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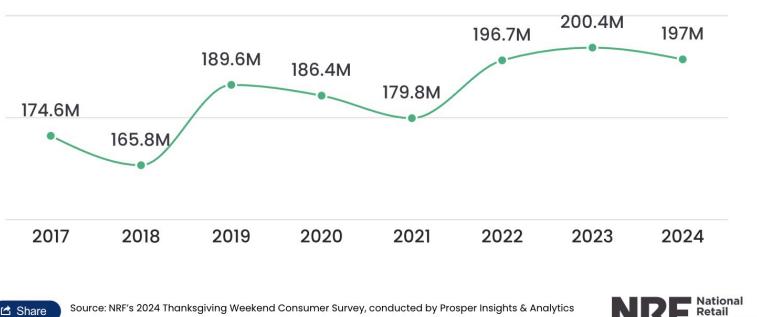
October 2025

Get Ready for a Great Thanksgiving Weekend.

Well, the kids are back in school, large boxes of Halloween treats dominate end-aisle displays in grocery, drug, and dollar stores, and "pumpkin spice" is starting to pop up everywhere.

These observations only mean one thing: the shopping orgy known as Thanksgiving Weekend is on deck. Now's the time to start planning for a great event, whether you're a business or an agency that serves business clients.

Thanksgiving weekend shoppers over the years



NRF National Retail Federation

During this 5-day shopping spree, which includes Thanksgiving, Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday, Americans will spend billions of dollars.

According to the National Retail Federation, in 2024, 197 million people **spent an estimated 55 billion dollars over the five days.**

Of the five-day weekend, Black Friday attracted the most shoppers, both in store and online (According to the NRF, the numbers are 81.7 and 87.1 million, respectively. You cannot add numbers together since many individuals used both channels.)

The shopper counts in the above chart exclude the period before and after the Thanksgiving Weekend. Consequently, these sales figures are likely understated as "Black Friday" has been known to start earlier and "Cyber Monday" now lasts longer than a single day.

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The perception of significant discounts drive Thanksgiving Weekend sales. Although deeper discounts may have existed in the past, in 2024, average discounts ranged from 11% to 23%, as reported on Black Friday Statistics and credited to Criteria.

Yet, people crave discounts, and Thanksgiving

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DIRECT MAIL INSIDERS
2255 SE 37TH AVE
PORTLAND, OR 97214
U.S.A.

Website:

directmailinsiders.com

Email:

info@directmailinsiders.com

Phone:

David Baer

914-522-9363

David Foley

313-285-1204

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Weekend promotions do not disappoint. But what decisions will support those discounts?

Here's a nine-step process for planning a successful Thanksgiving Weekend promotion.

1. Know your business objectives; write them down

Where will those oversized discount offers come from?

Do you intend to reduce paid inventory that's gathering dust in the basement, or off-site? Or, will you work with one or two vendors to help them reduce their inventory, particularly for products that they will replace with newer models immediately before the holidays?

What other objectives do you have?

Obviously, there's a sales goal for the weekend, but where will buyers come from? Will you rely on current or past customers, or do you plan to attract new customers to your business? (The answer to this question will influence your marketing strategy for the weekend.)

Set a team sales goal and have a team reward if that sales goal is achieved.

2. Analyze past performance

What has worked in recent years? What bombed? Can you replicate the successes and avoid repeating the failures?

3. Prepare a detailed work-back schedule

Working backwards from November 26th (two days before Black Friday this year), identify promotion dates (by channel), approval dates, promotional planning dates, and other key activities, printing, for example, if you're using direct mail.

Similarly, plan your inventory — when it will arrive, where it will be stored, and when displays will be built (for in-store businesses). Don't forget the signage!

Plan your staff requirements, including assignment of shifts, pre-event training dates, event apparel and so on. (Online businesses will need to ramp up their customer service and fulfillment staff levels.)

