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## Online Marketing Tools: A Comparison

We analyze 4 online marketing tools designed to strengthen your relationship with customers.

Sherry Prescott-Willis | April 29, 2010

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What are your top strategies for keeping in front of customers in 2010? Chances are, as an entrepreneur, you're looking to connect with your customers faster and more easily. You want to strengthen relationships with customers to help drive and increase your revenue. You can accomplish that with an online marketing tool. The key is to find the best tool for you and your business.

A lot of online tools claim to make you a better, faster marketer. Many also promise to help you easily connect with your customers. So, how do you choose? The trick is to pick online marketing tools that not only help you reach your customers, but also are really easy for you to use.

Here are the criteria I use to assess marketing tools for entrepreneurs:

**Ease-of-use:** Is the tool easy to use and implement?

**Relationship builder:** Can you build a database with the tool and--at the same time--reach, strengthen and build relationships with customers more quickly?

**Quick online campaign-tracking capabilities:** Can you analyze what you've sent to customers and quickly find out if your customers are clicking through your e-mail campaigns?

**Professional e-mail marketing templates:** Are there professional campaign templates that allow for e-mail and direct-mail capabilities, enabling you and your business to look marketing savvy?

**Cost-effective:** Are costs affordable, averaging less than \$30 per month?

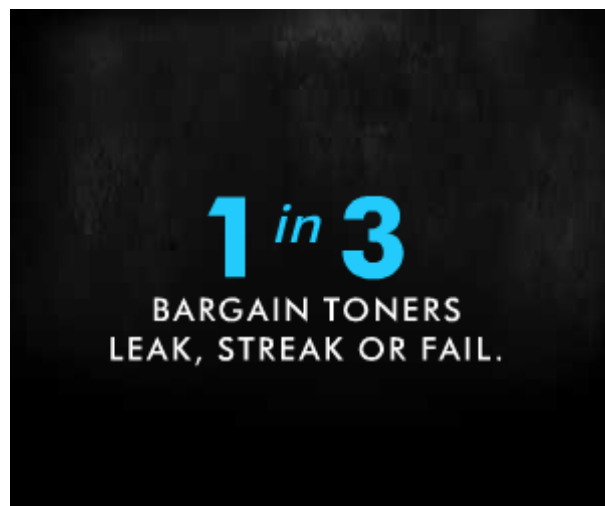
Here are four potential tools that could be the key to your customer relationships:

### Vertical Response

**Ease-of-use:** Designed for the smaller business, this tool takes little technology know-how to get up and running. When I was ready to launch my first campaign, it literally took me less than an hour to upload into my chosen template, select my list from the database, send myself a test e-mail blast and push the launch button. It's that simple. [Vertical Response](#) passes the "easy to use" test with flying colors.

**Relationship builder:** Vertical Response allows you to organize "lists," but you are responsible for inputting the lists and keeping them updated. You can upload existing contacts from a database you already have in Excel or another program. What is good about Vertical Response is that it tells you if you've entered an e-mail twice or if a contact's e-mail address isn't active.

**Quick online campaign-tracking capabilities:** After you launch your campaign, you'll be able to see a detailed report of how well your campaign did in terms of click-throughs and "opens." You'll know if any e-mails bounced or if anyone unsubscribed. The reports tell you which lists are performing well, and Vertical Response can compare response rates to other



e-mails you've sent in the past. Vertical Response also sends a reminder e-mail in case you forget about the reporting function.

**Professional e-mail marketing templates:** The templates are professional, clean-looking, easy to use and time-savers. The newsletter template includes suggestions, such as how many words your header should be so people will read it. An editor is built into the newsletter template, so you don't have to be one.

Need a postcard fast? There's a template. Need to e-blast a newsletter to your customers monthly? There's a template. Customizing my own newsletter template took far more time than I had expected, so I recommend using the company's templates to save time.

**Cost-effective:** Vertical Response has a pre-paid credit set-up, so you can order credits before launching your campaign. As you buy more credits, your cost per e-mail goes down. You get the first 250 credits free when you sign up for the tool. So on average, for a few thousand credits, your cost per e-mail is about .013 cents or about \$13 per thousand.

**Bonus:** There's always someone knowledgeable and helpful to talk to and walk you through your campaign if you need help. Vertical Response also will let you know if you've uploaded something incorrectly.

## WeMeUs

**Ease of use:** [WeMeUs](#) was founded by a woman CEO who wanted to help professionals organize, manage, and retain the contacts and relationships they acquire and build throughout their careers. Think of this tool as a relationship builder, contact management, e-mail blast and campaign tool all in one. It's truly a personal CRM tool, not a social network. So, all your data is private and each user sees only her own contacts.

