

# Marketing communications for small business

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A beginner's guide

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## **A beginner's guide to marketing communications for small business**

Email newsletters, social media, public relations, print advertising, sponsorship opportunities in your local community – with so many ways to connect with your customers, finding the right marketing communications strategy for your growing business can sometimes feel a little intimidating. Whether you're wondering how to get your company's exciting news splashed on the front page of your local newspaper or if you're eager to brush up on email marketing best practices, we've got you covered.



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# Your 4-step small business brand style guide

By: 99designs

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“A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person.”

— Jeff Bezos

Your reputation is comprised of many elements: what you do, what you say and how you present yourself to the world. A small business brand style guide lays out the rules for that last how.

A quick google search on style guides reveals beautifully designed, novel-length books that dictate the exact usage of a logo, and the specific kerning between type. If you're still figuring out who, exactly, your customer is, and just beginning to think about what features you want on your website, putting together a style guide at this stage might seem intimidating and unnecessary. But it doesn't have to be long, it doesn't have to be fancy and you don't have to be a professional designer to make one.

The mere exercise of creating your first style guide can actually help clarify what's really important to you, and start to give shape to the words and actions that make up your brand.

## Step 1: Start with why

You probably spend a lot of time explaining what your product or service does, but how often do you think about why you do it? A good style guide will start by answering key big-picture questions:

**Mission statement:** Write one sentence that describes the reason your business exists. You really don't need more than a sentence, I promise:

- TED: Spreading ideas.
- Patagonia: Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.
- Google: Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

**Personality:** Once you know the why, you need to know the who. Think of your brand as a person. How would you describe them? Sophisticated? Quirky? Down-to-earth? Loud? A dreamer? Write down the most salient 3-5 adjectives. Those are the skeleton of your brand's personality.

**Target audience:** So you're now starting to know who you are, but who is your customer? The easiest way to define them is to think about the archetypical person who would use your product or service: how old are they? What's their gender? What's their career? Education level? Favorite flavor of Doritos?

## Step 2: Make your mark

For people, our mark is our signature—it's what validates a contract, makes a check cashable and adds value to autographed books. For a company, your mark is your logo.

A logo does not have to be literal. It does not have to have a picture. It doesn't necessarily even have to have your name (think of Apple or Nike). What it does have to do is represent that personality you described above. For example, if you make pillows, and have a soft, sweet, sleepy personality, your logo probably shouldn't be sharp, angular and bright red.



Designs via [99designs](#), by [bo\\_rad](#), [Ricky AsamManis](#) and [shaka88](#). The Openly logo uses a clever, literal type treatment that represent their brand personality traits of simplicity and openness. YouTube star, Unge, is a playful vegan; his logo represents this with a cute character and the color green. Lanjia Craft sees themselves as feminine and sophisticated, which comes across with thin, delicate lines and a geometric diamond



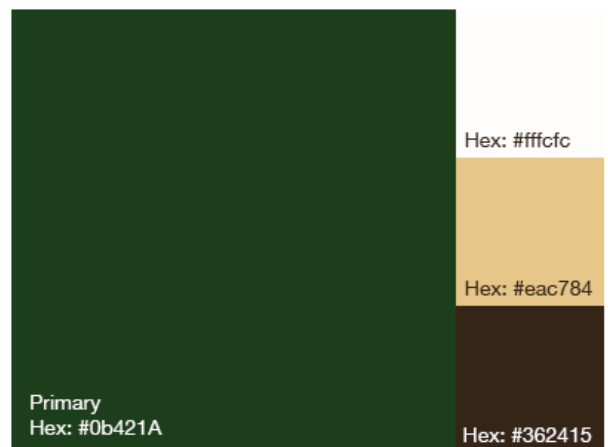
Once you have your mark, your brand style guide explains how to use it. The top three things you should think about are:

1. **Where should it appear?** Should employees use it in their email signature or does it only appear on the website and business cards? Does it go on every page of a powerpoint presentation?
2. **Are there different color or shape variations?** Do you want both a stacked version and vertical version? Do you have both a bright green version and a plain black version? Does it always appear with your name, or are they sometimes separated?
3. **When should those variations be used?** Should your green version always appear on a white background? If you have a photo background, should you always use the black version? On packaging to you use just your logo and not your name, or vice versa?

