

MINIMUM VIABLE MARKETING

A Startup Playbook

By Allan Gates



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MARKETING MATTERS TO YOUR STARTUP

Around the world, startup companies are disrupting old ways of doing business by creating smarter approaches to getting things done.

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Every day startups launch with founder teams focused on building and shipping product. In these heady early days of too much Red Bull, bad office furniture and suspect office space, marketing is often an afterthought. After all, the product is so awesome that people will be shouting *Shut up and take my money!* as soon as the beta is available.

But things rarely work out that way.

Maybe that's not surprising. Founders tend to be from the technology and operations side. Few core marketers have founded the most successful startups.

Still, assuming that marketing is something that will "come later" for your startup is potentially making a profound mistake. It's true that good marketing won't save a bad product. But it's also true that bad marketing can hurt, or even kill, a good product.

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The reality is, marketing matters greatly to startups—even from the very earliest days of the company. That doesn't mean you need to spend big buckets of scarce dollars on ad campaigns or hyped-up parties. Nowadays, those are about as relevant as the *pets.com* sock puppet from the Internet boom 1.0.

It does mean you need to understand who you are and what value you are offering to your customers. Figure that out and you'll be ready to go after those venture capital dollars you're lusting after to fuel your company's growth.

As a startup, you need to look like a real, credible company. It doesn't matter if you are in a B2B or B2C space. You're a company that people want to buy from and are comfortable investing in—project that. If you don't, even the most clever or disruptive technology might not save you.

But that doesn't mean you need to dedicate all your time to marketing. The product is still *the thing*. As is customer traction, shipping, revenue and profits.

Marketing matters to all those things, so it shouldn't be an afterthought. In fact, marketing helps you get it done. It tells your story in ways that help you achieve your business goals. It shelters your company as you find your place and it helps drive you forward as you begin carving out market share.

You're spending thousands or maybe millions developing patented technology for your company. If you build it, they may not come, even if your product is exceptional.

We know that in the early days you're impossibly busy trying to get things running. You are lean and mean as you work toward developing that Minimum Viable Product (MVP) and generating the all-important cash flow.

The good news is, you don't need to do a lot of marketing in the early days. You do, however, need to do a small number of things very well if you want to stand out and reach your company's true potential.

We call it *Minimum Viable Marketing*.



MINIMUM VIABLE MARKETING

Minimum Viable Marketing (MVM) is the first round of things you need to do to tell your startup's story and lead it firmly toward customers, partners and investors.

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While every company is different, most startups, no matter the market, will need the strategic and tactical items we're going to outline in this book.

MVM is a pragmatic approach to telling your startup's story: it recognizes the limits of your time and funding. This is a lean approach to marketing, one that echoes the way you're developing the rest of your business functions. There's no Superbowl ads or Big Name Band concerts. Rather it is "roll up your sleeves and get to work" materials that help you succeed.

This isn't marketing designed to puff up egos or look good in publications no one reads. It's marketing that will help you survive those tough early days, build relationships and close sales.

MVM is about getting the most "bang for your buck" from investments in marketing.

There are five essential components to Minimum Viable Marketing for startups:

1. **Positioning and Messaging** – understanding who you are, and what you are saying to the marketplace

2. **Branding** – your company’s DNA and how you represent that visually
3. **Pitch Decks** – clear, concise and compelling presentations for investors and early adopters
4. **Social media** – getting active in the right channels for your audiences, driving awareness and creating leads
5. **Website** – your first website needs to tell your story and make you look like a real, professional operation

1) POSITIONING AND MESSAGING

As a startup, you probably have a carefully honed 30-second “elevator pitch.” That’s great, but most of your conversations last longer than 30 seconds. At least they do if they are going anywhere. Or maybe you’ve got a longer pitch full of clichés like “disrupt” and “revolution” that sound pretty much like every other startup from the last 10 years. To differentiate, you need to stand out from the herd of same-sounding pitches.