Continues on the right

Thinking about staff, do you need to hire outside security guards for the weekend?

Security staff perform an essential role in keeping the store optimized with customers (and not overwhelmed). Also, they manage the line-up outside the store.

And, think about this: A line-up is a marketing activity, so you should rent temporary barricades (like at airports) to delineate the waiting area and have an enthusiastic staff member "working the line."

4. Expect a long day

Many big-box stores open early on Black Friday. Match their opening time (and have staff ready; see point # 2) Also, have healthy snacks and good coffee available all day in the break room.

Have taxi chits or use your Uber account to get exhausted staff members home with minimal delay (especially if they need to be back on shift the next day).

5. Craft irresistible offers

This is where the proverbial rubber hits the road. Remember, many consumers will be checking different businesses for the items they are looking to buy. Consider adding value (through bundling) to avoid direct price comparison.

And, make your best deal, your early-morning door-opening door crasher!

We advise against putting everything on sale; instead, choose a select few items and focus on those.

6. Communicate, communicate, communicate

In other words, follow through on the promotional plans detailed in your timetable (item # 3)



Source: Who's Mailing What!

Consider this customer mailing piece from a TV and Appliance store.

It shows a few products with specific deal pricing, but other claims are more generic: "Savings up to 50% OFF," "Exclusive Rebates," as well as a lowest price guarantee.

Also, note that this business offers special financing deals ("No Interest if Paid in Full by May 2025") which may tip the balance in their favor compared to a competing store.

Interest-free financing and "buy now, pay later" (BNPL) offers are becoming increasingly popular.

According to Capital One Shopping, almost 20% of Americans used BNPL plans in 2024, usually for smaller items (\$135+/-) and 90% of customers paid off the balance as required by the agreement (usually 25% down and the balance over the following six weeks).

7. Optimize for mobile devices

These days, it seems that everyone does everything using their mobile phones. While that might seem like hyperbole, the fact is that

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"Thanksgiving Weekend..."*

"Thanksgiving Weekend..."

Continued from page 3

researching products or services to buy is one of the most frequent uses of smartphones.

"Researching" might mean getting more information, reading reviews, or comparing prices in real time. Or, it may mean emailing a trusted friend to seek advice.

Or, it may mean checking a store's business hours or getting directions to another business (which either has the desired item at a lower price, or in stock, or both).

Additionally, consumers may use their smartphones to create shopping lists or use them as their preferred payment device.

In the USA, 77% of the total population owns a smartphone; in Canada, it's slightly lower (72%) and in the UK, it's slightly higher (82%). On average, 16.9% of the population of these countries are 14 years of age or younger, which means that virtually everyone 15 years and older has a smartphone.

Consequently, it is essential that websites are optimized for mobile use and that they load quickly. (No one has any patience for slowly-loading sites.)

8. Hold a contest to capture customer contact details

In a brick-and-mortar store, set up a self-

standing display to announce the contest and collect ballots. Ideally, display the prize (hanging from the ceiling) and have the contest entry collection point at a table below. Place blank entry forms and pens on the table, and have a closed container to receive ballots.

On the ballot itself, ask individuals to identify their communications preferences, which are typically email, text message, phone, and mail.

For credibility, make the prize draw public (for example, at 11 AM on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving Weekend) and record the event, which can then be shared on your social media channels. For the same reason, photograph the winner receiving their prize and post this image in-store and online.

9. Follow-up

Thanksgiving Weekend represents the beginning of a month-long sales spree that ends around Christmas Day.

Use the contact information provided by contest entrants to offer them information on and special offers for other products during this sales period using the communications preferences indicated on their contest ballot.

Start planning for a great Thanksgiving Weekend! It will not happen by accident.

