



Why Your Marketing Isn't Working

And What You Are Actually Responsible For

By Kevin Suboski

Table of Contents

- The Way Most People See Marketing..... 3**
- Where This Picture Came From..... 4**
- The Solopreneur’s Actual Situation 5**
- The Three-Part Product Most Entrepreneurs Overlook 6**
- The Trajectory Problem..... 7**
- The Real Distinction: Marketing vs. Sales..... 8**
- What Marketing Actually Requires..... 8**
 - Foundation 9
 - Strategy..... 9
 - Plan 9
 - Expression..... 9
 - Governance..... 9
 - The Energy Layer 10
- The Shift That Changes Everything 11**
- An Invitation 12**

I have sat across from hundreds of entrepreneurs over the past two decades. Different industries, different sizes, different stages. And in almost every conversation about marketing, I hear some version of the same thing.

The leads are inconsistent. The effort doesn't seem to produce results. They've tried things that didn't work. They've hired people who didn't deliver. They know something is wrong, but they can't quite name what it is.

Here is what I have come to see: the problem is almost never execution.

The problem is how marketing is being understood in the first place.

Most entrepreneurs are working from a picture of marketing that is simply wrong for their situation. Not wrong because they are unintelligent or uninformed. Wrong because the picture they are working from was designed for a completely different context, and nobody told them that when they brought it into their business.

This paper is about that picture. Where it came from, why it doesn't fit, and what you are actually responsible for if you want marketing to reliably produce customers.

The Way Most People See Marketing

Marketing is not primarily a noun. It is not something you have. It is a domain of action you must be responsible for.

Ask most entrepreneurs what marketing is, and you will get some version of the same answer. It is the website. The brand. The social media. The ads. The content. The messaging.

Even when they think of marketing as something you do rather than something you have, the actions are familiar: posting, writing, running campaigns, attending events, sending emails. In other words, producing and distributing content and collateral.

This is the common sense of marketing. It is the water most business owners swim in without ever noticing it is water.

And I want to be careful here, because I am not saying these people are wrong exactly. The website matters. The messaging matters. The content matters. But treating these things as marketing, as the sum total of what marketing requires, is where the trouble begins.

When marketing is seen as a set of outputs, the natural response to poor results is to improve the outputs. Redesign the website. Write better copy. Post more consistently. Hire someone to run the ads. And sometimes that works, at least for a while. But for most solopreneurs, these improvements produce modest gains and then plateau, leaving the fundamental problem untouched.

The reason is that the outputs are downstream of something. And that something is where most of the real work lives.

Where This Picture Came From

The version of marketing that is accessible to small business assumes that the foundational work has already been done. In most small businesses, it has not.

The way most people understand marketing did not emerge from the realities of small business. It emerged from the structure of large organizations, and was exported outward into the small business world, largely stripped of the context that made it sensible.

In a large company, marketing is a department. It has a specific function, which is positioning, messaging, and promotion. The people in that department are not responsible for designing the product. They are not responsible for constituting the business. They are not responsible for choosing the target market or setting strategy. All of that work has been done, by other people, in other departments, before marketing ever gets involved.

Marketing's job, in that context, is to communicate an already-defined offer to an already-identified market through already-established channels. It makes complete sense, in that context, for marketing to be associated with collateral and campaigns.

What happened next is the important part. A generation of professionals built their careers inside that model. They became skilled at the communication and promotion side of marketing because that was their job. Then many of them left those large companies and entered the marketplace as consultants, agencies, and advisors to small businesses.

They brought their model with them.

And so, the solopreneur who hires a marketing agency gets help with the website, the messaging, the social strategy, and the content calendar. All of it assumes that the business is already clearly defined. That the offer is compelling and specific. That the right target market has been chosen. That the entrepreneur's own role in the system has been thought through.

In most small businesses, none of that is true.

This is not a critique of marketing professionals. The best ones understand the full picture. But the full picture is expensive, it lives at the strategic level, and it is largely inaccessible to the entrepreneur running a business under thirty people who is trying to figure out why the leads are not coming.

I started Growing a Brilliant Business because of conversations with friends who run marketing agencies. The same story came up again and again. They would describe a client they could not help, not because the client was unwilling and not because the budget was wrong, but because

the client could not yet describe themselves. The marketing professional cannot do their job when what they have been hired to communicate has not yet been constituted in language.

What reaches most solopreneurs is a partial model. And the parts that are missing are, in most cases, the parts that matter most.

The Solopreneur's Actual Situation

You cannot produce a public identity for something that does not yet exist in language. A feeling about your business is not a business.