### Step 3: Pick your colors

Color is a personal choice, but it also comes loaded with implications. You may love orange, but are its energetic, cheerful associations right for your actuary firm? Refer back to your mission and brand personality: are you sophisticated? Then perhaps a royal purple would help get that point across.

If you already have a logo, you should probably start there to help define your colors. For help getting started, check out Google's [super helpful color guide](#). You will want 1-2 principal colors, and 1 or more supporting colors, including at least one neutral or grayscale color. The Starbucks color palette is as identifiable as their mermaid logo:



Your style guide should explain when to use your primary color(s)—e.g. in your logo and packaging—and when to use any secondary colors, e.g. in the body text on your website, or as a background in PowerPoint presentations. UC Berkeley does a great job illustrating how to utilize their diverse color palette.



In your style guide, you will want to list the hex codes and/or Pantone number, so that you or someone else (like an employee or a vendor) can easily reproduce your exact desired shade.

## Step 4: Find your fonts

Typeface is a wily beast: most of the time, no one except a type-fanatic will notice it. But if you get it wrong, everyone will.

Like with color, a great place to start when you're deciding which font should represent your company is to look at your logo. You will want an everyday font, and one or more accent fonts. Your everyday font should be a clean, clear, easy-to-read serif or sans serif that can be used in the body of documents. Your accent font is usually the fancy treatment that is used in your mark and other places to, well, accent important information.

In your style guide, you will want to list what these fonts are, and also how to use them. Are they bold sometimes and not others? Do you use your accent font only when typing your company name, or can it also be used for other headlines?

## Conclusion

A good brand walks a fine line between consistency and agility: it should be easily recognizable, but open to change as your company grows and develops. Developing a basic style guide gives you a road map to define who you are today, and lays out the route to your business' future brand identity.



## How to write a press release

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Whether you're opening a neighborhood pizza shop or throwing a corporate fundraiser for a local charity, a press release is a helpful tool to announce important news about your business to your customers and community via the media.

Before you write a press release, though, you need to ask yourself a very serious question: is this story actually newsworthy? Remember, a press release is not an advertisement or a sales pitch. To squeeze your way into a newspaper's editorial pages, your news must be new, meaningful, and relevant to its readers. To help assess whether your news will pique the interest of your local newspaper or trade vertical, consider the 5 Ws:

**Who?** Who are the main characters of your story, and how many people are affected by the news? Scope and impact are important. For example, people with existing public profiles, like your Mayor or CEO of your local Chamber of Commerce, will help bring weight and attention to your news. Think about creative ways you could get them involved — whether that's cutting the ribbon at your grand store opening or supplying a quote for your press release on how your new store is expected to bring additional jobs to the community.

**What?** This is a simple one. What is the news and what makes it new and noteworthy. Think about this from the perspective of your target audience, and communicate the facts clearly and succinctly. For example, are you launching the region's first vegan burger joint?

**Where?** Where did or will the news take place? Is there a geographical angle or is the location of the business/news moment relevant in any way? For example, opening pizza shop in the remains of a historic old movie theatre or in a town that hasn't had a local pizzeria for years is something noteworthy.

**When?** What is the timing of the news and is this significant? Adding a timely "hook" to a story will help hook a reporter. For example, opening your pizza shop on February 9 seems like just another day — until you note that it's also National Pizza Day!





**Why?** This is really important. Why is your news important to a reporter's readers? Consider your audience. For example, you may be offering the first gluten-free or vegan pizza in town, capitalizing on demand from the local community for healthier fast-food options. Or, opening your shop may be creating 10 new, full-time jobs in your community.

**How?** How did you come about to choosing to open a pizza shop in the town's old movie theater? What did it take to make it happen and who helped you along the way? Press release should be factual, but if there is a personal, human element to your story — use it! People love hearing about the people behind a successful business. In terms of tone, remember that a press release is not a piece of creative writing. It is vital you are clear, concise, and factual — so avoid the fluffy language.

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## How to write a press release

**The date** should appear at the top of your press release. If you would like a reporter to publish the news on or after a specific date, write "For release on [date] at [time]" or "Under strict embargo until [date] at [time]".

