

THE SPARK

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How to Find the Treasure in an Overflowing Pile of Trash

I love the Internet. I can't imagine running a successful business without having access to the tools, resources and information that the Internet affords small business owners.

It's a virtual treasure trove; business advice is everywhere online. But, let's face it, *good* business advice can be hard to find. And it can be even more difficult to determine what information online is actually valid and useful, and what's, well, trash.

Here are some of my own techniques for reviewing, analyzing and validating business information that I find online.

“Business advice is everywhere online. But good business advice can be hard to find.”

Consider the Site

There are a few different elements you can check when it comes to qualifying a website.

The first is a check of your overall impression of the site. Is the site laden with advertisements? What is the other content like on the site? Is there contact information readily available?

If you can't find any ownership information on the site (BIG red flag!), you may want to check the WHOIS information to find out who actually owns the domain. You can do this by going to <http://whois.sc> and typing in the domain. If the web address is publicly registered, you may be able to find some useful background information there.



*Alyssa Gregory
Founder, Small Business Bonfire*

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You can also analyze the actual URL of the site. Is it masked or forwarded from somewhere else? This may mean the URL you *thought* you were going to was not the page you actually ended up on, or that the URL stays exactly the same even when you click around to other pages.

Validate the Author

The author of a specific article online may not be the owner of the website you are browsing, so it's also a good idea to check out who is actually providing the information.

Try to answer these questions to form a clear picture about the author of the content:

- Who is the author? Is the author's name clearly displayed on the article?
- Is there a bio for the author included?
- Does the bio qualify the author to provide this type of advice?
- Do the links in the bio work, and what do the author's websites look like?
- Does the author have a "body of work" online in the form of other articles, websites and credits?

Look for the Motive

The motive of both the website and author can also have an impact on the validity of the content. What is the purpose of the website? Is it really to provide business tips and advice, or is the content "link bait" that just tries to get eyes on the page and ads that are displayed?

Put Google to Work

Often, the best way to validate information online is by using the ultimate online tool: Google. A quick web search about the author, website, and topic can often tell you enough to make an informed decision about whether or not you should trust what you're reading.

Ultimately, it comes down to your gut. What does your gut tell you about the information? Armed with this power, you are on your way to finding the treasure amidst all of the trash online. ★

GET CONNECTED



Website

<http://smallbusinessbonfire.com>



Blog

<http://smallbusinessbonfire.com/blog>



Community

<http://network.smallbusinessbonfire.com>



Facebook

<http://facebook.com/smallbizbonfire>



Twitter

<http://twitter.com/smallbizbonfire>



Email

info@smallbusinessbonfire.com



Telephone

888-239-4775

Small Business Bonfire Community Snapshot



Small Business Library

Private Group

active 2 days, 6 hours ago

A collection of useful small business reports, guides, swipe files, tip sheets, worksheets, forms and tools submitted by members.

Home

Documents

Members (61)

Send Invites

Document List

Order by: Category:

Viewing item 1 to 8 (of 8 items)

[Sample Marketing Plan Template](#)

A sample marketing plan template (in Word doc format) that you can use in your own business to get started with the marketing planning process. Includes targeted questions to help you fill in each section with the right information, as well as links to explanatory articles.

[How to Write a Press Release](#)

An overview of the standard format for press releases.

[53 Skinny Marketing Ideas](#)

Skinny Marketing is based on doing inexpensive, and in some cases free, marketing activities in a planned and strategic way while trying to get the biggest bang for your buck. Here are 53 ideas to give you a start.

[Social Networking Symposium Presentation](#)

Slide deck from a presentation on social networking at a conference in Feb 2010.

[Social Networking Planner](#)

A worksheet to guide you in identifying your goals for social networking, establishing metrics to assess your success, and preparing your profile for action.

[8 Social Networking Tips for Professionals](#)

A set of universal tips to help you get off on the right foot, regardless of where you are networking.

[27 Social Networking Sites for Professionals](#)

Twenty-seven social networking sites for entrepreneurs, business owners and professionals.

[10 Secrets to More Profitable Email Marketing](#)

Ten of the top actions successful email marketers take to get a better response from their mailings.

The Cloud: More Than Just Fluff for Small Business

by Simon Salt

Timely access to information, especially business critical information, is one of the challenges many small businesses face. It's not that they don't have the information. The problem lies in where the information is stored. For many, it is kept on a single computer at the business location, or perhaps at home.