MEMBERS-ONLY LIVE DIRECT MAIL INSIDERS' CALLS ON ZOOM

(All 90-minute calls start at NOON Eastern/11 AM Central/9 AM Pacific)

ALL Members

October 14th

November 11th

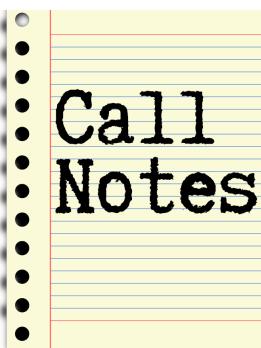
December 9th

FULL Members

October 28th

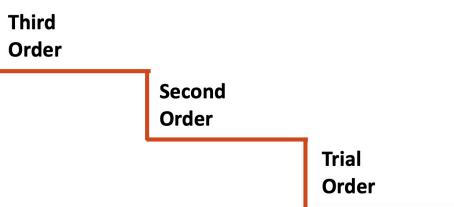
November 25th

These calls will be recorded and posted on the Private Members' Site for future reference.



On our September 9th call, we discussed the notion that every customer's first order was a trial order; their way of testing you as a supplier to them.

It does not matter whether that order was a \$7 online "tripwire" or a \$700 pearl necklace; the first order should establish the expectation of a second order. Or, try to.



The call offered three strategies to accomplish this.

1. The surprise gift card.

Following the initial (trial) order, enclose a gift card with the "thank you" note you mail to the customer. Ideally, the value of the gift card matches the value of the trial purchase, although that may not be possible in all cases (the \$700 necklace, for instance).

The gift card should not have any expiration date, and it should not be transferable, although you might offer some flexibility here (i.e., within the same family).

By not having an expiry date, you are giving new customers time to consider their second purchases. But that gift card will be in their wallet or purse, and they will think of using it every time they see it.

If you use this strategy, keep track of the

customers, the issue and redemption dates, and the value of the first and second orders.

2. A practical, relevant gift

After the initial purchase, send a practical, relevant gift along with the mandatory "thank you" note.

You might brand the gift with your business name, or engrave it with the customer's name. The latter is much more effective, but is also more expensive.

On some level, the customer will think of your business each time that they use the gift, which helps achieve top-of-mind awareness.

3. An invitation to an exclusive event

Imagine that your business held a customer appreciation event each quarter. It may be a BBQ in the summer or a wine-and-cheese pairing in the winter, or both.

First-time customers may not know about these events, so invite them. If they attend, these events provide an opportunity for them to learn about your business and meet with other satisfied customers.

Be sure to ask everyone to RSVP for event planning purposes, but pay particular attention to RSVPs by first-time customers. If they do not attend the first event, invite them to the next one, for precisely the same reason you invited them in the first place.

The call also included a discussion about window-and-door company Renewal by Anderson and whether its "new" advertising approach ("We'll replace just one window") was a new strategy — a trial order — or just a new way of getting in-home appointments.

Members who are interested in the whole discussion can check the replay.

Mailing of the Month:

