CourseMints

GUIDE

Zero-Cost Marketing

Build Your Brand Without Budget

SELF-PACED PDF COURSE

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Zero-Cost Marketing

Build Your Brand Without Budget

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INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Contents

	How to Use This Guide	4
CHAPTER 1	Your Time Is the Budget	6
CHAPTER 2	Positioning: Your Free Advantage	11
CHAPTER 3	Google Business Profile and Local Visibility	15
CHAPTER 4	SEO Basics for Small Sites	20
CHAPTER 5	Organic Social Without Burnout	25
CHAPTER 6	Create Once, Publish Many	29
CHAPTER 7	Partnerships and Collaborations	32
CHAPTER 8	Free PR and Community	36
CHAPTER 9	Referrals and Word of Mouth	40
CHAPTER 10	Measure Results With Free Tools	44
CHAPTER 11	Your 90-Day Zero-Budget Plan	48

How to Use This Guide

You can market a business without an advertising budget. Many durable small businesses were built that way: through a clear position, a well-kept local listing, useful content people find through search, partnerships with businesses that serve the same customers, local press, active communities and, above all, customers who recommend them. None of this requires paying for ads.

It does require something else. When you do not spend money, you spend time, attention and consistency. Zero-cost marketing is slower to start than paid advertising, and it compounds: the listing you optimize this month, the article you publish, the partner you meet and the customer you delight keep working for you long after the effort is spent.

The honest deal

- **Zero ad spend, not zero cost.** Your time is the budget, and it is limited. This guide helps you spend it where it is most likely to pay off.
- **Free tools have limits.** Free plans change, cap features, or add the provider's branding. Where this guide mentions a tool, read it as "at the time of writing".
- **Some small costs are worth paying when you can,** such as your own domain name. The guide points these out honestly, and shows a free path when you cannot pay at all.
- **Results take weeks and months, not days.** Most of the methods here need at least one to three months of steady effort before you can judge them fairly.

What you will learn

- How to set a weekly time budget and choose the two channels that fit your customers.
- How to position your business so word of mouth has something clear to repeat.
- How to set up a free home base and a Google Business Profile that local customers find.
- The SEO basics that matter for small sites.

- Organic social media without burnout, and how to repurpose one piece of content into many.
- How to build partnerships, earn free press, join communities and grow referrals.
- How to measure results with free tools, and a 90-day plan to put it all together.

How to get the most from it

1. **Read Chapter 1 first** and set your weekly time budget before choosing any channel.
2. **Do not try everything.** Each chapter is a channel or a skill. Choose two channels for your first 90 days; read the others when you are ready.
3. **Use the companion planner.** *Zero-Cost Marketing Planner* contains the 90-day calendar, a weekly content planner, a repurposing map, a partnership tracker, a PR and community log and a monthly scoreboard.
4. **Measure from week one,** using the free methods in Chapter 10, so you know what is working.

Related CourseMints titles go deeper on some topics: *Personal Brand Starter Kit* for building a personal brand, *100 Growth Hacks for Social Media Success* for a large library of social tactics, and *Lead Magnet Mastery* for turning visitors into email subscribers.

TIP

About the examples

The people and businesses in the example boxes are fictional composites written to show the methods in action; they are not real clients or testimonials. Platform features change often, so specific settings are described as they were at the time of writing. Notes on advertising, privacy and contest rules are general information, not legal advice.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ You can market effectively without an ad budget, but your time becomes the budget.
- ✓ Free methods start slowly and compound over months.
- ✓ Choose two channels, measure from week one, and use the planner to stay consistent.

CHAPTER 1

Your Time Is the Budget 01

When marketing costs money, budgets force choices. When it is free, the temptation is to do everything: a post on every platform, a blog, a newsletter, three networking groups and a podcast. Within a month most people are exhausted and nothing has had enough attention to work. Treat your time exactly like money: set a budget, invest it deliberately and track the return.

Set a weekly time budget

1. **Be realistic.** How many hours a week can you give to marketing, every week, for the next three months, even in a busy week? Two steady hours beat ten hours for two weeks followed by nothing.
2. **Put a value on it.** Multiply those hours by what your time is worth (your hourly rate, or what you could earn doing client work). If you spend 4 hours a week and your time is worth $50 an hour, you are investing about $200 a week. That number keeps you honest about what each activity must return.
3. **Block it in your calendar** as fixed appointments, ideally at the same times every week.

