



BAHRMARKETING · FIELD GUIDE

How the Marketing Industry Rips Off Small Businesses

The eight tactics agencies use to stay paid without staying accountable — and how to spot every one.

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THE SHORT VERSION

Most small businesses that hire marketing help **cannot actually tell whether it is working** — and a large part of the industry is built to keep it that way. This field guide breaks down the eight most common tactics agencies, freelancers, and “gurus” use to stay paid without staying accountable, the exact signs you are on the receiving end of one, and what honest marketing help looks like instead. If you are spending money on marketing and feeling vaguely uneasy about it, that instinct is worth trusting. This guide will tell you whether it is justified.

WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

Your uncertainty is the product

There is a number that should make every small business owner stop scrolling.

According to HubSpot's Small Business Trends Report, **68% of small businesses are increasing their marketing budgets** — but **fewer than 20% feel confident any of it is working**.

Sit with that. More than two-thirds are spending more. Fewer than one in five believe it is doing anything. That gap is not an accident — it is the product. A confused customer who cannot measure results is a customer who keeps paying out of fear that stopping would be worse.

I call the system that profits from that confusion the **marketing-industrial complex**: the loose network of agencies, contractors, platforms, and course-sellers whose income depends less on your growth than on your uncertainty.

I am a marketing consultant. I work with small businesses for a living, and I am telling on my own industry — because someone should, and because the honest operators in it (they exist, and they are worth finding) lose business every day to the ones running the plays in this guide.

Here is the context that makes these tactics work. Inflation is the top concern for 53% of small business owners, per the NFIB Small Business Economic Trends report. More than half of owners say they do not even know which marketing channels to invest in. When money is tight and the landscape is confusing, people reach for someone who sounds certain. The marketing-industrial complex sells certainty. It rarely sells results.

These are the eight plays. Once you can name them, you cannot un-see them.

How the industry runs on small businesses

Eight tactics, each one designed to keep you paying without keeping anyone accountable. Here is how each works, how to spot it, and what should be happening instead.

01 The Bait-and-Switch

How it works: You are courted by the senior expert — the founder, the strategist, the person whose name is on the case studies. You sign. Then your day-to-day work is quietly handed to a junior hire learning on your budget. You paid for the master and got the apprentice.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- The person who sold you the engagement is not the person in your meetings sixty days later.
- Your emails are answered by names you were never introduced to.
- Strategic questions get “let me check with the team” instead of an answer.

What good looks like: You know exactly who is doing your work and how experienced they are, and you can reach them directly. With a solo consultant or an honest small shop, the person who sold the work is the person doing it.

02 The Retainer Black Box

How it works: You pay a flat monthly fee — \$1,500, \$3,000, \$5,000 — for a bundle of activity that is never precisely defined. Because the deliverables are vague, there is no honest way to check whether you got your money’s worth. The retainer renews automatically. The ambiguity is the point.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- You cannot say, in one sentence, what you are specifically paying for this month.
- The contract lists categories (“social media management,” “SEO”) but no concrete outputs or quantities.
- “What did we get for last month’s fee?” is answered with a list of activities, not outcomes.

What good looks like: Scope you can read and understand. Retainer or hourly, you should be able to point at specific work and specific results and connect them to specific dollars.

03

The Vanity Metrics Smokescreen

How it works: Your monthly report is full of numbers that only ever go up: impressions, reach, followers, “engagement.” They look like progress. They are noise. None of them is revenue, and none of them is a lead. The report exists to make you feel something, not to tell you something.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- The headline numbers are impressions, views, reach, or follower count.
- Leads, cost per lead, customer acquisition cost, and revenue are absent — or buried on page 6.
- Numbers are never shown against a goal, only against last month.

What good looks like: Reporting that leads with the metrics that pay your bills — leads generated, what each cost, and revenue you can trace back. Followers and impressions are not business results.

04

The “It Takes Time” Stall

How it works: “Marketing is a long game.” “SEO takes six to twelve months.” “Branding compounds.” All of these are *true* — which is exactly why they are such effective cover. The stall uses a real principle to push accountability so far into the future that, by the time you would notice nothing happened, you have already paid for a year.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- Every request for an early signal of progress is met with “be patient.”
- No leading indicators or 30/60/90-day checkpoints were ever set.
- “It takes time” is said *before* you asked — pre-loading the excuse.

What good looks like: Real results do take time — but progress is visible long before the payoff. An honest partner sets early checkpoints and shows you the leading indicators that prove you are on track.

05

The Jargon Shield

How it works: You are buried in acronyms, frameworks, and proprietary-sounding methodology until you feel unqualified to question your own marketing. The complexity is manufactured. Its job is to move you from “I’m the client” to “I don’t really understand this stuff” — because clients who feel unqualified do not push back.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- You leave meetings less clear than you went in.
- Plain questions get jargon answers instead of plain answers.
- You have started apologizing for “not being a marketing person” in your own business’s meetings.

What good looks like: Anyone genuinely good at this can explain what they are doing, and why, in language you already use. Clarity is a sign of expertise. Confusion is a sign of someone hiding inside it.

06

The Hostage Accounts

How it works: Your new website, ad accounts, Google Business Profile, and analytics all get built and registered under the agency’s ownership instead of yours. Everything works fine — right up until you try to leave, and discover you cannot take your own business with you.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- You do not have admin access to your own website, ad accounts, or analytics.
- You do not know which email address your domain or accounts are registered under.
- Asking for ownership access produces friction, delay, or a fee.