The smart business backs up this data to some other storage device or perhaps to an online back-up service like Mozy or an equivalent. This is, of course, very good practice and essential to any business. But what if you need access to documents stored on that one machine that is in the office or at home when you are somewhere else?

Think about your contracts, proposals, presentations, etc. Have you ever arrived at a meeting with a client or prospect only to realize that you left the most recent copy of your presentation on the other machine? Now imagine the mad scramble to reach someone back at the office or home, and have them find it and email it to you before the meeting!

Enter the Cloud

The term, "the Cloud," while sounding slightly ethereal and science-fiction-y, really just means the Internet.

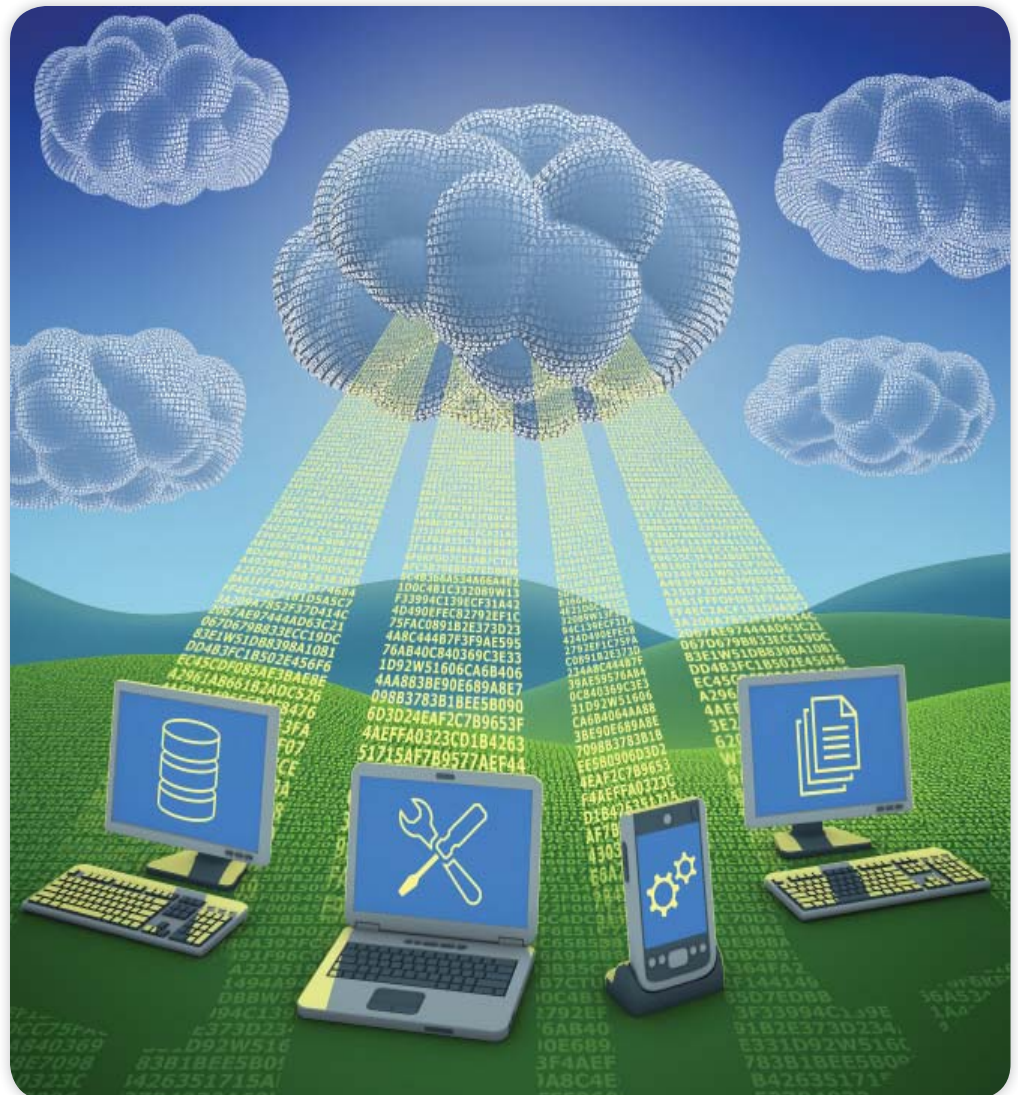
Cloud-based applications are simply the new way of describing web-based applications, ones that aren't installed on your computer, but instead you access them via a web browser.

