

'Building Small Business Resilience' Digital Marketing Training Program

Stage 1: Program Design

This is the first report from our research project: 'Building Small Business Resilience' (BSBR) Digital Marketing Training Program. It summarizes the findings from the first stage of the research: Program Design, which aims to investigate the needs and challenges of underrepresented small business owners to grow their businesses online. The findings from this stage will inform the development of the BSBR Digital Marketing Training Prototype in the Stage 2 of the research project.

Background

As the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the global economy into worst recession since World War II ^[1], under-represented businesses were amongst the hardest hit due to their existing financial fragility and poor economic health ^[2]. As businesses have been forced to pivot online, owners have faced the need to quickly upskill their digital marketing capabilities. The BSBR Digital Marketing Training Prototype will be specifically designed to address vital skill gaps and build resilience amongst underrepresented small business owners to prepare them to face any future economic shock or disruption.

Objectives

The project aims to:

- Increase equitable, diverse and inclusive participation in small business sectors
- Develop optimal training courses and tools to bridge digital marketing skill gaps for small business owners
- Develop and enhance other training programs in adult education, experiential learning, and digital marketing as we learn from the research data

Expected Outcome

For the short-term outcome at the end of the training program, participants are expected to be able to develop and execute a digital marketing campaign plan that is applicable to their own businesses and customer bases; identify elements of success and failures; and make necessary changes to optimize results.

For the long-term outcomes, participants are expected to successfully apply the knowledge and skills from the BSBR program, pivot their businesses online and increase their revenues and resilience against any future economic disruption. More successful underrepresented owners will experience more equitable, diverse and inclusive participation in small business sectors.

The training prototype is expected to be developed into programs offered by Sheridan College of Learning and Advanced Technology. Learning gained from the project will be applied to the development of other digital marketing programs in the Pilon School of Business, Faculty of Continuing and Professional Studies and EDGE Entrepreneur hub at Sheridan College.

Research Process

There are 5 stages of the research:

Stage 1: Program Design

Stage 2: Program Development

Stage 3: Alpha Testing

Stage 4: Beta Testing

Stage 5: Program Evaluation

This report covers Stage 1: Program Design.

Stage 1: Program Design

The first stage of the research, Program Design, aims to gain an understanding of the project's target market to develop a training program that is responsive to their needs.

Our target market is underrepresented small business owners whose businesses have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are looking to develop their digital marketing skills to pivot and grow their business online.

To be eligible to participate in the research, they must:

- Be 19 years of age or older.
- Identify as a woman, an Indigenous person, a racialized person or visible minority, immigrant, an LGBTQ2S+ person, a person with disabilities or a person without a post-secondary education.
- Have operated a Canadian owned small business within Canada for over 2 years.
- Have a business website.
- Have an interest in undertaking digital marketing development for their business.

1. Data Collection

We used three methods of data collection: online survey, online discussion board and focus group discussion.

1.1 Online Survey

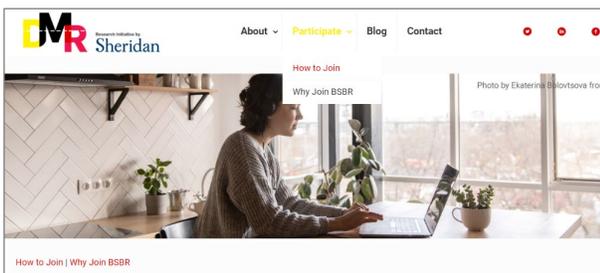
We asked underrepresented small business owners to complete 50 questions in the online questionnaire on the research website. The questionnaire was purposefully designed to be detailed and comprehensive as it was used to screen research participants as well as obtain insight on the target market and their needs.

There are 5 parts of questions:

- **Owner profile:** to find out about their age, education, language preference, and their software proficiency
- **Business profile:** to collect information on their business location, number of employees, length of operation, industry, revenues pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic
- **Digital profile:** to collect information on their website and social media presence, audience reach, frequency of use
- **Digital knowledge and skills:** to find out their level of expertise (self-rating) and their perceived skill gaps (self-identify)
- **Program delivery:** to learn their preference on class length and frequency, delivery mode in addition to their expectations

Data on their business and digital profile will also be used to establish the baseline for evaluation of the training program. The success factors will include revenue, number of employees, number of business locations and the growth, reach and frequency of their social presence.

