AGL MARKETING LIMITED

Cabbages & Golf Balls

Musings and scribbles of a consulting marketer

February 2026

Reflections from the Water: Marketing Lessons on Big Lake

The rhythmic dip of the canoe paddle in the clear, cool water of Big Lake is a meditation. Here on Manitoulin Island, surrounded by the rugged beauty of the Canadian Shield, the noise of the business world fades, and what remains is a quiet space for reflection. Each stroke of the paddle, each ripple that spreads across the water's surface, seems to echo the lessons learned over a long career in marketing.

The sudden splash of a smallmouth bass breaking the surface reminds me of how many small businesses approach marketing: a reactive jolt of activity only when something startles them into action. A dip in sales, a new competitor, a sense of being left behind. But just as a seasoned paddler anticipates wave height and the weather, a successful business must be proactive, not reactive. Marketing isn't a life preserver to be thrown in when the boat is already taking on water; it's the rudder that steers the vessel, a fundamental part of the journey.

Looking into the clear depths of the lake, I'm struck by how much it resembles the concept of branding for so many business owners. They see the surface, the logo, the colours, but the true depth, the ecosystem that lies beneath, remains a mystery. Branding is not just a visual identity; it's the very essence of a business, the story it tells, the values it embodies. It's the unseen current that gives the business direction and purpose.

The size of Big Lake, stretching out before me, is a reminder of the budget constraints that so many small businesses face. It often feels like there's never enough to reach the other side, to fully implement a comprehensive marketing plan. The desire to take shortcuts, to paddle with all your might in one direction without a map, is strong. But a successful journey, like a successful marketing

plan, requires a clear destination, a well-thought-out route, and the right provisions for the trip.

As I glide past a rocky outcrop, I'm reminded of the 7 Ps of the marketing mix, the essential elements that must work in harmony. The product is the canoe itself, the vessel that carries you. The price is the effort required to paddle. The place is this beautiful lake with maple-treed shoreline. The promotion is the story I'll tell of this journey. The people are the fellow paddlers I meet along the way. The process is the rhythm of my paddling. And the physical evidence is the wake I leave behind, the tangible proof of my journey. Each element is distinct, yet they all contribute to the whole experience.

The shoreline of Big Lake is not uniform. There are sandy beaches, rocky cliffs, and dense woodlots, each with its own unique ecosystem. This is the lesson of the customer. What thrives in one environment may not in another. A deep understanding of the customer's world, their culture, their language, is essential. A one-size-fits-all approach to marketing is as foolish as trying to navigate a rocky shoreline with a deep-draft sailboat.

As the sun begins to set, casting a golden glow across the water, I turn my canoe towards my camp. The journey, for today, is over. But the reflections remain. Marketing, like paddling, is a journey, not a destination. It requires a clear strategy, a deep understanding of the environment, and the right tools for the job. And just as I'll return to these waters, so too must a business continually return to its marketing strategy, adapting, refining, and always moving.

COMMENT?

Why Your E-Newsletter Matters in a World of Algorithms

It's easy to dismiss the e-newsletter as a relic of the past in a digital landscape dominated by ever-changing social media algorithms. To do so, however, would be to overlook a powerful and enduring marketing tool that continues to deliver exceptional results. While social media platforms are invaluable for reaching new audiences, the e-newsletter offers a direct, personal, and algorithm-proof channel to cultivate lasting relationships.

One of the most significant advantages of an e-newsletter is the direct line of communication it provides. Unlike social media, where your content's visibility is

at the mercy of a platform's algorithm, an email lands directly in your subscriber's inbox. This unfiltered access is becoming increasingly rare and valuable. Your message is seen by those who have explicitly chosen to receive it, leading to higher engagement rates than those on social media pages. While organic reach on social media hovers around 2-4%, email open rates can reach very high levels (well over 50% in Canada) depending upon the quality of the email database.

CONTINUE READING

What to Cut and What to Keep in Your 2026 Marketing Budget

Bob, a business owner in his 60s, pragmatic and skeptical of new marketing trends, is meeting in his office with Edith, a professional marketer in her 30s, data-driven and forward-thinking. Bob is looking at a spreadsheet with a frown. Edith is sitting opposite him, holding a tablet.

Bob: I've been going over these numbers, Edith, and I don't like what I see. With the economy the way it is, we need to tighten our belts. And this marketing budget... it's a lot of money for what feels like a lot of fluff.

Edith: I understand the pressure, Bob. But that's exactly why we need to be smart about our marketing, not just cut it. The landscape is changing. We have tools now, like AI, that can make us more efficient than ever.

Bob: AI? You mean those robots that write poems? I'm not sure I want a robot talking to my customers. What I want is to see a return on my investment. Justify every dollar. That's what I want to see.

Edith: And you should. Every good marketer wants that. We call it zero-based budgeting. Instead of just tweaking last year's numbers, we build the budget from the ground up, justifying every single expense. It's about being strategic, not just making cuts.