The first step in using this tool is to upload your contacts into the WeMeUs database to begin the process of "tagging" or categorizing your existing contacts. Uploading your contacts is easy with the tool, but it is up to the user to tag contacts appropriately and to keep them organized. The site includes tutorials and FAQ documents that get you up and running very quickly.

**Relationship builder:** What makes this tool unique is that it works the way most women think about developing business relationships. Suppose you meet someone at a networking luncheon and you both enjoy soccer and belong to the local chamber of commerce. You can note this in your WeMeUs database through the "tagging" feature and then pull up your contact by the way you've been introduced. Using the "tags" feature makes it fast and easy to find people. Premium services include an e-mail assistant for fast and personalized e-mail communications, updates and follow-up.

You can use WeMeUs to activate your LinkedIn connections. You can keep notes and a log of all your contacts and schedule follow-up reminders. You also can send e-mail to one or all of your LinkedIn contacts.

**Quick online tracking capabilities:** The online tracking capabilities of this tool are unique, providing you with a 360-degree view of your e-mail marketing activity. All kinds of handy features help you connect with your existing contacts, such as reminders to get back in touch. New features in development include the ability to see how many of your contacts are opening your e-mails.

**Professional e-mail marketing templates:** WeMeUs focuses on personalized, one-to-one communications rather than the glossy, colorful marketing templates you find in Vertical Response or Constant Contact. The templates provided are personalized so you can drop in your company logo or artwork and focus on the content of your message. You won't find a ton of colorful templates to choose from, but if you have one of your own, you can cut and paste into WeMeUs. You'll find step-by-step instructions under "Information, Tips and Help" on the WeMeUs wiki.

**Customizing messages to each customer:** You can easily customize a message to a specific group of customers and send it out in an e-blast. The tool will automatically pull the first name of your customer so the message looks personalized. You can also customize your message on the fly, so if you want to add a little note about something you have in common, you can do so with ease. You can also customize your e-mail letters with logos and artwork, but you will need the original artwork file, such as an .eps or .tif, to do this.

**Cost-effective:** For \$10 to \$15 per month you get the premium service membership and the unique ability to tap into your existing contacts and centralize them. There are also special offers. Recently, WeMeUs offered members a migration of all their contacts into the WeMeUs tool to get them started quicker. There's also a free trial offer.

**Bonus:** You get easy access to your contacts from anywhere. Regardless of where you keep your contacts, WeMeUs can

find them across multiple address books such as e-mail, webmail, business and social networks.

An iPhone application is scheduled to be released later this year.

## MailChimp

**Ease of use:** The monkey looks a little juvenile on the homepage of this e-mail marketing tool website, but don't let the name and logo fool you. This company is becoming the preferred e-mail marketing tool.

[MailChimp](#) has a user-friendly, simple website. Numerous demo videos help you get started. You also can sign up for online training, and if you can't make the webinar time, you can watch a recorded session.

**Relationship Builder:** You can build a "master list" in the MailChimp tool and look up your contacts, similar to Vertical Response. Your database will remain intact there. Some great features are built into this tool. For example, the "auto responder" feature is excellent if you're planning an event and want to send several reminders. You pick a template, tell the tool where and when to send the message, and the "auto responder" does it for you. You can also segment your lists by interest group and add special features into your signup forms to get the information you need about new customers. MailChimp offers colorful free signup forms you can embed into your website or blog.

**Quick online tracking capabilities:** There's no monkey business when it comes to tracking and CRM. MailChimp has list management, tracking and ROI reports, plus CRM integration with tools like Twitter, Sales Force, High-rise, Batch book and WordPress. You can also track how many e-mails were opened, bounced or unopened.

MailChimp is a trailblazer when it comes to working with social media to help you and your campaigns. Wondering how many people tweeted about your marketing campaign? MailChimp's new integration feature allows you to track tweets and retweets. You can also share your campaign with others on Facebook and Twitter. But what's really snazzy is that MailChimp has linked its tool to Google analytics, so you can check ROI, conversion rate, average value per visitor and the revenue created from your campaign. This is an incredibly impressive feature.

**Professional e-mail marketing templates:** MailChimp has great e-mail campaign templates. They're top-notch in terms of looking professional, clean and simple. It's fairly easy to upload your own design, as well. An image library within the MailChimp tool allows you to store images and photos for upcoming campaigns and launches. It's easy to use and handy to have.

**Cost-effective:** What's great about MailChimp is that the tool is completely free for lists below 500 subscribers. Then the pricing goes up to \$30 a month for 2,501 to 5,000 subscribers, with unlimited sending.