At the time of this report publication, we have received 53 responses with 70% completion rate and the average time spent is approximately 13 minutes.



Digital Marketing Research website:
<https://digitalmarketingresearch.ca/how-to-join/>



Online Questionnaire:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/78N2TSF>

1.2 Online Discussion Board

After analysing the questionnaire data, we invited 51 business owners to participate in an online discussion board and a focus group discussion.

Prior to the group discussion, we asked participants to answer three questions on the online discussion boards using the online discussion board, Padlet¹. These questions were designed to guide later group discussion.

- What are the main problems or failures with your online marketing activities?
- What are the skills that are needed most in your business?
- What types of training program will give you the best chance to succeed?

Building Small Business Resilience - Group 1
Digital Marketing Training Program

What are the main problems or failures with your online marketing activities?	What are the skills that are needed most in your business?	What types of training program will give you the best chance to succeed?
Marketing Challenges I wouldn't say I've had any failures (quite a strong word), but have certainly had some challenges. First, I'm lacking in the appropriate skill set/know how to successfully	Needed Skills There are several kinds of skills needed for my line of work, such as technical skills in working with chocolate, artistic skills, presentation skills, customer service skills, project and time management skills, e-commerce	Training Program Needs I'm looking for a training program that sets me up with practical skills in digital marketing and one that would hopefully equip me with some funding to put these new skills into practice

Group 1

Building Small Business Resilience - Group 2
Digital Marketing Training Program

What are the main problems or failures with your online marketing activities?	What are the skills that are needed most in your business?	What types of training program will give you the best chance to succeed?
- Not much knowledge about digital marketing, so don't know where to start - Time is limited - how to be most efficient with digital marketing? I can't seem to factor it in	- 1) Marketing and Promotion: I need to raise awareness about my company and products in the future 2) Ecommerce: Being more savvy at e-commerce and selling online	- Regular, hands on training (as opposed to just theory), with repetitions embedded within the training. - Ideally, the training starts off easy and gradually increases in difficulty.

Group 2

Building Small Business Resilience - Group 3
Digital Marketing Training Program

What are the main problems or failures with your online marketing activities?	What are the skills that are needed most in your business?	What types of training program will give you the best chance to succeed?
Not doing any online marketing activities. Website is basic. All business comes from "word of mouth".	Build an effective marketing presence online - build a compelling website, develop social media campaigns, etc.	Marketing. How to build website and market on social media. Build an effective marketing presence online - build a compelling website, develop social media campaigns, etc.

Group 3

Building Small Business Resilience - Group 4
Digital Marketing Training Program

What are the main problems or failures with your online marketing activities?	What are the skills that are needed most in your business?	What types of training program will give you the best chance to succeed?
I don't really see a return on them, I feel like we are paying someone to run an ad campaign and there is little feedback or data to support the value. In our regular posting we are speaking to our current clients/audience - so again - nice to	Better understanding of the language to use, use of hashtags, difference between the platforms and how to utilize that. I like 'stories' because they are quicker to post and I see who sees them - but not sure they get the same reach.	practical, hands on - case studies, helping to compose posts and that monitor them so we can compare and see the differences

Group 4

Building Small Business Resilience - Group 5
Digital Marketing Training Program

What are the main problems or failures with your online marketing activities?	What are the skills that are needed most in your business?	What types of training program will give you the best chance to succeed?
The hardest part is the lack of time. There is just so much to do every day, it makes it challenging to do well all the marketing activities too. Then it is the unknown, like many business owners, I know my trade, a lot less about branding marketing	I would need to know inside out the following areas: - Shopify, it is already our platform, but I would need to know it in depth (how to optimize SEO, how to lower our abandon cart %, how to program different types of shipping rates...)	I have had the chance of attending different training during the pandemic to try to learn about those topics. I would say the best type of training that actually makes a difference in our daily life afterwards start with

Group 5

1.3 Focus Group Discussion

Twenty-six business owners participated in one of the five Focus Group Discussions. A 90-minute online discussion was designed to further explore their skill gaps, barriers, needs, and expectations of the training program.