Understanding and articulating your narrative is vital for your business. In fact, it’s probably one of the most important things you can do. You need agreement on who you are, what you do, how your product fits in the market and your value proposition for your customers. This is your positioning and messaging.

In many startups, positioning and messaging is often taken as a given. Yet probe a bit deeper, and the assumed consensus falls apart. You may find out that a product manager and the sales person actually have fairly different views of what problem the product is solving and how.

Sometimes founders discover they don’t actually agree on the vision for the company. Maybe there hasn’t been a real conversation about this since the product idea was sketched out on the back of a napkin.

This matters. You need to be rock solid in the way you tell your story to the market. That means you need to be clear about what your technology does for your customers. It seems simple, even obvious. But often it becomes very challenging.

So ask yourself what does the product do, I mean really do, for the end user? Too often founders fall in love with the potential of the product—“It can do this, and this, and this and more!” They envision a 10-year product

roadmap that reflects all the various things their beloved tech can possibly do (no matter what the customers might actually want it to do).

That dilutes your message, particularly in the early days, and leaves your audience confused about what you are actually offering them. You need to strip away the “and it also does this” talk and figure out the core user benefit of your solution.

It's all about focus.

That means clearly describing your value proposition – what benefit you provide to customers who use your product or service.

Describing your value proposition isn't the “Mission” and “Vision” of big companies, those carefully strung together clichés that have no relevance to the day-to-day needs of customers or employees. Leave those in the lobby of the big boys. You've got other things to do.

Avoid the trap of describing the process. Think about a hotdog (stay with me here). You seldom – actually, never – see a hotdog manufacturer explaining how they make the hotdog. Ad copy will never tell you what “all beef” really means, and how the factory forms those leftover bits of, um, hopefully cow or pig, into the familiar hotdog shape.

Not appetizing, is it?

So these companies talk about how great their hotdogs taste. How delicious they are shared with friends or family on a summer day, at the ballpark or even after a night at the bars. They talk about benefits, not process.

The benefits are key to your value proposition. Your focus should be first on the benefits of your solution. Intrigue your prospects first with your value proposition – tell them how you take their pain away and make their lives easier or more profitable. Once they're interested, then you can explain how you do it.

When you've worked your way to an agreement, write your positioning and messaging down. Put it on the bulletin board by your desk or write it on the white board. Keep it simple and use language your team can embrace and your audience will understand. If you're speaking to a technically literate audience, you can go a bit deeper but don't nerd out too much at this stage. That will come later when you've piqued your prospect's interest.

Of course, developing precise positioning and messaging isn't always easy when your startup could pivot tomorrow. So be smart and give yourself room to move in what you develop.

This written positioning and messaging should inform every piece of outbound communication from your business. You should be fanatically consistent in everything you do and say throughout your Minimum Viable Marketing materials.

Positioning and Messaging Checklist

- Discuss positioning and messaging with your team*
- Develop consensus on how you explain what you do and who it is for*
- Focus on benefits, not process*
- Write it down, then stick to it*
- Develop your value proposition*
- Be consistent in using it*

2) BRANDING

For many people, a brand starts and stops at a logo. But in reality, your logo is only a minor part of your overall brand.

At its heart, your brand is built on the positioning and messaging we just covered. That's your story. As you develop your branding, consider how to go deeper in articulating that story.

Brands aren't marketing fluff. Branding is the expression of your company's DNA – the very essence of who you are and what you stand for, with a dash of aspiration thrown in.

Every company has a brand. The choice is actively managing it or ignoring it. When you don't take action on your brand, someone else will define it for you. That could be your customers or the media. Or it could be your competition. The bottom line is simple: if you cede control of your brand to others, you might not like the result.

To figure out your brand beyond your core positioning and messaging, answer some fundamental questions like:

What is your company's personality?

What are the attributes of your company?

What values does your company hold?

What function leads your business (Engineering? Accounting? Marketing?)

What does your company aspire to be?