Bob: Good. Let's start with all this "marketing technology" you have us signed up for. It seems like you have a new app for everything. How many of these do we actually need?

Edith: That's a fair question. And I've already started a full audit of our martech stack. You're right, there's some redundancy. We can consolidate and probably

cut our subscription costs by 20%. And by automating some of the manual, repetitive tasks, we can free up my time to focus on strategy.

Bob: And what about the agency? We pay them a hefty sum every month. What are they even doing for us?

Edith: They've been effective for some of the specialized design work, but I agree, we need to re-evaluate. My proposal is to bring the core strategic functions in-house and use the agency for project-based work. It will give us more control and cut down on the retainer fees.

Bob: Now you're talking. Cut the fat. That's what I like to hear.

Edith: But it's not just about cutting, Bob. It's about reinvesting in what works and what will drive growth. And that brings us back to AI.

Bob: (Sighs) Edith...

Edith: Hear me out. AI isn't about replacing people. It's about empowering them. It can help us create content faster, personalize our customer communications, and get more out of our ad spend. It's a collaborator, not a replacement.

Bob: And what's this about "social search"? You want to spend money on TikTok?

Edith: It's not just TikTok. For Gen Z, social media is the new Google. It's where they discover and research products. If we're not there, we're invisible to a whole generation of customers. It's called Social Search Engine Optimization, and it's essential.

Bob: My customers aren't on TikTok, Edith. They're reading the paper. They're listening to the radio.

Edith: Some of them are, and we should still be there. Paid media, both in traditional and digital forms, is still a core part of the strategy. But we can't ignore the shift that's happening. We need a mix. We need to be where our customers are, and increasingly, that's on social media.

Bob: (Leans back, steeples his fingers) So, you want to cut the agency, consolidate the tech, and then spend the savings on AI and TikTok?

Edith: I want to build a data-driven marketing budget for 2026 that eliminates waste, invests in high-growth areas, and ties every single dollar to revenue. It's not about chasing trends, Bob. It's about building a sustainable future for your company.

(Bob looks at Edith, a flicker of something new in his eyes. It might be annoyance, or it might be respect.)

Bob: Alright, Edith. Put together a proposal. A small one. A test. Let's see what this "social search" thing can really do. But I'll be watching every dollar. Every single one.

Edith: (Smiles) I wouldn't have it any other way... Bob.

Prospering in the Hills - How small businesses can outperform bigger non-local brands - Tactics that work

Living and working in Halton Hills, we all know the deal. We've got that perfect blend of small-town charm and access to the big city, a place where you still know your neighbours and appreciate the unique character of Area Municipalities like Georgetown, Acton, and Glen Williams. But for our local business owners, that dream of running a business here comes with a very big challenge: competing with huge, faceless corporations - many anchored in Toronto and abroad.

It's a tough gig. Statistics show that a significant number of new businesses don't make it past their first few years. But in a place like Halton Hills, our local business entrepreneurs have a secret weapon that the big guys can never replicate: us – we the residents. It's our community spirit, our desire for genuine connection, and our appreciation for the unique things that make this place home. For small businesses, leaning into what makes them local is their superpower.

The hometown advantage: More than a transaction

Think about your favourite local spot. Maybe it's the bakery where they know your order, the shop owner who asks about your family, or the mechanic who gives you honest advice. That's the hometown advantage in action. Unlike a national chain where you're a number on a spreadsheet, local businesses are owned and operated by our neighbours. They're part of the fabric of Halton Hills, participating in local events, sponsoring organizations representing the interests of children and elders, and truly caring about the people they serve.

This creates a bond that goes beyond price. It's a relationship built on trust and a shared love for "community." When you shop local, you're not just buying a product; you're investing in the story of Halton Hills and supporting the people who make it special. That personal touch, that feeling of being genuinely valued, is something the automated, one-size-fits-all approach of a large corporation can never match.

The agility to adapt at the speed of local life

Big companies are like cruise ships—they take a long time to turn. Small businesses of "The Hills" are like speedboats. They can pivot quickly to respond to what's happening right here, right now. When a new food trend hits, a local eatery can add it to their menu tomorrow. When a local artisan starts getting buzz on Instagram, their boutique can have their products on the shelf by the weekend. Small businesses can adjust their hours for the Georgetown Farmers' Market or a festival in Acton, staying perfectly in sync with the rhythm of their local community.

This flexibility shows they're paying attention. It proves they're not just located in Halton Hills; they're an active, breathing part of it. This responsiveness makes the lives of residents better and sets them worlds apart from slower, more bureaucratic competitors.