There were two main areas we focussed on:

- **What to include in the training:** in this section, we asked participants to discuss their business needs and skill gaps in more detail with the following guiding questions:

¹ <https://padlet.com/dashboard>

- From your experience, what are the main problems and failures you have had with your online marketing activities?
 - From the digital marketing skills listed in the survey questions you completed earlier, please discuss the skills are important and needed most in your business.
 - What are your expectations after completing the 12-week program?
- **How to offer the training:** in this section, we asked participants to brainstorm ideas for training delivery with the following guiding questions:
 - With the intensive nature of the program which you will undertake while running your business full time, what types of delivery will give you the best chance to succeed?
 - How can the program help you apply your learning specifically to your business?

2. Data Analysis

2.1 Owner profile

From the online survey with 153 participants, the majority identified themselves as women, immigrant, and racialized peoples, whose employees are also women, immigrant, and racialized peoples. Their median age is 43 years old. English is their first language. They are highly educated with 58% having a bachelor's degree or higher, and 19% having a diploma. They also have high computer literacy with 81% rating themselves as intermediate or advanced level in Microsoft Office.

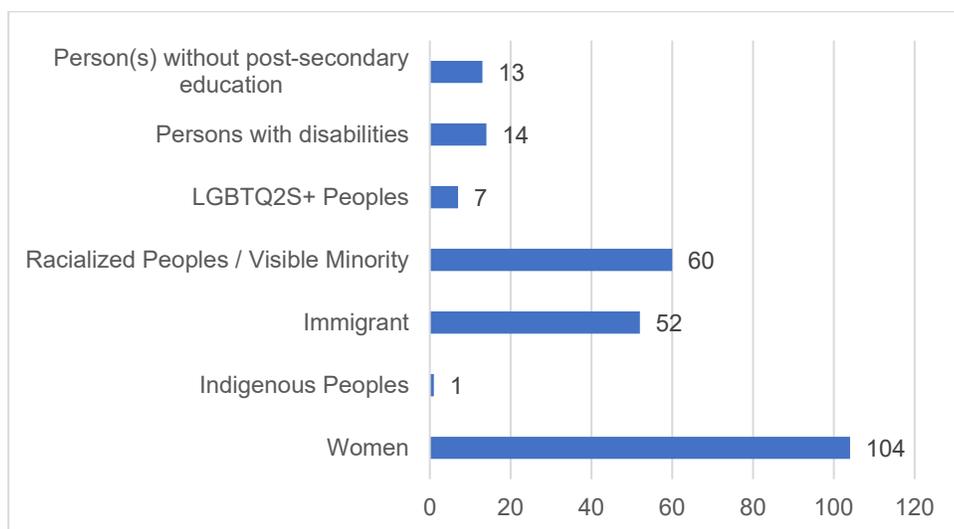


Figure 1: Participants' profile

2.2 Business profile

Almost all of the businesses (97%) are based in Ontario and the majority are from Arts; Educational Services; Health Care and Social Assistance; Professional, Scientific and Technical Services; and Retail industry sectors. Their current customers are based locally or in the same province, but they are looking to expand their customer base nationally and internationally.

Their revenue has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. 77% of the businesses experienced a negative growth in their annual revenue with an average of 58% reduction. The rest had a positive revenue growth of around 162%.

