual work, every hour you spend doing your own marketing costs you \$75 of higher-value time. Outsourcing a \$200 graphic that takes you four hours to make at \$75 an hour saves you \$100 in opportunity cost.

This reframing matters most for women-led and older-owner businesses, where the survey shows time-for-money tradeoffs hit hardest. The hours you spend on marketing aren't free. They're billed to a different account.



## STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

Calculate your hourly value. Anything you can outsource for less than that hourly rate is a savings, not a cost. The hours you reclaim go to the work that actually grows the business.

# 03 Pick Channels Based on Where Your Customers Are

## THE DATA

Organic social media (32.7%) and Google Business Profile or online reviews (20.4%) delivered the best marketing ROI for small businesses in the past 12 months. Both are free.

### Two action items, in order of importance

- 1. Fix your Google Business Profile this week.** It takes one hour. Add updated hours, current photos, your full service list, and at least 10 recent reviews. If you don't have 10 reviews, email your last 30 customers and ask. This single step outperforms most paid campaigns for local businesses, and it costs nothing.
- 2. Pick one organic social channel and commit to it for 90 days.** Not three channels. One. The owners winning on social aren't posting everywhere. They're posting consistently somewhere. Choose the channel where your actual customers spend time (not the one your competitors are loud on), and post three times a week minimum. After 90 days, you'll have data on whether it's working. Before 90 days, you don't.

The free-channel ROI advantage is partly because paid social has gotten genuinely expensive. The math is on your side here. Use it.

## STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

Free channels are winning on ROI in 2026 because paid acquisition has gotten expensive. Fix your Google Business Profile this week, then pick one social channel and commit for 90 days.



# 04 Your Packaging Is Doing Marketing Work Either Way

## THE DATA

Given an unexpected \$500 to spend on marketing, 30.4% of Gen Z small business owners said they'd upgrade their packaging or labels — nearly triple the rate of Gen X (11.1%) and six times the rate of Boomers (5.1%).

### What to do about it

If your product ships in a brown box with a plain label, you're paying for marketing real estate and using none of it. The customer's first physical interaction with your brand happens at the unboxing. That moment is either earning you a repeat purchase or earning you nothing.

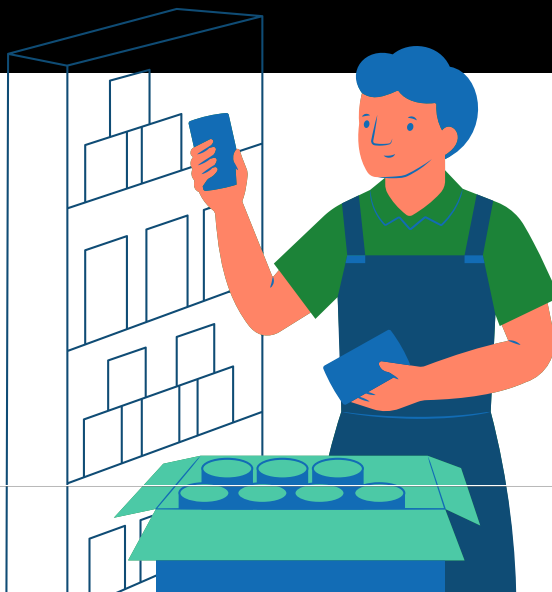
You don't need a full rebrand. The cheapest, highest-impact upgrades for most small businesses are:

- **A custom printed insert** thanking the customer and offering a small incentive for a review or referral
- **A branded label or sticker** on the outside of the package
- **Tissue paper, a printed bag, or any branded element** that turns the unboxing into something worth photographing

The goal is to make the package memorable enough that customers want to show it to someone else. That's free marketing built into something you're already shipping.

### STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

Packaging is the only marketing channel your customer is guaranteed to interact with physically. Even a printed insert or branded sticker turns an ordinary unboxing into a memorable one.



# 05 Get Finance and Marketing in the Same Room

## THE DATA

51.3% of Finance and Accounting respondents said their company increased marketing spend in 2026— the highest of any role. Just 17.9% of Marketing and Communications respondents said the same; 57.1% reported flat budgets.

### What to do about it

This one matters more for businesses with five or more employees, but the principle scales down too.