**The headline** is the key message — the takeaway from the article. What is the most important piece of information your target audience needs to know, even if they don't read the rest of the article? Use active voice and a strong verb.

Pacifica Pizza's 'Doughraiser' to Raise \$10K for Jacksonville Humane Society

**Paragraph 1** should tell readers the story around your news. It should answer who and what questions clearly and succinctly.

Pizza sauce will be flying thick and fast at Pacifica Pizza in Jacksonville on March 3rd, as the team prepares to cook over 2,000 pizzas during its annual fundraiser to support the local Humane Society.



**Paragraph 2** will expand on the information featured in the first paragraph. Give a little more detail and context to your company's news.

Pacifica Pizza, the oldest pizzeria in Jacksonville, expects to raise over \$10,000 to support the Jacksonville Humane Society's new puppy wing, expected to open in early 2018. Five dollars from every pizza sold in store on March 3rd will be donated to the cause.

**Paragraph 3** and beyond is where you can talk more in-depth about your business and the news. Think about the how and the why, and providing any more details on the who, what, where, when. Make this information approachable, bearing in mind that some readers may have never heard of your business.

**Include a quote or two** from the most relevant characters in your story to give context and color to your news. Try to include a quote by the third paragraph, or fourth at the latest. Think about who is most important to hear from. In the Pacifica Pizza's example, this could be the business owner, who could explain why the Humane Society is a cause close to their heart, and the CEO of the Human Society, who could talk about how the money raised will be used.

**Add "END"** after your last paragraph, and beneath that include contact details for your spokesperson, or any footnotes about how you may have calculated figures in your release.

End the piece by adding **general information** about the business (also known as your boilerplate). This is where you should put a generic "about us"-type statement. Outside of the context of this news, what does your business do?

Your press release should not be longer than a single page (front side only), with rare exceptions made for especially complex concepts. When you send it to journalists, be sure to include a cover letter in the body of the email. This will include an overview of what information the press release include, and anything else that may be of interest to the journalist, such as an offer of an interview with the business owner.



## **Sending your press release to journalists**

Do some research to find out if a reporter from your local paper has written about a similar topic recently — it could be an area of interest for them and they may be keen to follow up on a story with a similar theme. It's also worth knowing when a journalist's deadlines are so you can send your press release at the right time. National deadlines tend to be very early in the morning, whereas regional press are likely to have a deadline day for the following week's paper.

Generally, the best way to get your press release in the hands of a journalist is to email it to them. Think hard about your subject line — most people use their headline here given it's a short, punchy snapshot of the news. It seems like such a small and insignificant part to your pitch, but one glance at the subject line will help a journalist decide whether they even want to open and read your email.

Many media companies block attachments, so paste your press release into the email. Finally, reporters are inundated with hundreds of emails and press releases every day, so it's important you follow up on your press release to check they received the email and pitch your idea over the phone.



## 4 tips to take your email from dead to read

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205 billion. That's how many emails are sent every day around the world.\*

As a savvy 21st century business owner, you're probably already enticing customers with special offers and unique promotions via email. But as more and more businesses embrace the humble email as a powerful marketing tool, it can be tough to make sure you stand out in an overflowing inbox.

Fortunately, formulating a small business email marketing strategy doesn't require much time or technical know-how. Here are four simple tips to help take your emails from dead to read.

### Remember consent is key

Just like the unwanted presence of spam in the iconic Monty Python sketch of 1970, no one wants unsolicited or irrelevant emails they never asked for, from places or people they've never heard of, clogging their inbox. The first rule of email etiquette is actually quite simple: email people who have asked to receive messages from you, like by signing up for your newsletter on your website. The age-old adage, "it's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission," does not apply to email marketing.

Additionally, be sure to promptly remove anyone who wishes to unsubscribe from your email list — and make it easy for them to ask. This will not only help you avoid [potential legal trouble](#), but will also help improve your open rates (the percentage of people who received your email who actually opened it), as well as click and conversion rate metrics that correlate with your qualified leads and customers.

### Entice readers with the perfect subject line

It seems like such a small and insignificant part to your email, but a subject line should never be an afterthought — one glance at the subject line of your email in their inbox will decide whether they even want to read the rest of the message.