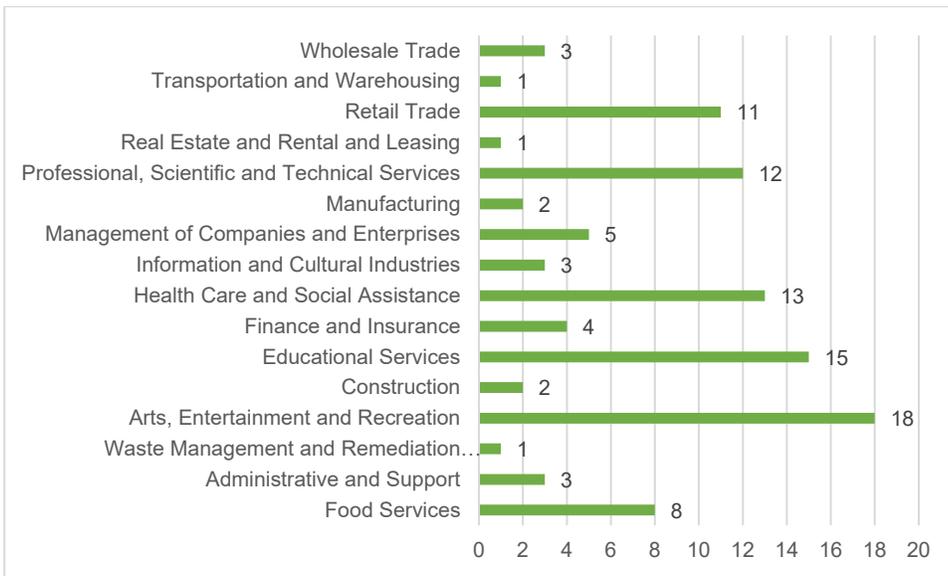


Figure 2: Participants' businesses by industry sector

2.3 Digital profile

The online survey participants are relatively new to digital marketing. On average, they have been operating a business website for 3.5 years, a blog for 0.8 year and an e-commerce site for 1 year. Regarding social media, they have been active on Facebook for 2.6 years, Instagram for 2.4 years, Twitter for 1.4 years, LinkedIn for 1.7 years, YouTube for 0.8 year and email marketing for 2.3 years.

They have a low level of online activities with an average of 2 updates per month. Most frequent updates are on Instagram 6.9 times and Facebook 4.6 times a month. Consequently, their online reach is low with an average 1,126 pageviews, 1,257 Instagram followers, and 427 email subscribers.

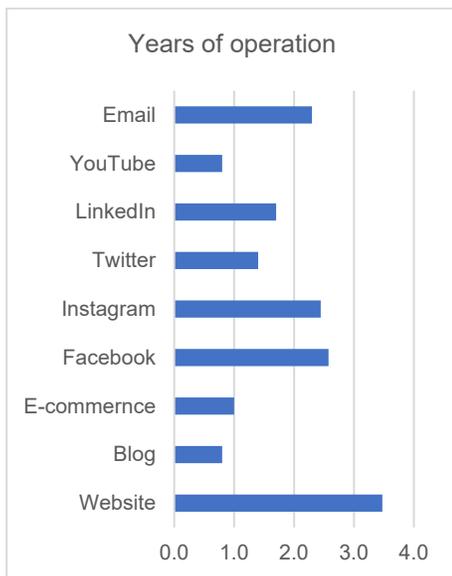


Figure 3: Number of years a business has operated their digital media

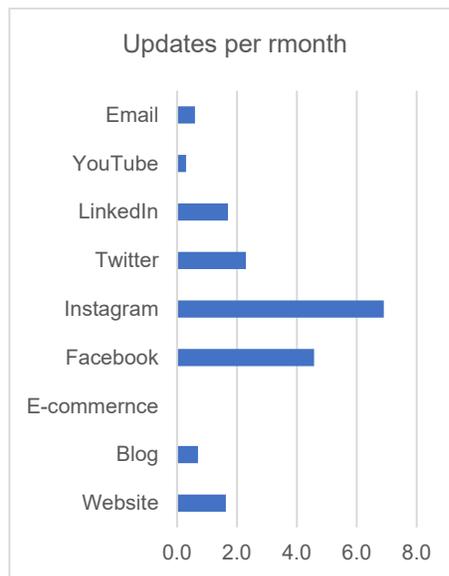


Figure 4: Number of media updates a business perform each month

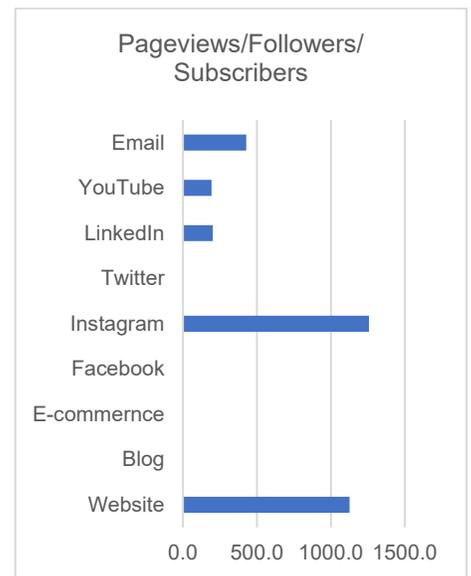


Figure 5: Number of audiences a business has reached through their channels

38% did not engage in any forms of online advertising. For those who did, Facebook and Instagram advertising were preferred (25%) followed by Google advertising (12%). For non-digital promotion activities, word of mouth was the most popular (65%), followed by store signage (16%), flyers (14%), and direct mail (11%).