Think about Apple, as one great example. From the very beginning in his parents' garage, Steve Jobs had a vision for his brand. Apple would be the "other," the company that stood apart from the boring, conventional, unimaginative people who ran Hewlett-Packard, IBM and Microsoft.

Apple would be, as one of its ads famously said, for "the misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently."

That does a nice job of summarizing the Apple brand. You saw that reflected in its design aesthetic, its innovative products, its retail strategy and its almost always excellent marketing. Apple didn't just say *think different*, they lived it. In the process they created an extremely successful company and one of the most recognized brands in the world.

So think consciously about your brand, and articulate it, particularly in your early days. What you do now could set the tone for everything your company does. Your branding will influence your pitch to early adopters, VCs and everyone else who will matter to you.

Once your brand is solid, you need to showcase that in the way you present yourself to your market. That starts, yes, with a logo.

A good logo is important, but at the end of the day, a logo is simply an empty container you fill with meaning throughout the rest of your branding, and (more importantly) your interactions with your customers and other people.

In fact, one definition of a brand says it is "the sum total of the conversations about you." So what are people saying?

Visual branding is important because it becomes shorthand for your brand. You can recognize brands by their color palette and fonts, not just their logos. You apply that brand thinking to the visuals, consciously or unconsciously.

So invest in your visual identity. Have a professional design your logo. (And there's a big difference between a designer and someone who just knows how to use the software — check work samples.) Keep the logo clear. Think about reproduction on websites, packaging or even t-shirts. Will an overly complex logo execute well or will it cause problems?

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Stick to some basic graphic standards that will affect how people can use your logo: things like placement; all black or all white versions; and the spacing around it.

You should also establish a color palette – a series of colors that will be used consistently in your materials. The same goes for fonts. Choose one or two that complement your visual brand.

This type of visual language is really table stakes.

Now make sure you apply that basic visual branding correctly on everything you do – your website, social channels, email signatures, business cards, packaging and PowerPoints.

Consistency on a visual level will reinforce everything you do from a product, sales and client services perspective. It conveys a professional image and gives you an important element of the “puffer fish” strategy – looking bigger than you are.

Branding Checklist

- Articulate your brand identity*
- Develop a tone for your communication*
- Develop a usable logo*
- Develop a color palette*
- Choose complementary fonts*
- Make sure everything is consistent – everywhere*

3) PITCH DECKS

As you build your startup, you're going to do a lot of PowerPoint presentations.

A lot.

You will do presentations for investors and VCs, for potential customers and early adopters, non-dilutive funding sources (like government agencies or university researchers) and many others. You might even pitch to a VC audience in some kind of “Shark Tank” spectacle.

So your PowerPoints matter a lot at this stage. You've got to think both form and function.

Your deck should reinforce your positioning, messaging and branding. You've already done some of the heavy lifting. And remember that awesome logo, fonts and color palette you developed? Put them to work on your deck.

Bringing in a designer to build a template is usually a good investment. Yes, you can use PowerPoint. Anyone can use PowerPoint. That's the problem.

Because we all have it on our laptops and it's easy to use, we all think we can "do PowerPoint" well. Yeah, that's not true. That's why so many presentations are a jumble of fonts and clip art. And that standard template you picked? That's been used about 14 million times by other people. Remember that herd of same-sounding pitches? Well, being part of the herd of lookalike pitches isn't a whole lot better.

Trust the set up of your presentation to an expert. Find a designer who can actually work well in PowerPoint or the Mac version Keynote. Make sure the final product is something you can work with to adjust and revise on your own, so you don't need to go back to a designer every time you need a change.

When you have the design locked down, think about your content and audience. Investors and early adopters tend to want very different things. Don't try to speak to them in the same way.

Think about the audience's familiarity with your technology or space. If they aren't fully up to speed, avoid nerding out on them. Write like a human being. You can (and should) go into much more technical detail later – but you need to engage them first. If you bore or confuse them, the conversation may end there.