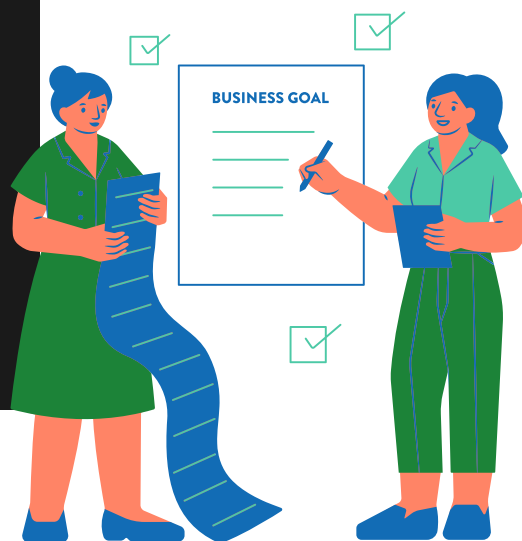
The survey shows that the people approving spend believe in marketing more than the people executing it. That's a problem. It usually means budget conversations happen in isolation. Finance approves a number based on what looks reasonable on the spreadsheet, and Marketing receives that number without being able to push back on what's actually possible inside it.

The fix is structural rather than motivational. Once a quarter, sit Finance and Marketing in the same conversation about three things: what worked last quarter, what's costing more than it used to, and what marketing actually needs to deliver next quarter to hit the revenue target. Most small businesses skip this conversation entirely. The ones that don't tend to make better decisions on both sides of the table.

If you're a solo owner, you're playing both roles. The same conversation needs to happen in your own head, on paper, once a quarter.

### STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

The biggest gap in small business marketing isn't budget — it's communication between the people who approve spend and the people executing it. Close it with a recurring quarterly conversation.



## CONCLUSION

# The Bigger Picture

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Every small business in 2026 is making the same hard calculation: how do you market your way through a year when every dollar feels like it might be your last? The owners getting it right tend to share one habit. They're honest about which corners are safe to cut and which ones are quietly costing them customers.

The full survey breaks down how 1,000 small business owners are answering that question by generation, gender, income, ethnicity, and role.

### WHAT THE SURVEY REVEALS

- DIY design is the universal default reflex of small business marketing in 2026.
- Email is the only channel every generation refuses to cut.
- Almost everyone wants faster marketing results. Most budgets aren't growing to match.
- Black and Hispanic owners are investing in marketing at significantly higher rates than their White peers.
- Gen Z is the only generation that sees packaging as media, not overhead.

Small businesses still drive 51% of total net job creation in the U.S., according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The decisions millions of owners are making about their marketing this year are not small ones.

## SOCIAL PROOF

# Why Small Businesses Trust UPrinting

The tactical advice in this playbook only works if the printed materials behind it look as good as your business deserves. Here's what small business owners say about working with UPrinting.

*"As a small business, I needed a reliable printing partner to help me with my promotional items. I'm so glad I found UPrinting! Uploading my designs was super simple and I appreciated the way they returned proofs so quickly. Everything was shipped carefully and I loved how everything turned out – stickers, labels, tissue paper and business cards."*

[Diana T.](#) | Yelp

*"After a rough time with a local print shop, I hit the web and luckily stumbled upon this gem. The quality they deliver is outstanding, and the prices? Way more reasonable than I expected. As a small business owner, UPrinting has totally covered all my printing needs."*

[Verified Customer](#) | TrustPilot

*"I love using them for both my day job and my side hustle's marketing needs. Last minute marketing materials that were printed in no time and ready for a work event. It shows how helpful and caring they are about their customers."*

[Leila P.](#) | Google Reviews

*"We designed a business card to include with our orders. Someone at UPrinting actually took the time to fix an issue before printing our cards out. We were thrilled with our order. The cards are absolutely top notch, the colors are vivid, and the printing is on point."*

[Verified Customer](#) | TrustPilot

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

# How We Conducted This Study

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To understand how Americans approach small business marketing in 2026, UPrinting surveyed 1,000 adults across the country via Pollfish who work in or own small businesses.

Participants answered a series of questions about their marketing budgets, channel performance, cost-cutting strategies, biggest fears, and the tradeoffs they make when resources are tight. Responses were analyzed by demographic groups, including age, gender, income, ethnicity, education, and business role, to identify trends and disparities.

## ABOUT UPRINTING

### The Print Partner for Small Business

UPrinting is your trusted online and local print shop offering fast, dependable printing services for businesses, creatives, and anyone who needs quick, high-quality prints. From business cards and flyers to posters, packaging, and stickers, we help small business owners turn their marketing ideas into professional-quality printed materials.

#### Ready to upgrade your printed marketing materials?

Explore packaging, business cards, postcards, flyers, and branded inserts that make your small business look as professional as it really is.

[VISIT UPRINTING.COM →](https://www.uprinting.com)