2.4 Digital knowledge and skills

From the online survey, participants ranked social media marketing as knowledge and skills most important for their business, followed by content marketing, and digital strategy. They ranked influencer marketing and graphic design as least important.

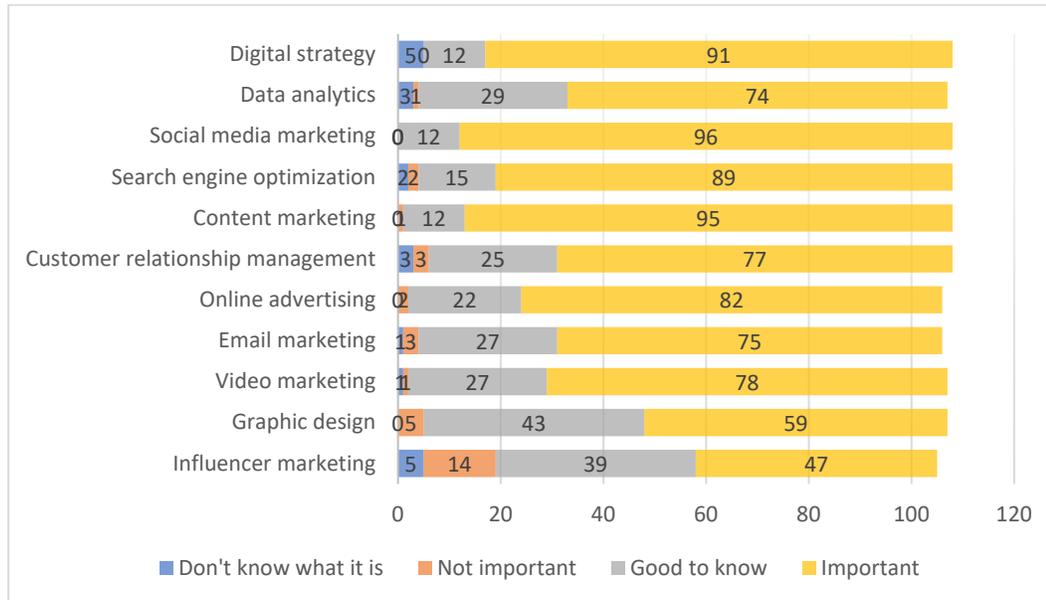


Figure 6: Participants' ranking of digital marketing knowledge and skills that are important for their business

Participants rated themselves mostly as beginners in all aspects of digital marketing with more intermediate skills and knowledge in social media marketing and content marketing.