Capital One

Tysons, VA

About Capital One

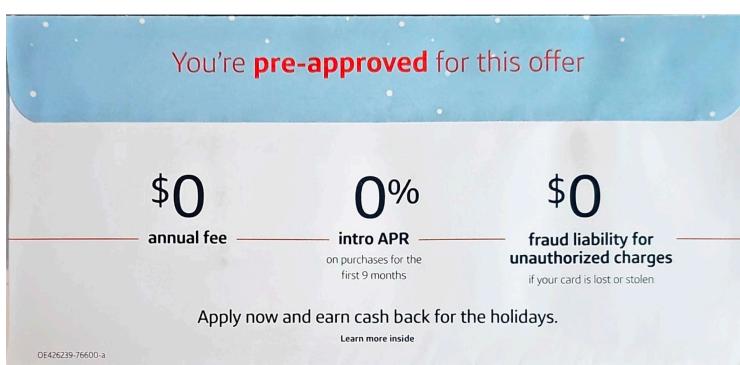
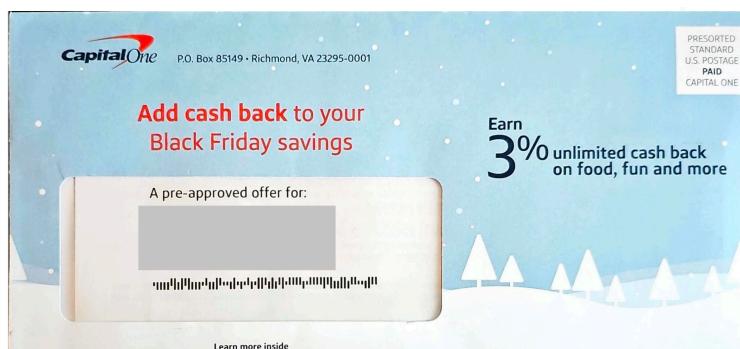
Readers will know Capital One as the organization that popularized the mass marketing of credit cards, primarily by direct-to-consumer direct mail. It is the third-largest issuer of Visa and Mastercard accounts in the USA with a market share of 10.74%. (Chase is #1 with a 17.27% share and Citi is # 2, with a 10.94% share, according to cardrates.com.) Both Chase and Citi have more branches (according to usbanklocations.com) than Capital One, which will certainly help Chase and Citi market new credit card accounts.

And, while both Chase and Citi are skillful practitioners of direct mail, Capital One has the edge. Frankly, there's not much we could teach Capital One, but there is so much we can learn from them, like this campaign.

About This Campaign

This campaign is a credit card acquisition mailing.

Comments on this Campaign



Let's start with the premise that everyone expects to save money on Black Friday, after all, that's the *raison d'être* for the event. (See cover story.)

Capital One's hook for this mailing is that those who respond to this offer save more, as expressed by the headline: **Add cash back** to your Black Friday savings.

A second copy block explains this: "Earn 3% unlimited cash back on food, fun and more."

The back of the envelope piles on the benefits — \$0 annual fee, \$0 introductory APR on purchases for the first 9 months, and \$0 fraud liability for unauthorized charges if your card is lost or stolen.

Then, to top it off, the flap proclaims that "You're **pre-approved** for this offer." (More about that later.) Additionally, the copy encourages one to "apply now and earn cash back for the holidays." Black Friday ushers in "holiday spending," or perhaps "holiday overspending."

What does this envelope teach us? First, to pile benefit upon benefit and, second, to express

these benefits as succinctly as possible. No wasted words. Note the repeated use of "\$0" on the back of the envelope.

Of course, the devil's in the details...

Most recipients are "Pre-approved"

The required fine print states: "Being pre-approved means that you've met our **initial criteria**, and you are likely to be approved for this Savor card offer." (Bold is ours.)

However, approval requires that **all criteria** are met, and there are several reasons, stated in the fine print, which explain why the required application would be rejected.

That said, this pre-approval offer is far stronger than others we have seen from Capital One.

In planning its mailings, Capital One (or any other mailer) would refine its mailing list to suppress unqualified names. In this case, people who already have a cash back credit card may be less likely to respond and, for that reason, Capital One might suppress them. Or would they? As a zero fee card, perhaps this is a better deal than the cash back card already in their wallet.

\$0 APR on purchases in the first 9 months

To the 40%+ of Americans who carry a balance on their credit cards, thus incurring interest costs, this is a powerful promise. There's nothing we could find in the fine print that limits this offer, so it appears to be exactly as stated.

Reward Program details

The mailing includes an insert titled, "THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS REWARDS PROGRAM," that explains which type of purchases earn more than the 3% stated on the envelope, which earn less, and which earn nothing at all. The rewards program seems unnecessarily complicated, particularly considering that a footer reads, "Full terms and details of the rewards program will be available in your Welcome Package upon approval." Yikes!

This is a solid package that reaches likely pre-approved individuals and discloses most of the details associated with the offers, including the complex rewards program.