What good looks like: You own everything, always — domain, hosting, ad accounts, profiles, data. A good partner operates *inside* accounts you control. Ownership is never a bargaining chip.

07

The Everything-for-Everyone Pitch

How it works: The agency markets itself to every industry and offers every service — SEO, ads, social, web, video, PR, branding — to restaurants, law firms, dentists, and manufacturers alike. A jack of all trades is a master of none. You pay generalist rates for generalist work, dressed as specialism.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- The client logo wall has no pattern — every industry, no focus.
- The service list is enormous and the website cannot tell you what they are actually *best* at.
- Your specific industry's quirks are met with “we'll figure that out.”

What good looks like: Real focus — a clear specialty in a type of work, a type of business, or both. You want someone who has solved your specific problem before, not someone willing to attempt anything.

08

The Proof-Free Promise

How it works: The pitch is all upside — “we'll grow your traffic,” “we'll 10x your leads,” “we'll build your brand” — and contains zero verifiable proof. No case studies with real numbers. No named results. No accountability built into the agreement. They over-promise at the start because nothing forces them to deliver at the end.

HOW TO SPOT IT

- Case studies are vague (“huge growth!”) with no real figures, timelines, or client names.
- Big promises are made before anyone has looked closely at your business.
- The agreement contains no checkpoints, no defined success criteria, no exit terms.

What good looks like: Specific, checkable proof — real clients, real numbers, real timelines — and an honest conversation about what is realistic for *your* situation before any promise is made.

RUN THE CHECK

Is it happening to you right now?

Be honest. If you are answering “no” or “I’m not sure” to most of these, the marketing-industrial complex has you.

- Can you state, in one sentence, exactly what you paid for this month?
- Do your reports lead with leads, cost per lead, and revenue — not impressions and followers?
- Do you personally hold admin access to your website, ad accounts, and analytics?
- Do you know the name and experience of the person doing your actual work?
- Have you seen specific, numbers-based proof that this partner has done this before?
- Do you leave meetings clearer than you went in?
- Were 30/60/90-day checkpoints set, in writing, at the start?

Seven yeses means you have an honest partner — protect that relationship. **Three or fewer** means you are paying for activity, not outcomes, and it is costing you more than the invoice.

THE STANDARD

What honest marketing help actually looks like

Strip away the eight plays and what remains is not complicated. Honest marketing help is **legible**: you can see what is being done, who is doing it, what it costs, and what it produced. It is **owned by you**: every account and asset is yours. It is **measured against goals you care about**: revenue and leads, not vanity numbers. And it is **specific**: scoped clearly, promised carefully, and proven with real figures.

None of that requires a big agency. Often a big agency makes it *harder*, because layers of account managers and overhead sit between you and the work. What it requires is someone willing to be accountable in plain language — rarer, and more valuable, than any framework with a trademark symbol on it.

One more thing worth knowing: HubSpot research shows word-of-mouth still drives **61% of new customers** for small businesses. The honest operators know this — it is why they would rather give you a real result you will talk about than a vague retainer you will quietly resent. Their incentives and yours point the same direction.

Frequently asked questions

Q How do I know if my marketing agency is ripping me off?

The fastest test is the legibility test: can you state what you paid for this month, see results measured in leads and revenue, and access all of your own accounts? If the answer to any of those is no, you are at minimum overpaying for opacity. The eight plays in this guide are the specific patterns to look for.

Q Is a marketing retainer worth it for a small business?

A retainer is worth it only when its scope is clearly defined and tied to outcomes you can measure. The retainer model itself is not the problem — vague retainers are. If you cannot describe in one sentence what a given month's fee buys, the structure is working against you regardless of the dollar amount.

Q Should I fire my marketing agency?

Not necessarily — but you should audit them. Run the seven-point check in this guide. If you score three or fewer, raise the specific gaps with them directly and see whether they respond with plain answers and concrete changes, or with jargon and patience requests. How they react to being asked for accountability tells you everything.

Q How much should a small business pay for marketing?

There is no universal number, but the right question is not “how much” — it is “how much, for what, measured how?” A clear \$1,000 engagement with defined deliverables and tracked results is worth more than a vague \$4,000 retainer. Demand that any price be attached to specific work and specific success criteria before you compare costs.

Q What is the difference between a marketing agency and a marketing consultant?

An agency is typically a multi-person team that executes campaigns across many clients, with account managers between you and the people doing the work. A consultant is usually an individual you work with directly — the person you hire is the person doing the work. Consultants tend to be more transparent and lower-overhead; agencies can offer more capacity. The right choice depends on whether you value direct access and clarity or scaled execution more.

Q Can I do my own marketing instead of hiring anyone?

For a while, yes — and you should understand the fundamentals either way, so you can tell good help from bad. The point to bring someone in is when marketing is consistently losing to more urgent tasks, or when you are spending money and cannot tell what is working. Even then, the goal is a partner who makes the work *legible* to you — not one who takes it somewhere you cannot see.



THAT UNEASY FEELING IS DATA

Think one of these plays is being run on you right now?

If you want a straight, jargon-free second opinion on whether your marketing is actually working — or just want guides like this one as they come out — start a real conversation. No retainer pitch. No jargon.

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About the author

This guide was written by Justin Bahr, a marketing consultant based in Phoenix, Arizona. Justin works directly with small businesses on marketing strategy, websites, and brand — as a solo consultant, which means the person who answers your questions is the person doing the work. He publishes plain-language guides like this one because the owners who understand how the industry operates are the ones who stop getting taken advantage of by it.