Choose channels where your customers already look

Customers find businesses in a few basic ways, and different businesses depend on different ones:

How customers look	Typical for	Strongest free channels
They search for a solution right now	Plumbers, dentists, accountants, repair services, many products	Google Business Profile, SEO, reviews

How customers look	Typical for	Strongest free channels
They discover you while browsing	Fashion, food, design, crafts, entertainment, coaching	Organic social media, content, collaborations
They ask someone they trust	Professional services, trades, childcare, high-trust purchases	Referrals, partnerships, community, reviews
They follow experts and media	Consultants, B2B services, new or unusual products	PR, podcasts, guest content, speaking

Ask your last ten customers how they found you. Their answers are your best evidence of which channels matter.

The two-channel rule

For your first 90 days, choose **one primary channel** that matches how customers look for you, and **one supporting channel** that feeds it. For a local service, that might be Google Business Profile plus referrals. For a handmade product, Instagram or TikTok plus a partnership with complementary shops. For a consultant, LinkedIn plus podcast guesting. Doing two channels well beats doing six badly, and you can add a third once the first two run as habits.

Your free toolkit

At the time of writing, these are free and cover most small-business needs:

- **Listings:** Google Business Profile, Apple Business Connect and Bing Places.
- **Search:** Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools, to see how your site appears in search.
- **Analytics:** Google Analytics, plus the analytics built into each social platform.
- **Design and video:** free plans of tools such as Canva and CapCut, and your phone's camera.
- **Email:** many email marketing services offer a free plan for small lists, with limits on contacts and sends.
- **Scheduling:** the native scheduling built into most social platforms.

Your home base

Every channel should point somewhere you control: a place that explains what you do and how to buy or get in touch. Ideally that is your own website on your own domain. A domain name is one of the few small costs worth paying as soon as you can, because it moves with you if you change tools and looks more trustworthy. If your budget is truly zero, start with a complete Google Business Profile, a well-filled social profile with a clear link, or a free website builder plan on the builder's own subdomain, and move to your own domain later. Google discontinued the simple free websites it used to offer inside Business Profiles in 2024, so do not plan around that option.

EXAMPLE

Rosa's four hours

Rosa bakes celebration cakes from a licensed home kitchen. She was posting on three platforms, writing a blog nobody read, and attending two networking breakfasts a week, and her orders still came mostly from friends of past customers. Her time was worth about $40 an hour, so her "free" marketing was costing about $400 a week.

She asked her last twelve customers how they found her. Nine said a friend or a venue recommended her; three found her on Google Maps. She cut to two channels: referrals and partnerships with local venues (primary), and her Google Business Profile (supporting). Her four weekly hours now go to a referral thank-you routine, one venue relationship a week, and new photos and review replies on her profile.

Common mistakes

- **Copying what big brands do.** They have teams and budgets. Your advantages are focus, speed and personal relationships.
- **Judging a channel after two weeks.** Free channels need months of consistency.
- **No home base.** Attention you earn on social media or in the press needs somewhere to go.
- **Not counting your time.** "Free" activities that bring nothing are expensive.

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PLANNER

Zero-Cost Marketing Planner

90-Day Calendar, Content Planner and Partnership Tracker

COMPANION TO ZERO-COST MARKETING

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INSIDE THIS PLANNER

Contents

	How to Use This Planner	4
PART 1	**Plan and Calendar**	5
PART 2	**Weekly Tools and Reviews**	9

Month 1: Foundations

Month goal: _____

Key dates this month (events, seasons, launches): _____

- [ ] Time budget set and channels chosen
- [ ] Positioning statement and one-liner written
- [ ] Home base, Google Business Profile and other listings complete
- [ ] Analytics, Search Console, UTM tags and “How did you hear about us?” in place
- [ ] Social profile(s) optimized and content pillars chosen
- [ ] Review-request routine started; ten potential partners listed

Weekly plan and record

	Main focus	Content published	Outreach done	Reviews and referrals	Hours
Week 1 (dates)					
Week 2 (dates)					
Week 3 (dates)					
Week 4 (dates)					

End-of-month notes (what worked, what I will change):