In closing, we'd note that the lovely winter scene depicted on the envelope is rarely seen in three of the four states to which it was mailed this time — California, Florida, and Texas!

This mailing's stats from Who's Mailing What!

Left: WMW's "score" for this campaign (0 to 100)

Center: This campaign's most recent mailing date

Right: One star indicates a "control mailing; 3 stars, a "grand control."

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08/25



Images courtesy of Who's Mailing What!

Beyond The Mailbox

SEO in the Age of AI

by David Baer

Hardly a week goes by that my email inbox isn't littered with cold emails offering SEO services. "We'll boost your rankings!" "We have a team of 250+ SEO experts," "We build 2-3 backlinks per day." The sender's name changes, but the pitch never does.

Some emails are so generic they don't bother to use my name — just "Hi Sir/Ma'am."

If you run a business or manage a website, you likely know these emails. Maybe you wonder if you're missing out by ignoring them.

But the truth is, the SEO world these emails describe is disappearing. The rules of Search Engine Optimization are changing, and most of these pitches are stuck in the past.

How SEO Used to Work (And Why That's Over)

It used to be that SEO was simply a game of keywords and backlinks. All you needed was to stuff your web pages with the correct phrases, chase links from directories or guest posts, and hope to land on Google's first page.

The "10 blue links" were the prize that site owners coveted. Or, rather the top 3 links, which accounted for the largest percentage of search traffic. To get these pages ranked, content farms (and other legitimate and not-so-legitimate methods) churned out thousands of articles, optimized for search bots, not people.

I manage several websites, each with different audiences and goals. Five years ago, I could use the same playbook for all of them: research

keywords, publish posts, build links, and watch the rankings, expecting that some would climb. It was predictable, albeit mechanical.

But that world is gone.

AI Has Changed Search... And Fast

Today, artificial intelligence is at the heart of online search. For Google and Bing, AI plays a major role in how results are delivered. In 2023, Google rolled out AI Overviews: summaries that pull information from across the web and display it right at the top of the search page. Users get direct answers, often without clicking through to any website.

The numbers are staggering. According to a 2024 *BrightEdge* study, AI Overviews now appear in up to 96% of informational queries. That means for most questions, Google users see an AI-generated summary before they see any traditional search results.

But this is not just about Google or Bing. New platforms like Perplexity are gaining ground by offering conversational, AI-powered answers. So is ChatGPT. One SEO expert says, "Perplexity's conversational answers are a glimpse into the future of search."

Timeline: The Shift to AI Search

2010s: SEO = keywords + backlinks.

2020: Google's BERT and RankBrain start using AI to understand context.

2023–2025: AI Overviews, Perplexity, and other answer engines start dominating.

Continues on the right

Winners and Losers

Some businesses are thriving in this new world. Take Bankrate.com, which pairs AI-assisted content creation with human oversight. A 2025 case study by *ResultFirst* highlights Bankrate's model of publishing hundreds of AI-generated articles reviewed by human specialists. This process has enabled Bankrate to rank highly on Google for both primary and long-tail keywords, generating approximately 125,000 organic visitors per month according to Ahrefs data cited in the study.

On the flip side, Monday.com. In early August 2025, its stock dropped 30% in a single day. Missed earnings (which they beat) was not the cause, but Google's AI Overviews, which crushed the company's main growth channel: organic search traffic.

During its earnings call, Monday.com's leadership confirmed that Google's AI Overviews appeared in 47% of relevant searches, causing its click-through rates to plunge (from 2.94% to 0.84%). Its CMO openly admitted they're urgently reallocating marketing resources away from SEO because the old playbook no longer works.

Monday.com's story isn't unique. Many SaaS companies are reporting organic traffic drops. B2B service firms often see only branded search traffic left, with acquisition costs doubling or tripling while conversion rates fall sharply. Yet, many marketing teams are still running strategies designed for 2019's search landscape.