The same goes for cloud storage; you aren't actually renting a space to keep fluffy white clouds for those days when you need rain. Rather, it is a method of storing and exchanging data in a way that is accessible from any internet-connected device.

Notice in that last sentence the important pieces – "storing and exchanging" and "any internet-connected device." Now you can see the importance of understanding the impact of the Cloud on small business. It's about having your important data follow you wherever you are and be accessible on whatever internet-connected device you happen to have in your hands, whether it's a laptop, tablet or smartphone.

Advantages of the Cloud

There are many advantages to being able to remotely access your files and data from wherever you are without having to actually take the information with you. Not



least of which is the ability to carry a smaller, lighter device.

A few years ago we were constrained by carrying around heavy laptop computers. Then gradually, they became lighter and smaller, mainly because manufacturers started leaving things out, like optical drives, and in some cases the hard drive, opting instead for solid state drives like SD cards.

Now we are seeing the rise of the tablet device and the smartphone.

I recently experimented on a business trip and didn't take my usual netbook with me. Instead, I took a tablet device and my smartphone to see if I could still conduct business while on the road with these cut-down devices.

The result was an overwhelming yes, with the caveat that it works well for trips of up to 48 hours. After that, I need to have a physical keyboard to type on, but that is an easy fix as there are Bluetooth keyboards available for tablets that don't add a huge amount in terms of size or weight.

Having documents stored in the Cloud meant that no matter what came up on my trip, I could access the relevant information and respond accordingly. No more having to tell people that I'd get back to them as soon as I got back to the office.

Third-Party Cloud Alternatives

Some people have reservations about storing critical data with a third party. What if they go out of business; what if their service is unavailable just when you need it?

Of course these are valid concerns, and choosing a reputable partner is definitely important.

I personally use Dropbox. They have been around quite some time, and I have never experienced access issues. As a company, we have found a lot of uses for their service; from exchanging documents with remote workers, contractors and even clients, to using it as an off-site backup location.

However, some things you just want to have a little more control over and placing it in the hands of a third party

just feels uncomfortable. For those files and things like pictures of your kids, favorite movies and music, there is a cloud solution as well. This time you own the cloud. Yes, your own personal cloud, no harp provided.

With the use of an external hard drive connected to your network and a device from a company called Pogoplug, you can create a cloud-like environment that operates

exactly like a cloud storage service, but is controlled by you, and you own the hardware.

Now of course this sounds very complex, and who the heck wants to get into the business of computer storage – unless of course that is your business. However, hardware manufacturers seem to be waking up to the fact that we want the power of

their devices, but we don't want to have to go back to school and get another degree to learn how to use them.

I recommend looking into the Seagate GoFlex solution. I set this up in under five minutes, not because I'm super smart where technology is concerned, but because it was quite simply a plug-and-play device. Connect it with a power cable and the provided Ethernet cable and the device does the rest. The Pogoplug device, which turned the Seagate into a cloud storage device, was equally simple.

The result? I can now access all those personal files, like documents, music and videos from any Web-enabled device.

It makes things so much simpler. For example, having your insurance documents available whenever you need them. Or scanning a copy of your passport and never needing to worry when you travel abroad that you won't be able to prove who you are. Or even scanning copies of flight bookings, hotel reservations, etc. and knowing that you have easy access to them. The possibilities are endless.

How will you use the Cloud? ★



Simon Salt is CEO of IncSlingers, and is an author, blogger, writer and entrepreneur. His book, "Social Location Marketing," was published by QUE, a division of Pearson publications in February 2011. Follow him on Twitter: @IncSlinger.

MARKETING LESSON OF

by Jason Gregory

Read *or* not read. The results from every email you send, sales letter you write, ad created, blog post written...are completely dependent on that set of two options.

Read *or* not read.

If your sales letter isn't read by your potential customer, then you have absolutely zero chance of getting that potential customer to respond and purchase what you are selling.

In order to get that sales letter read, you need a headline that will hook the reader and get them to the first sentence.