When you write your content, keep it to as few words as possible. A big block of text on a slide is unreadable and unlovable. A single phrase or, at most, a few lines is all you should include on the slide. Even better, say it with visuals such as photos or charts.

Also—keep it short, like 8 to 12 slides short if possible. We've all experienced someone rushing through a slide deck that is too long for the time allotted for the presentation. It's cringe worthy.

Of course, PowerPoint becomes a crutch for many speakers. They hide behind the podium and turn their backs to the audience to read from the

screen. That's a mistake. The PowerPoint supports your presentation – it is not the focus.

You want your audience to be listening and watching you. When the focus is on the PowerPoint, the most effective parts of your presentation are being lost. So a phrase on a slide that reinforces what you will be discussing for two or three minutes is almost always the best way to go.

Pitch Deck Checklist

- Have a designer create a good template*
- Reflect your positioning, messaging and branding*
- Write short, understandable content*
- Save the deep technical detail for later*
- Keep it to 8 to 12 slides*

4) SOCIAL MEDIA

As a startup, you probably don't have a big (or any) advertising budget.

That's OK. At this stage you don't really need advertising. There are, however, platforms that will give you extraordinary reach – but only if you have something engaging to say. The Twitter feed of your startup has the same potential to reach the same audience as Elon Musk, Reid Hoffman or TMZ. Facebook gives you a way to reach over a billion people with a click of the mouse.

So for most, though not all, startups, social media can be an important part of the marketing mix. It isn't a panacea for awareness or lead generation, but it does have extraordinary power to help you tell your story.

So what's right for your business? That depends.

If you are a B2C company, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter are probably your best bets. They have massive audiences and there is no barrier to entry.

For example, it takes no time to set up a Facebook page for your brand. However, Facebook has recently throttled back the organic reach of brand pages. So unless you promote your post, not many people will see it.

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Still, a promoted post on Facebook might cost you as little as \$6 or perhaps as much as \$175, quite affordable compared to traditional advertising. As well, Facebook allows you to get fairly targeted in your posts based on gender, age, location and even interest related keywords.

Even better, these ad platforms are “self-serve” so you don’t need a media buyer to do it for your company.

Instagram is a photography-based social network (owned by Facebook but left somewhat independent) with 200 million active users. Many B2C brands have found great success in this channel.

Pinterest is another good option for B2C companies. The site is predominantly used by women and is a strong referrer to online retailers. Pinterest is a visual medium so you need to have powerful images that appeal to your target audience and are “pinnable.”

Tumblr, a social blogging platform acquired by Yahoo, tends to skew towards younger people. So if your product is aimed at the Teen or Tween demographic, a Tumblr blog would be a good channel.

Twitter works well for most companies in the B2B or B2C space. Twitter, even more than the other social sites, is a conversation. Your brand needs to take part in the conversation. That doesn’t mean endless braying of promotional tweets – don’t be “that guy.” Rather, add some value to the conversation: share useful content from yourself and others and say thank you when someone retweets you or provides something you find helpful.

LinkedIn, the “Facebook for Business,” is, well, for business. Like Facebook, you can share your posts or updates and you can also promote them via self-serve advertising. If you are targeting a very specific business audience, you can get quite granular in your targeting. That can be very useful in lead generation.

LinkedIn also has many active groups built around specific industries or job titles. Research them to find out the nature of the conversation, who posts what, and how you can make a positive (i.e. non-spammy) contribution.

As a startup, social media can help you look the part. In fact, some VCs are said to include the number of social follows a company has in their evaluation of the business. So be sure to add your branding to any sites you join, to keep it consistent. No one will take a company with a generic Twitter “egg” photo seriously. Fill in your bio and include your website. Use appropriately branded profile photos and cover images.

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People often think that social media is “free.” While it doesn’t cost anything to start a social feed, social media still comes with a cost in staff time and other resources. You need someone on your team or in your agency to write posts, follow other users, take advantage of opportunities and respond to messages. Your content marketing requires an investment.