The Rise of Perplexity and Other AI Search Engines

Perplexity (perplexity.com) positions itself as an AI-powered "answer engine" or "research engine," rather than a traditional search engine that merely returns a list of links.

Instead of showing links, it gives users a direct, conversational response — often citing multiple sources. For businesses, this means you're not just competing for a spot on Google's first page, but you are also competing to be cited by AI.

Some companies are adapting by structuring content with clear, question-based headers, using schema markup, and providing original data or expert quotes. The goal is to become the source that AI engines trust and reference.

And Then There's Local SEO

Local SEO is a different animal, because people still search for "coffee shop near me" or "best plumber in [city]," and the local pack — the map and business listings — still dominates those results. For pure location-based searches, AI Overviews haven't taken over yet.

But the lines are blurring. For queries like "best gluten-free bakery in [city]," AI Overviews are starting to appear, mixing local and informational results. This means local businesses need to do more than just optimize their Google Business Profile. They need to provide the kind of detailed, trustworthy information that AI can use.

Practical Tips for Local Businesses

Keep your Google Business Profile up to date.

Encourage happy customers to leave reviews.

Add FAQs and detailed service descriptions to your website.

Use schema markup to help AI understand your business.

Strategies for AI Search Optimization

So, if you are wondering what you should actually do, here's a brief breakdown of what's working now:

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1. Structure Content for AI

Use clear, question-based headers

“How does X work?”

Break up content into short, focused sections.

Provide direct, concise answers.

2. Use Schema Markup

Add structured data to your pages so AI can easily extract key info.

Mark up FAQs, reviews, products, and business details.

3. Offer Original Data and Expertise

Share your own research, charts, or case studies; Include expert quotes or interviews;

Demonstrate real-world experience (E-E-A-T: Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness).

4. Audit for AI Readiness

Check if your content is being cited in AI Overviews or answer engines.

Update or expand pages that aren't getting traction.

Regularly review analytics for changes in traffic and engagement.

The Challenge of Zero-Click Searches

According to the online audience research platform, Sparktoro, 58.5% of Google searches in 2024 ended without a click, up from 50% in 2019. What this means is that more users are getting answers directly on the search page. So your website might not get the visit, even if you're the source.

How to Adapt

Focus on brand visibility and reputation. Make sure your business name is mentioned in AI answers.

Use content to drive email signups, social

follows, or other direct connections (not just clicks).

Build authority so users recognize and trust your brand, even if they don't click through.

What the “Experts” Believe

Not everyone agrees on what the future holds. Some worry that AI-generated answers can spread misinformation or amplify bias. Others argue AI content won't harm SEO, just as it won't replace the human content creator. And still others feel that SEO will remain one of the most effective strategies in digital marketing - with AI here to help make it even more impactful.

What Should Small Businesses Do Now?

SEO has shifted from winning the keyword and backlinks race to being the trusted source that AI systems choose to feature. Local SEO still matters, but it's evolving fast. The businesses that win will be those that blend AI-powered tools with real human insight and expertise.

Start Here:

Audit your website for AI-readiness: Are you answering real questions? Is your content structured and authoritative?

Update your Google Business Profile and encourage reviews.

Add schema markup and original data to your site.

Focus on building your brand, not just your rankings.

If you're still getting those cold emails promising “better SEO,” remember the rules have changed. It's time to rethink your strategy for an AI-driven search world.

Ideas for Annuity Mailings

by David Foley

Annuity mailings are the Energizer Bunny of direct mail — they keep going, and going, and going.

Right now, select customers at Cellar Door Winery, an on-premise winemaking business in Toronto, are deciding which limited-release, advance order wines they will add to their wine cellars over the winter.



The front cover (left) and center spread (right) of Cellar Door Winery's fall mailing. The back cover (more wines) and the paper order form are not shown. The 11" x 17" sheet folds to 8 1/2" x 11" and then z-folds into a #10 envelope.