Here is what makes the small business context fundamentally different, and why the large-company marketing model breaks down.

In a small business, the product is still being shaped. The business is still being constituted. The target market is often a rough guess. The entrepreneur is not an executive overseeing a marketing department. The entrepreneur is part of the system, doing the work, having the conversations, and sustaining the effort, often all at once.

There is no marketing department to hand things off to. There is no product team to define the offer. There is no strategy team to set the direction. All of those responsibilities land on the same person who is also trying to deliver the work and keep the business alive.

When I ask an entrepreneur what their target market is, the most common answer, stated or implied, is essentially “anyone with money.” Nobody says it that way, of course. But it is close enough that most solopreneurs I tell this to laugh with recognition. They think this way because the fear of leaving money on the table is real. What they do not yet see is that this openness, this reluctance to narrow, is one of the most reliable predictors of marketing failure I know.

When I ask what their offer is, I jokingly paraphrase it as “anything they want.” I can help you with this. I have experience in that. I am good at solving these kinds of problems. That is not an offer. That is a person. They do not want to limit their possibilities. They often reinvent the offer in real time as they learn what the prospect needs. This works in the room. It does not scale, because you cannot market a person the same way you market a product, at least not to people who are not yet in the room with you.

And when I press further, asking what specifically makes someone the right fit for their business, or what the experience of working with them actually produces, the answers often get vague. Not because the entrepreneur lacks intelligence or ability. Because the work of constituting the business in language, of making it real, specific, and seductive to the right people, has not been done.

This is the central problem. Most solopreneurs are trying to market something that is not yet clearly constituted. They are asking tactics to do the work that only clarity can do.

The Three-Part Product Most Entrepreneurs Overlook

The offer, the company, and you. All three are part of what the marketplace is evaluating. All three need to be clear, coherent, and compelling.

In a large company, the product is distinct from the company and from the people who work there. When Coca-Cola releases a new beverage, they do not need to explain Coca-Cola. Decades of investment have made the company a known entity, a reliable signal that the product will meet a certain standard and feel a certain way. The product can stand on its own.

For a small business, this separation does not exist. The product, the company, and the person are all part of what the marketplace is evaluating, often simultaneously. And all three need to be clear, coherent, and compelling.

The offer is what you are specifically selling. Not what you are capable of, but what you are actually offering, with enough precision that a person can decide whether they want it. Most entrepreneurs have a loose version of this at best.

The company is the entity behind the offer. Its values, its direction, the kind of experience someone can expect when they engage with it. For a solopreneur who wants to grow, who wants to eventually have a team, who wants to be able to step back from doing every sale personally, the company has to exist as something separate from them. Someone else has to be able to represent it, and that means it has to be specified.

And then there is you. The entrepreneur. Your perspective, your personality, your approach. This is often the most seductive part of a small business, and also the most fragile. Because what attracts people to you personally does not automatically transfer to the business. If the company is just a loose wrapper around your improvisational talent, it will not scale, and it will not make your marketing easier.

All three of these have to be coherent. They have to tell the same story. When they do, something shifts. The conversations get easier. The right people recognize themselves in what you are saying. The wrong people self-select out. And the marketing, whatever form it takes, starts to actually work.

When they do not, you get what I see constantly: an entrepreneur who is impressive in person, who can close a conversation when they are in the room, but whose marketing produces nothing because the business does not yet exist clearly enough to be marketed.

The Trajectory Problem

Network marketing, then referral marketing, then distributed marketing. Each stage requires more clarity about who you are than the last.

Most solopreneurs begin with what I would call network marketing. They go out, meet people, make an impression, and convert some of those people into clients. If they are naturally engaging, knowledgeable, and willing to put themselves in front of people, this can work surprisingly well in the early years.

The problem is that this approach does not scale, and most entrepreneurs do not see the wall coming until they hit it.

At some point, the physics work against you. There are only so many conversations you can have. There are only so many events you can attend. And as you bring on clients and do the work, you have less time for the outreach that produced those clients. Many businesses plateau here, oscillating between a few clients and not enough clients, never quite breaking through.

The next stage many entrepreneurs attempt is referral marketing. If I can get my existing clients and network to bring me new people, I get my time back. This is a sound instinct. But referral marketing has a requirement that network marketing does not: someone else has to be able to carry you.

That person has to remember you clearly enough to bring you up in the right moment. They have to understand what you do specifically enough to identify the right people to refer. And they have to be able to describe you in a way that is attractive to whoever they are talking to.