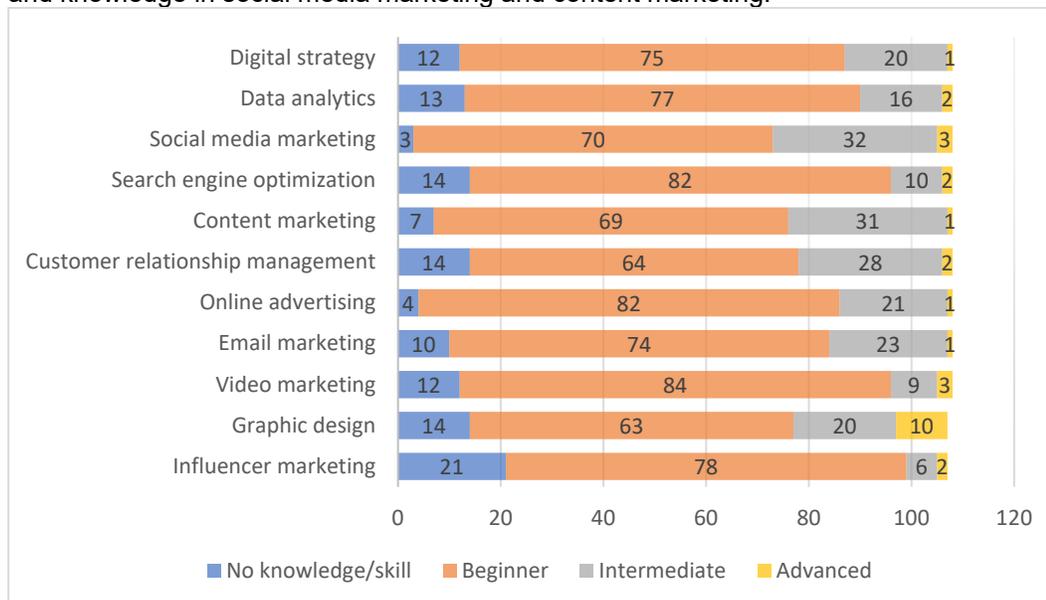


Figure 7: Participants' self-ranking knowledge and skills in digital marketing

After the online survey, 26 underrepresented small business owners participated in online discussion board and focus group discussion. We asked participants to further identify the knowledge and skills needed in their business and perceived gaps in their current skill set. We understood that some participants may not know what they did not know and therefore not be able to identify or articulate their needs. We overcame this by asking them to identify the issues their businesses were facing, we then diagnosed potential causes of these issues and skills needed to fix them.

Participants' feedback was tagged and grouped into learning paths, topics and elements (See Appendix 1), which will form the learning outcomes of the training program.

The learning paths and topics that emerged as priorities with the most comments are:

- Implementation and tactics: Technical how-to information (24% of the comments)
Participants would like DIY information on how to implement the tactics themselves.
- Strategy and Planning: Overall planning (16% of the comments)
Participants need help formulate overall marketing strategy and plans that are purposeful, focused and result driven.
- Strategy and Planning: Sales funnel and customer relationship management (12% of the comments)
Participants have problems finding new customers, converting leads (social followers or email subscribers) to customers, and retaining existing customers.
- Strategy and Planning: Target market, target audience and persona (11% of the comments)
Participants would like to know who their customers are, where to find them and how to engage with them.
- Strategy and Planning: Unique selling proposition (USP) and value proposition (10% of the comments)
Participants have difficulties creating promotional messages, and developing content and stories around the messages.

2.5 Program delivery

From the online survey, participants preferred the training program to be delivered online (65%) over hybrid (20%) and face-to-face (15%) with the recommended class length to be 2.1 hours and the proposed frequency of 2.6 classes per week.

From the online discussion board and focus group discussion, participants voted for 1.5 to 2 hours, twice a week as their preferred class length and frequency. Weekday morning sessions (39%) are preferred over lunch (19%), evenings (17%) and Saturdays (12%) or Sundays (13%).

To give them the best chance to succeed, participants suggested the program should:

- Be flexible: offering alternative class times, video tutorials or recorded sessions for those who miss the class
- Be hands-on: explaining the concepts, showing real and relevant case studies and examples, and working on assignments that are related to their own businesses
- Be result-oriented: if participants can see results or progress, they will be more motivated to continue
- Be accountable: sharing and commenting on each other's work, learning from each other's mistakes
- Include coaching time: one-on-one or group sessions after class to help with homework and catch up with lessons
- Offer technical support: especially when using software
- Have learning resource available prior to class so participants can study in advance and use the class to discuss issues
- Include resources like planners, workbooks, tools, and systems to help complete assignments
- Have a peer-support system: class buddy, groups of similar businesses to help and encourage each other and networking opportunity
- Encourage to experiment and not be afraid or worried about failing
- Provide participants with constructive feedback from mentors and peers

3. Next Step

The first stage of the research project, Program Design, is completed. We are ready to progress to the next stage, Program Development. The research findings and insights from our participants and their learning needs will provide guidance and directions to develop our first training prototype, which will be launched in September 2021.

Appendix 1: Learning paths, topics and elements

Below is some of participants' feedback, which was tagged and grouped into learning paths and topics, and learning elements.