No, social is not free. But it is often good value for your time and money.

There are also lots of tools out there to make it easy for you. HootSuite, for example, is a good platform for managing your social media feeds, scheduling posts and providing some basic analytics.

You know the saying “what gets measured gets managed?” Maybe you read it in business school or maybe you have a Peter Drucker poster on your wall. Either way, this is true when it comes to social media. You must measure to manage.

You can set goals for followers and engagement and measure how you did against them. You can track the performance of people drawn to your site through social referrals.

Remember, you need to stick with social media. It never stops. But as you grow your following and build your brand reputation, it will continue to pay dividends.

Social Media Checklist

- Identify which platforms are right for your business*
- Use paid promotions to increase your brand's following*
- Identify resources for a consistent program*
- Measure results*
- Refine the approach*

5) WEBSITE

Almost every startup has a website. That's important because for most businesses, even startups, your website is often your most important marketing tool. If that VC you are attempting to schedule a pitch with checks you out, what will they find? What about that developer you desperately want to hire?

Your website tells a big part of your story to people who don't know you well.

Most startup sites need a little work.

Why? Well in the absence of both a marketer and budget, this tends to get cobbled together as cheaply as possible. "I gotta a guy," someone will offer. Your cousin does websites from her basement, or that wedding DJ you met does them on the side. Spend 500 bucks and you're away to the races.

That usually doesn't work out well. The site often looks outdated with bad stock images and confusing messages. That hurts your credibility. Who knows what opportunities it is costing you?

Website 1.0 needs to look better than that.

This doesn't mean you need a \$100,000 site with hundreds of pages. That would be a waste of money at this stage. However you need a site that reflects your messaging, positioning and branding. It should clearly explain what you do and the value proposition you offer to your customers. You should also highlight your leadership team.

Be sure to include actual contact information. Avoid contact forms if possible and instead provide an email address, phone number and street address. If you are still working from a coffee shop, spring for a PO Box number at least.

Incorporate your social media feeds in some way, either as links using icons or as embedded feeds (this works best with Twitter).

Have a designer work on the look and feel of the site and make sure it reflects your visual identity and brand. And get a real writer to work on the copy so it is clear and understandable. This is money well spent.

Think about building the site on a Content Management System like WordPress. That way you can quickly add or remove content when the need arises, without having to pay and often wait for a web designer to make these simple changes.

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Your website doesn't need to be elaborate but it needs to be professional, be well branded, showcase your team and clearly convey your messages.

Website Checklist

- Work with pros to design, write and build your site*
- Keep it consistent with your positioning, messaging and branding*
- Include your value proposition*
- Highlight your team*
- Include real contact information*
- Build it on an easy-to-use CMS*



GET ROLLING

As a lean startup, you are all about getting product built and shipped, revenues coming in and market share expanding.

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Minimum Viable Marketing is an approach that complements that philosophy. If you invest time and budget strategically in marketing, it will help your business move faster and achieve more.

Every startup is different, but most will need MVM elements: *positioning and messaging; visual identity and branding; a solid, core pitch deck; social media; and a website.* Focusing on the quality of these core items is more important than spreading resources too thinly across a variety of channels.

Marketing, at its heart, must directly support the business strategy. Everything else is just fluff. Does everything about your marketing program help sell more product? If the answer is no, then ask yourself why you are doing it.

By using these MVM tips, you can tell your startup story and set yourself firmly on the path of success.

So get rolling.

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ABOUT ALLAN GATES

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ABOUT BONFIRE

Bonfire Communications Inc. is an integrated marketing and communications agency based in New Brunswick, Canada. Bonfire tells stories for brands and works at the intersection of advertising, PR and social media. Bonfire has a particular focus on startup marketing, helping companies launch and grow. You can find out more at www.bonfirestory.es or [@BonfireStories](https://twitter.com/BonfireStories)



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