Imagine the last time you returned from grabbing a sandwich on a jam-packed day to an inbox chock-full of unread emails: before panic sets in, you do a quick skim of subject lines. How do you decide which are the most important? Only the most important, clever, or relevant ones are opened for a quick perusal as you quickly finish your BLT.

Keep your subject line short, but not too short: between 40 and 50 characters, including spaces. Much longer, and it will seem rambling and verbose (and could get cut-off by some inbox views), and much shorter and it won't convey enough information to pique the interest of your busy customers.

For example, to make your subject line irresistibly clickable, tease the reader a bit about what's inside. If you title your email "50% off everything this Saturday" very few people will click it because you've already told them everything they need to know — so what's the incentive for them to open it? But if you simply say "News and announcements," that's not particularly compelling either. Instead, you might try "Limited time only: save 50%" or "Going, going, gone! This sale ends soon." Get creative — try different phrasing and framing to see what resonates best with your audience. You could even go back to your own inbox and see which clever subject lines got your attention that you can learn from.

## **Give a clear call-to-action**

Once someone has opened your email, the next goal is to get them to engage with what's inside it. Think about the primary goal, or the call-to-action (CTA), of your email. What are you asking your customers to do? Is it to get them to purchase a refrigerator online, fill out a digital customer feedback survey, visit your blog to learn about a recent customer success story, or download a free guide? Structure the hierarchy of your content within the email accordingly, putting your CTA (whether that's a link or a button) in prime position where it is impossible to miss.

Give your readers more than one opportunity to engage with your CTA, with the most important one being "above the fold" — in other words, one they can see without scrolling when they open the email. Vary your CTA types, and be creative. For instance, if you sell chairs, instead of simply saying "Click here to buy," try making your CTA an engaging phrase like "Make your guests more comfortable," or "Sit and stay awhile."



## Pick the perfect sender

Who is the email actually from? Is it from you personally, the business itself, or another relevant stakeholder? It may seem minor, but even small details like this can affect open rates. Think about what the message is and who the customer is more likely to recognize or appreciate a message from. In most cases, this is the business or brand name. If possible, consider testing a couple options — one email from Bob's Brick Business and one from Bob Brickton himself, for example.

Similarly, also consider what email address to use. If you're sending an email from Bob, you'll probably want the email address to match — bob@bobsbricks.com, for example. Alternatively, if the email is from your stellar customer support team, you may want the email to be sent from support@bobsbricks.com instead. Whenever possible, keep the sender and email address consistent and easy to read — sending an email from roberttylerbrickton@bobsbricks.com and signing the email from Bob isn't ideal.

These simple changes to your small business email marketing plan will help your messages stand out from the crowd — and better emails for your audience can mean better business for you!

\* [Radicati Group, 2015](#)



# Should my business sponsor a local youth sports team?

Professional sports and corporate sponsorships go together like the Chicago Cubs and Wrigley Field. Can you imagine the New England Patriots' playing anywhere other than Gillette Stadium? Or the Super Bowl Halftime Show brought to you by anyone other than Pepsi?

With big brands like Budweiser, Toyota, Nike, and AT&T each spending more than \$200 million per year on sports sponsorships, most small businesses can't hope to compete on the professional level. But you can get a piece of the action and reap similar benefits — albeit on a smaller scale — by sponsoring a local youth sports team.

## Why should I sponsor a youth sports team?

Few professional achievements can match the excitement you feel when you see your business' name printed in big bold letters on the front of a jersey for the first time. But with razor thin margins and a super lean marketing budget — those feelings of pride probably aren't enough to rationalize even the \$100 donation that it takes to get a pity shout-out in the post-game huddle.

But if you keep your eye on the ball and use your sponsorship budget strategically, a small investment can have a tremendously positive impact on your business. Here are three ways your business can benefit from sponsoring a local sports team:

### 1. Supporting local teams can increase brand awareness

Whether you're sponsoring a Little League team, a soccer tournament, or even a local dance troupe, supporting youth activities can be an easy way to develop a positive reputation in your local community. It can be particularly valuable if your target customer base includes kids or young families, and if word-of-mouth is an important part of your marketing strategy. Believe it or not, some parents get a little bored watching little Timmy take 15 attempts to get the pitch over the plate, so if you can get them talking to each other about your business while they wait, you're not going to strike out.