If the business is not clearly constituted, if the offer is fuzzy and the brand is vague, this breaks down. People who were impressed by you in person cannot translate that impression into a conversation with someone who has never met you. They try, and it sounds uncertain, and the referral goes nowhere.

Entrepreneurs who want to grow beyond what personal hustle can produce also need to develop what I think of as distributed marketing, reaching people who do not yet know they exist, at a scale that no amount of networking can match. This is where digital channels, content, and systems come in. And this is where the lack of a clearly constituted business becomes most visible and most costly.

Because when you try to write to strangers, you cannot rely on your presence. You cannot read the room and adjust. You cannot charm your way through a fuzzy offer. The business has to speak for itself. And if it has not been built to do that, all the ad spend and content production in the world will produce very little.

The Real Distinction: Marketing vs. Sales

Marketing generates the conversation. Sales converts it. Treating them as the same thing produces real strategic problems.

One of the most consistent confusions I encounter is between marketing and sales. Entrepreneurs conflate them, often because in the early years of a business, the same person is doing both. But they are not the same thing, and treating them as the same thing produces real strategic problems.

Marketing is the set of practices that produce a public identity and seduce strangers into being willing to hear about your offer. Its job is to generate leads, to bring people from not knowing you exist to being open to a conversation.

Sales is what converts those willing people into customers. It is a different set of practices, a different challenge, and a different skill.

Many solopreneurs think they have a sales problem when they actually have a marketing problem. They are skilled at selling, at the one-on-one conversation where they can build rapport and demonstrate value. What they are not producing is enough opportunities to have those conversations. That is a marketing problem.

And many of the things they are doing in the name of marketing, the website refreshes, the social posts, the networking events, are not actually producing qualified leads in any measurable way. They are activities that feel like marketing without functioning as marketing.

This is worth sitting with. If your marketing activities are not producing a consistent, growing supply of qualified leads, then regardless of how much effort you are putting in, the marketing system is not working. And the solution is not to work harder at the same activities. The solution is to understand what the system actually requires.

What Marketing Actually Requires

Foundation, strategy, plan, expression, governance. Five layers. Most entrepreneurs work almost entirely in the top one.

A marketing system, for a small business, is not a website and a social media presence. It is the complete set of practices that reliably converts qualified people from not knowing you exist into being willing to have the conversation that leads to them becoming a customer.

That system has layers, and most entrepreneurs are working almost entirely in the top layer while leaving the foundational layers unaddressed.

Foundation

The foundation is the constitution of your business. What exists to be marketed. Your values, your direction, your specific offer, your target market, and the coherence between all of those things. Without this, nothing built on top of it will hold for long.

Strategy

Above the foundation is strategy. What is the specific insight that makes your business matter to the right people? Why are you the obvious choice for this particular group of people with this particular situation? What makes you different, not in a generic way, but in a way that is actually true and actually seductive to the people you are trying to reach?

Plan

Above strategy is your plan. How many leads do you actually need? What are the channels through which you will reach your target market? What are the conversion points in your process, and what are the realistic conversion rates at each one? Most entrepreneurs have never done this math, which means they have no basis for knowing whether their current activities can possibly produce the results they need.

Expression

Above the plan is expression. The website. The content. The ads. The collateral. The campaigns and the channels through which you reach people. This is where most of the attention goes, and where most of it is wasted, because the foundational work has not been done.

Expression is where most attention goes, and where most of it is wasted, because the foundational work has not been done.

Governance

Above expression, and holding the entire system together, is governance.

Marketing, viewed as a domain of action, is also a domain of commitments. To the business, to the market, and to yourself. Governance is how those commitments stay alive after the system is built. It is the structures and rhythms that turn a designed system into a system that actually runs, week after week, through the long arc of building a business.

Most entrepreneurs do not have governance. They have activities. They do not have a way of knowing, week to week, whether the activities are producing what they need. When the results disappoint, they cannot tell whether the problem is in the foundation, the strategy, the plan, or the expression. So they default to the layer they can see and try to fix something there, whether or not that is where the actual problem lives.

There are four structures that, in my experience, carry most of the governance load for a solopreneur.

The scorecard. A small number of metrics, tracked weekly, that tell you whether the system is producing what it needs to. Leads. Conversations. Conversions. The specific metrics depend on the model. The scorecard is a commitment to know rather than guess.

The marketing and sales pipeline. The people in motion through your system, from first awareness to closed customer, visible at any moment. The pipeline is a commitment to the people who are already in motion with you. They are real, they are paying attention, and they deserve not to be forgotten as you chase the next opportunity.