This versatile format is suitable for many businesses.

I prepare this mailing for **Heather Banks**, the owner (and a personal friend), every year. The promotion has the same look from year to year, although the content changes, and typically it achieves CAD\$8,000 to \$14,000 in sales per year along with a solid ROI.

This mailing is like an annuity for Heather and her business. Any promotion for limited-release, advance order products has the potential to achieve results year after year.

But what other types of annuity promotions are out there?

Well, imagine you're an insurance broker, and you attend industry conferences each year.

At a recent conference, you learn that in the future, insurers will only cover flood damage to homes that have an electric sump pump with battery backup installed.

As their broker, find a local business (perhaps a client) who will offer a discount on the purchase of a qualifying sump pump. Include this offer in your mailing.

Your clients will appreciate both the heads-up and the discount offer.

Or, you're a gourmet food business (bricks-and-mortar or online) and you attend the Fancy Food Show in New York each year.

There, you check out the latest gastronomical delights, buy some, and, upon your return, create a mailing which introduces these foods to your customers.

The promotional piece features appetizing photographs of the items, full descriptions, prices, and how-to-order instructions.

The mailing produces new sales because foodies always like to try new things. At worst, the mailing should produce sales revenue to cover the cost of your trip... at best, it's a profitable test that you repeat each year.

(By doing this promotion repeatedly, some customers will anticipate it. So, don't stop!)

Finally, another type of annuity is the direct mail package that is your control package. While you may be trying to beat it (and you should), your current control produces consistent and profitable results every time you mail it. That, too, is an annuity!



SEND-OFF

HOW BETTING ON UNDERDOG MARKETS CAN YIELD OVERSIZED WINS

In business, the loudest opportunities often attract the most competition, leaving quieter, underdog markets overlooked. These markets — small, underserved, or considered unglamorous — can present outsized opportunities for those willing to bet on them strategically. Here's how focusing on underdog markets can yield significant returns.

Spotting the Underdog Markets

Underdog markets typically exhibit two key characteristics: a lack of established players and a specific, unmet need. Identifying these requires careful research and a willingness to explore areas others may dismiss. For example, a niche consumer group or a regional market underserved by large competitors can offer room to dominate without excessive pressure on pricing or positioning.

Understanding Their Unique Dynamics

What makes an underdog market tick is often overlooked in favor of chasing bigger trends. Spend time understanding the habits, pain points, and motivations of this audience. Tools like targeted surveys, focus groups, and third-party data analysis can help paint a clearer picture. The insights you uncover will likely differ significantly from more mainstream segments, giving you a chance to craft offerings explicitly tailored to their needs.

Entering with Precision

Approaching an underdog market requires precision. Start small by testing products or

services with minimal risk. This might mean piloting in one location, offering limited-run products, or focusing on a single marketing channel. The goal is to validate your approach without overcommitting resources.

Building Loyalty Early

Underdog markets often appreciate businesses that recognize their needs. By being one of the first to invest, you have the opportunity to build deep loyalty. Offering excellent customer service, listening to feedback, and ensuring a consistent value proposition can help secure long-term relationships that become a foundation for growth.

Scaling Without Losing Focus

Once an underdog market begins to yield results, the temptation might be to scale quickly or diversify into other areas. However, it's critical to scale in a way that maintains focus on what made your business successful in the first place. Whether that's continued innovation or simply retaining a personalized touch, staying true to your core value ensures you don't lose the trust you've built.

Why It Works

Betting on underdog markets works because competition is lower, and customer loyalty tends to be higher. By offering something they can't get elsewhere, you position yourself as indispensable. Over time, as these markets grow or gain attention, you're not just part of the conversation — you're leading it.

The key to success is strategic patience. Betting on underdog markets is rarely about immediate wins. It's about recognizing potential, entering wisely, and staying committed. Those willing to focus on the underappreciated often find they've built something others only notice once it's too late.