These kinds of sponsorships also have the power to create intense customer loyalty — if Timmy gets in the habit of going to your pizza shop after every home game, he could keep coming back long after he tires of Little League and swaps his baseball mitt for karate lessons or a spot in the school band.

**2. New sports sponsorships can create buzz for a new location or product launch**

Local sporting events tend to create captive audiences full of people with similar interests who all live within a few miles of each other. That's the ideal environment for a company looking to make a local splash by announcing a new brick-and-mortar location or introducing a new product line. Because youth sports sponsorships often have more flexible price-points than a newspaper ad or a roadside billboard, it can be a cost-effective way to compete with more established players and get the news out quickly.

**3. You might knock it out of the park with free press**

Local reporters and bloggers are always looking for feel-good stories featuring scrappy underdogs and come-from-behind victories. If you bet on the right horse, your name could get added to that Cinderella story and published all over the state

Even if your team doesn't make the playoffs, at the very least cute pictures of kids running around the bases in their oversized batting helmets with your company's banner hanging over the right field fence presents a nice social media opportunity.

## How to make the most of your youth sports sponsorship

Let's say you've stepped up to the plate and are ready to put some money towards a sponsorship. How do you make sure that money is being spent in a way that will actually help your bottom line? Here are 6 simple steps:

**1. Don't get last pick**

Even the smallest towns in America can have dozens of youth sports teams. You might choose to back a team because your own kid is on it or one of your employees is the coach. But if you're seeking out a team to sponsor as part of an intentional marketing strategy, make your pick wisely.





First, think about your target audience and select the sport that they are most likely to support. Then consider the age group, the competitiveness of the league, and how much they travel. A soccer team with competitors all over the state will probably get you broader exposure than a basketball team full of first-graders, but if the parents of that basketball team line up with your target demographic, it might be a slam dunk.

## **2. Think outside the (batter's) box**

If you're simply handing over a check in exchange for your name on a shirt, it's time to get your head in the game. Sponsorship can take on many forms — think of ways you can do something that's unique for your business.

Maybe you own a print shop that can provide "trading cards" and a post-season program featuring photos of the players in action. Or maybe your restaurant can host a pre-tournament carbo-loading feast with an all-you-can-eat price just for the players and their friends and family. Even if you're in the service industry, ask if you can hand out branded swag after a home game or bottles of Gatorade with a coupon taped to the lid.

## **3. You don't have to go for the gold, but don't come in last**

Many sports teams with experience raising money will offer different tiers of sponsorship. If you're contributing purely out of the goodness of your heart, there's no problem starting at the lowest tier. But if your goal is to provide a measurable return on your investment, it's probably a good idea to get your name up in lights. Second place isn't always the first loser, but very few people remember the names of the people Michael Phelps beat on his way to 23 gold medals.

## **4. Control the messaging and get on the schedule**

With the rising cost of jerseys, pads, gear, tournament fees, and everything else, youth sports teams are often desperate for sponsorships — which means they probably need you more than you need them. That can give you the edge when it comes to negotiating a sponsorship package.



Make sure your brand standards will be met with everything your name goes on. And if they're asking what they can give you to sweeten the deal, tell them you want ad space on the team's recurring email newsletter or the season schedule. The game and practice schedules receive prime placement on household fridges all over town, and they are checked constantly by frantic parents shuttling their kids between after school activities. Getting your name and logo on those essential spots is like getting your face on a box of Wheaties.

**5. Investigate the tax incentives**

Depending on the type of team you sponsor and the state in which your business is incorporated, you might be eligible to write off your sponsorship as a business expense or as a charitable donation. Speak to a tax professional before you do this, and remember to get proof that the sports team is registered as a 501(c)(3), because the penalties can be steep if you make a mistake.

**6. Remember the intangibles**

Many of the reasons why you would sponsor a youth sports team align with the reasons you became a small business owner in the first place. By giving back to the community that supports you, you can create real connections that make the daily grind worthwhile. The positive feelings can also radiate outward, inspiring your employees who may have kids of their own — that might play for the team you sponsor.

Take pride in your sponsorships and post the team photo in a place where customers and employees can see it. Employees who feel they are working for a compassionate, value-driven company tend to be more loyal and motivated workers.