The marketing and sales process. The specific stages a person moves through, and the work that happens at each one. The process is a commitment to do the right thing at the right time rather than improvising the same conversation every week and wondering why it produces inconsistent results.

The portfolio of relationships. Everyone you have met, met through someone, or want to meet, organized so that you can tend the relationships that matter. The portfolio is a commitment to cherish the people who can carry you, by remembering them and giving them what they need to think of you when the moment comes.

These four structures are necessary, but they are not yet governance. What makes them governance is the rhythm of review. A scorecard nobody looks at is a document, not a scorecard. A pipeline that does not get worked weekly is a list, not a pipeline. The discipline of weekly review, ideally with an accountability partner who is doing similar work, is what turns the structures into a living system. Without the rhythm, the structures decay, and the work that produced them is wasted.

There is one more thing governance requires, and it is often the first structure to fail: the block of time on the calendar that belongs to marketing. Not “I will work on this when I have a chance.” A standing commitment to your own marketing work, treated with the seriousness you treat client work. Without this, the scorecard cannot save you. The marketing work always gets pushed by the delivery work that pays this week. Until the entrepreneur protects the time, the system cannot run.

Governance is the layer that turns a marketing system from a thing you built into a thing that runs. Without it, the foundation can be excellent, the strategy precise, the plan sharp, the expression polished, and nothing produces customers, week after week, over the years it takes to build a business.

The Energy Layer

I also want to name something that is rarely discussed in the marketing literature, and that I believe is genuinely important. Marketing requires energy. Not enthusiasm as a performance, but something more fundamental: the entrepreneur has to be lit by the work, the clients, and the direction of the business.

This shows up in every conversation you have, every piece of content you write, every presentation you give. When an entrepreneur is genuinely energized by what they are doing, that presence is seductive in the most literal sense. It draws people toward them. When they are not, when they are going through the motions, when the business has drifted from what actually matters to them, it shows. And no amount of tactical sophistication compensates for its absence.

This is one of the reasons I insist that business design has to work for the entrepreneur, not just for the market. A business built entirely around what other people want, without regard for what sustains and energizes the person building it, will eventually hollow out. And hollow marketing does not produce customers.

The Shift That Changes Everything

When the business is real, specific, and built for the right people, marketing becomes much simpler. You are not convincing anyone of anything. You are just making it easy for the right people to find you.

What I am describing is not a set of tactics. It is a shift in how you understand what you are responsible for.

If marketing is a noun, something you have, then the response to poor results is to get better marketing. Hire someone. Redesign something. Try a different platform.

If marketing is a domain of action, something you are responsible for, then the response to poor results is to ask what part of the domain is not being engaged. Is the business clearly enough constituted? Is the offer specific and compelling? Is the target market narrow enough that you can actually reach them? Is there a system, or just a collection of activities? Is the system being governed, or just designed and then left to drift?

This is a harder question. It requires looking at things that most entrepreneurs would rather not look at, because the answers sometimes mean that real work needs to be done before the tactics can function. But it is the honest question, and in my experience, it is the one that actually leads somewhere.

The entrepreneurs I have seen build real marketing momentum are not the ones with the best ad strategy or the most polished website. They are the ones who did the work of getting clear. Who built something specific and compelling. Who chose a target market narrow enough to reach and deep enough to serve. Who designed a business that energized them as much as it served their clients. And who built the discipline of governance that kept the system alive after the initial work was done.

Those businesses are magnetic. Their marketing does not have to be perfect, because there is something real behind it that people can sense. The clarity itself is seductive.

An Invitation

Not a quick fix. Not better tactics. The foundational work that most marketing advice skips entirely.

If what I have described resonates with you, if you recognize your own business in any part of this, I want to offer something specific.

The GBB Marketing System program is built around exactly these layers. Not tactics first, but foundation first. We work through the constitution of your business, the strategic insight that makes your offer matter to the right people, the plan that translates that insight into a system, the expression that brings the system to life, and the governance that keeps it running.

It is not a quick fix. The work of constituting a business takes real time and real thought. But the entrepreneurs who go through this process consistently report that something unlocks. That the conversations get easier. That the right people start showing up. That marketing finally starts to feel like it is working with them instead of against them.

If you are ready to stop working on the surface and start building the foundation, I would be glad to talk. Not to sell you something, but to see whether what I do is actually the right fit for where you are.

That conversation is always worth having.

Kevin Suboski

EOS Implementer | Entrepreneurial Strategist | Founder, Fastest Route

Kevin works with solopreneurs and small business owners who are serious about building something real. His GBB programs address the foundational work that most marketing advice skips entirely.