Participants' feedback	Learning paths and topics	Learning elements
	Strategy and Planning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsure of where to start with some things, or where to best focus my energy as there are so many options and so many of the are constantly changing and evolving • How to tie together in a focused approach • Better understanding of the marketing strategy • What we have to offer is sometimes overwhelming. Not sure where to focus and when • Overwhelmed by everything and find it hard to prioritize/implement any kind of growth strategy • Increase my revenue 	Overall planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business strategy • Marketing strategy • Business plan • Marketing plan • Marketing campaign plan • Strategy formation process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting & competitors • Keeping up with technology • Having clients see the difference between us and our competitors 	Environmental scan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor external environment • Conduct environmental and competitive analysis for strategy formulation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't analyze my target market properly • How to form connection - targeting my potential customer • Finding and reaching the right target market • Not reachable to targeted audience • Targeting more niche audiences 	Target market, target audience and persona	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market segmentation • Identify target markets • Choose target audience for each campaign • Research and empathize with the persona
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting more people to like the page organically • Creating compelling storytelling and content • Content creation difficulties • Targeted messaging, making the value clear • Identifying the right messaging • Not being able to generate relevant content according to the target market 	Unique selling proposition (USP) and value proposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop USP and value proposition for each target audience • Content marketing • Content ideas • Pillar and micro content • Cluster content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep speaking to our current clients. Need new ones • How to get more customers into my email list • Not generate enough engagement/leads • Difficult to move to a call-to-action 	Sales funnel, customer journey, customer relationship management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead generation • Lead nurturing • Customer conversion • Customer loyalty • Advocates: online recruitment of new clients from existing Word of Mouth approach

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Onboarding and Customer Retention • Got leads but the conversion to sales was difficult • Primary Word of Mouth, need to move away • Awareness is not sales • Have emails but don't know what to do with them 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align the marketing strategy tighter with business goals • Tangible ROI • KPIs - understanding metrics • Want to have more strategic goals that are well informed given my type of business 	Goals, objectives and KPIs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business goals • Marketing objectives • Key performance indicators (KPIs) • Return on investment (ROI) • Align and use them for planning and evaluation
Implementation and Tactics		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of education on how to use the tools • Become self sufficient at building and maintaining my digital channels • Tried FB ads, very overwhelming and expensive • Lack of knowledge of the technology and how to use it to my advantage • Have one Landing page – no CTA • How to optimize SEO • SEO - keep up with the Google Algorithm • Lack of technical knowledge • Want to do some of the work myself in-house 	Technical how-to	<p>Software mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website: WordPress, WIX • Social: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube • E-commerce: WooCommerce, Square, Shopify, Google ads, Google My Business, Etsy • SEO: SEMrush • CRM: Salesforce, HubSpot, Party Center • Advertising: Facebook, Google, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest • Email: MailChimp <p>Tactics mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEO • Web Landing Page • Mobile marketing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which social channels to choose to find my customers • Understanding the different platforms for advertisements • Where is the best place for results? • Done ads on LinkedIn. The clicks were not very high • Google ads – did not see ROI 	Best practices, ideas, tips, and tricks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose the right channels for the target audience • Develop the right content for the target audience • Link strategy to tactics: awareness, engagement and conversion • Link tactics to KPIs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management for regular tasks like posting • Limited time, not consistent effort • Marketing activities are time consuming • The hardest part is the lack of time • Trying to get the valuable time for marketing, need results • How often to post on social media? 	Time management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up and manage campaign calendar and yearly marketing calendar • Link time management to KPIs and ROI

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A daily routine that will help build business 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where best to spend my marketing dollars • What an appropriate budget should be for advertising 	Budget management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up and manage marketing budget • Allocation for ad spend • Link budget to KPIs and ROI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had others do social media, and they do not follow the brand guide • Able to better direct others and knowing what they are doing. • Do yourself vs handing off to others • Had an agency – but low ROI and quality • Total control. Be able to know what the agencies are doing • Delegating can be challenging 	Outsourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring staff, freelancers, agencies • Delegating tasks • Project briefing • Performance monitoring and evaluation • Link performance to KPIs and ROI
Evaluation and Analytics		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to measure the results • Concrete steps how to create reports and analytics to see trends • Learn about Google Analytics 	Technical how-to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have Google Analytics but what to do with it • How to analyze the data/campaign evaluation • Experimenting without understanding • Not sure how the advertising did not work • How to use the analytics relative to adjustments • How to read the results and do better 	Evaluate data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis • Data interpretation • Translate analytics to actions: lesson learned, what's next

Reference

[1] The World Bank (June, 2020). *COVID-19 to Plunge Global Economy into Worst Recession since World War II*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii>

[2] Canadian Women's Chamber of Commerce (CWCC). (May 2020). *Falling Through the Cracks: Immediate Needs of Canada's Underrepresented Founders*. Retrieved from https://canwcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Falling-through-the-Cracks_CanWCC_May2020v19.pdf