**Bonus:** MailChimp has a direct link to [Eventbrite](#), which is an online event management and registration tool. Many companies use EventBrite to promote webinars, teleseminars, workshops--basically any event that requires online registration. MailChimp also has multilanguage support, currently 34 languages.

## SalesForce.com

**Ease of use:** Salesforce is the founding father of small-business online customer relationship management. It's also the pioneer in tracking those relationships. Some people think salesforce.com is too big to help entrepreneurs these days, but that isn't the case. It's a great solution for businesses that need the benefits of an application that will grow and scale with them.

When you go to the [salesforce.com](#) site, it's easy to find the section for entrepreneurs and small businesses. In this section, you'll find virtual tours and clear direction on how to get started with a free trial. The beauty behind the product is that you can log in from anywhere and update your customer data and database on the fly. If you want to add fields and create new processes, you can do this easily. If you have existing databases from other accounts, such as gmail, Outlook or ACT! you can easily upload your files. Also, with automatic upgrades, you'll always have the latest version of the product, and any customization you've developed along the way will remain intact. This saves the headache of worrying about new versions and updated features.

**Relationship builder:** The Contact Manager seems ideal for small businesses with one to five employees. You can store contacts, track your customers and run activity reports, and it integrates with e-mail. You don't get all the full CRM capabilities in this version, but the Contact Manager lets you efficiently track and record relationships and interactions with any vendor or supplier. It will also track e-mails, documents and more. When you move up to the Group version, you start to track sales opportunities and get real-time dashboard reporting.

**Quick online campaign tracking capabilities:** The real value is in the professional version of the small-business product.

Here you can run sales reports and get real-time custom dashboard reporting and campaign-management features. You also have unlimited users, so if you start to scale your business quickly, you can benefit from all the campaign and sales force automation features.

**Professional e-mail marketing templates:** The small-business versions of the product do not come with professional e-mail marketing templates for marketing campaigns. However, salesforce.com has an App exchange library with the ability to download any template-builder tool you like. For example, Vertical Response is an App Exchange partner, so you can pull a template right from Vertical Response for your e-mail campaign activities and integrate a favorite template right into your salesforce.com application.

The nice thing about this library is that there are reviews for each tool and customer favorites listed so you can see what many companies find most useful in terms of the tools.

**Cost-effective:** Pricing is based on users. For \$5 per user per month you get the basic contact management system. For up to five users, you can move up to the group version for about \$25 per month, which includes Google Adwords tracking and the unique ability to track website leads. If you have 20 employees or more and need unlimited usage per user, the professional version is \$65 per user per month. The handy thing is that at any time you can easily upgrade to the next version.

Salesforce is on the cutting edge of dashboard reporting for organizations that need to forecast and track their marketing campaigns. As your business grows and your need for reporting capabilities increases, you'll have these types of features readily available.

**Bonus:** If security is a concern, rest assured that your content is located in dedicated spaces at top-tier data centers. Your content gets backed up on a regular basis and, in addition, is covered with real-time data replication between production data center and disaster recovery center. Salesforce uses security monitoring to manage threats and guarantees secure log-in sessions by identifying and re-identifying each transaction with a special log-in.

## You've Picked Your Online Marketing Tool. Now What?

Once you've picked an online marketing tool, make the most of it. Keep current on what your tool can do for you. New feature upgrades, pricing structures and e-mail templates are introduced frequently.

Once you begin your outreach to customers using your tool, remember these five keys:

**Communicate with customers often.** Pick something simple you will do consistently like a marketing newsletter blast or a weekly tips announcement, and stick with that plan. If you're consistent, your message will begin to stick in the minds of your customers.

**Utilize the marketing templates in your online tool.** Many online tools have great wizard templates for e-mail campaigns and newsletters. This saves a ton of time.

**Make sure your leads are current and your notes updated.** Clean up your database as often as you can.

**Leverage the benefits of your online tool.** There may be hidden benefits you haven't tried yet, such as an application tie-in to your iPhone or a new module that improves the way you track your customer leads and marketing activity. Technology changes weekly and new innovations happen daily on these types of online products. Keep up-to-date by checking in often with your online marketing tool's website.

**Make sure the pricing structure works for you.** If your online tool doesn't scale for you as the price increases, examine other online options and make sure you pick a membership structure that will continue to grow with you as you gain new customers.

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*Sherry Prescott-Willis is passionate about helping people become better marketers. She has more than 18 years of product, alliance, and strategic marketing experience specializing in both consumer and high-technology products. She is the author of the award-winning [Market This!: An Effective 90-Day Marketing Tool](#).*