The purpose of a headline is: (a) to get the potential customer to the first sentence of the sales letter; the subscriber to open your email; a follower to click on a link you posted, and (b) to remain open to taking action.

Your success or failure as a marketer is dependent firstly upon getting your target audience to move from headline (aka subject line in an email) to first sentence. It is then up to the remaining content to move them from potential customer/client/reader to customer/client/reader.

It does not need to be anymore complicated than that.

When you think about it, it is all a numbers game.

For example, the number of subscribers who respond to your emails is directly proportional to the number of subscribers who read your emails. Said another way, the more people who open your emails, the more people who respond to your emails.

Here are 25 tips to help you write better headlines:

1. Keep a swipe file of headlines that have caused you to take action.
2. Don't mislead.

3. Don't be "all business" all the time.
4. Mention an update, upgrade or upsell to a product that your customers already own.
5. Be provocative by using headlines that startle the reader.
6. Work in current news.
7. Get inspired by reading magazine covers.
8. Write to one person at a time.
9. Be very specific.
10. Write at least 10 versions before making a decision.
11. Keep it relevant to the rest of your message.
12. Test, test, test.
13. Evoke emotion.
 14. Write from your customer's point of view.
 15. Focus on decreasing pain.
 16. Be casual.
 17. Be cryptic.
 18. Write the headline before you write the rest of the copy.
 19. Ask a revealing question.
 20. Avoid trickery.
 21. Avoid false claims.
 22. Write it as a tips list (i.e. Top 10 Ways...).
23. Use the results and time formula (i.e. Stop Smoking in 30 days or pay nothing).
24. Personalize with information other than the person's name.
25. Create anticipation.

CAN YOU TAKE THE HEAT?

Send in your own marketing materials to be critiqued:

Small Business Bonfire
P.O. Box 239
Stewartville, NJ 08886
USA

Over on the next page, I have listed 21 headlines that I have in my personal swipe file. If I were you, I would add them to your swipe file, as well. Don't have one yet? Then no better time to start than now. ★



Jason Gregory is an entrepreneur with more than 15 years of business experience, a passion for marketing that actually delivers results, the environment and everything in between. Follow him on Twitter: @JayGregory.

About the Small Business Bonfire

The Small Business Bonfire, founded in early 2011 by Alyssa Gregory, is a social, educational and collaborative community for small business owners. Our goal is to provide help and support for entrepreneurs who are ready to make positive changes in their businesses and the way they run them.

We provide our members with an outlet for networking, a place to learn new techniques, a support system for business owners who are driven to reach exceptional levels of success, and a number of other benefits.

If you are ready to start a business or take your existing business to a new level, the Small Business

Bonfire is the place for you. Join our thriving community of smart, progressive, dynamic and open-minded small business owners and entrepreneurs around the Bonfire as we learn, share, grow and succeed.



You can find out more at:
<http://smallbusinessbonfire.com>

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Small Business Bonfire Membership Levels

Below are some of the member benefits included with each level of membership. For more details, please visit:
<http://smallbusinessbonfire.com/join>.

	Kindling	Oxygen	Heat	Fuel
Social Network for Entrepreneurs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Member Directory Listing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red Hot Tool of the Week	✓	✓	✓	✓
Member-Only Networking Groups & Forums	Limited	✓	✓	✓
Online Archives	✗	✓	✓	✓
Small Business Library	✗	✓	✓	✓
The Spark Monthly Newsletter	✗	✓	✓	✓
CD of the Month	✗	✓	✓	✓
Marketing Swipe Resource of the Month	✗	✓	✓	✓
Featured Member Profile on Facebook	✗	✓	✓	✓
"Get Promoted" Monthly Blast	✗	✗	✓	✓
Featured Member Webinars	✗	✗	✓	✓
Business Evaluation & Monthly Action Plans	✗	✗	✓	✓
Expert "Lesson of the Month"	✗	✗	✓	✓
Original Blog Content for Your Blog	✗	✗	✗	✓
Social Media Shortcut Pack	✗	✗	✗	✓
Professional Promotional Audio Recording	✗	✗	✗	✓
Quarterly Mastermind	✗	✗	✗	✓



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This is only a preview copy of
The Spark monthly newsletter.

To read the rest of this 12-page newsletter and
to get a new issue in your mailbox every month,
become a premium member of the Small Business
Bonfire at:

<http://smallbusinessbonfire.com/join>