Finding a niche: Becoming a local legend

Instead of trying to be everything to everyone, the smartest local businesses focus on being the absolute best at one thing. By carving out a specific niche, they become the go-to experts, the destination that people from all over the region will seek. Whether it's a custom meat shop with an unparalleled choice of cuts, a garden centre with expertise in heritage plants, or a service centre where mechanics can fix just about vehicle, specialization builds a powerful reputation. This focused approach allows them to attract a dedicated following of customers who value quality, expertise, and a personalized experience. It's about identifying what the residents of Halton Hills are missing and filling that gap with business acumen and skill. In doing so, they create a category of their own that goes beyond competing for customers.

Digital dominance on a local scale

A strong online presence is essential. For local small businesses, the goal is to own the digital space locally. It starts with a top-notch Google Business Profile listing, filled with photos that tell a story and positive reviews from residents. It means using social media not only to sell, but to engage in conversations, share the backstories of the business, and connect with people. By joining forces with the Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce or collaborating with local bloggers, they can amplify their message and reach every corner of Halton Hills.

The unbeatable customer experience

The most powerful tool in a local business's resources is the ability to provide an exceptional customer experience. It's the warm greeting, the expert advice, the hassle-free return, or the simple, handwritten thank-you note. These gestures, however small, create a lasting impression and build a level of loyalty that no marketing budget can buy.

In Halton Hills, we have a choice. We can support the giants, or invest in our neighbours. The path to success for local businesses lies in embracing everything that makes them small, agile, and deeply connected to residents. By leveraging these unique strengths, small businesses can survive and help create a vibrant local economy while keeping the spirit of Halton Hills exciting and relevant.

CIMMO
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Arthur Grant Lee

Was admitted as a

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of The Chartered Institute of Marketing Management of Ontario
On the 7th day of July, 2023
Given at Toronto, Canada, subject to the provisions
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Credentials from CIMMO affirm services of a Professional Marketer

The Chartered Institute of Marketing Management of Ontario (CIMMO) grants the **Chartered Professional Marketer** (CPM) certification to people seeking a life-long career in marketing. Certification requires a formal education in marketing from a university or college, professional exams, and mandatory continuing education. CIMMO is chartered by the Ontario government, but membership is not legislated and overseen by a government agency. Membership is voluntary and no licence is required to practice marketing.

Without a licencing requirement to practice marketing, the industry is wide open to anyone wishing to call themselves a marketer without any formal education, training, and skills development. CIMMO's membership recruitment from marketing schools, people working in government with marketing responsibilities, and marketers in private practice is a daunting challenge. For CIMMO, the draw to membership is certification by a chartered institute, mandatory continuing education, and a global reach of its purpose – to make the world a better place through ethical marketing.

Grant Lee is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing Management of Ontario.

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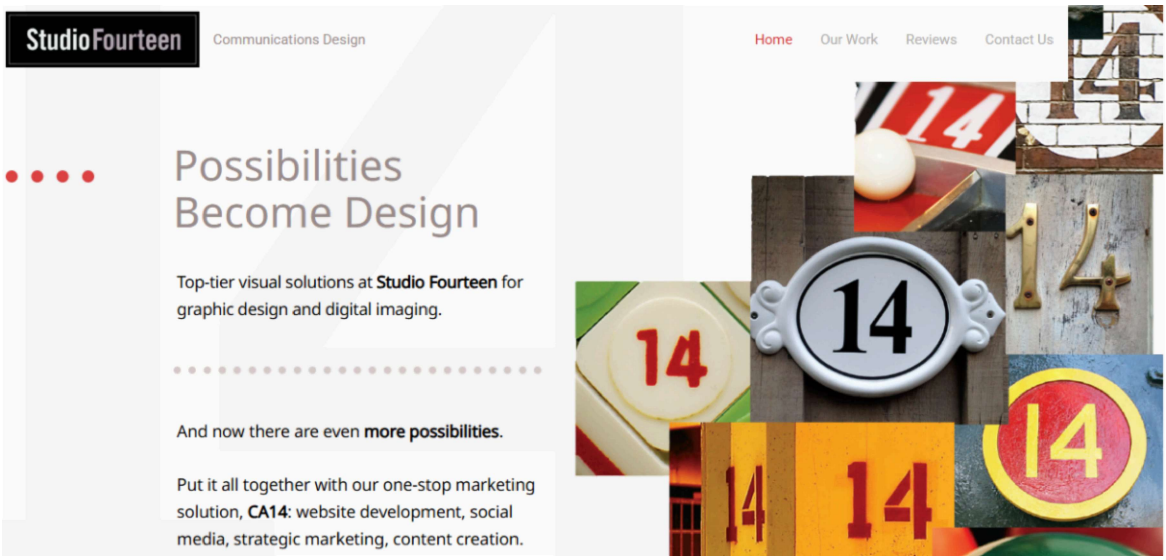

AGL Marketing partners with Peter Perko, RGD and Studio Fourteen when design concepts require the services of a Registered Graphic Designer. Peter is a founding member of CA14, which is a business partner of AGL Marketing limited.

Studio Fourteen provides graphic design and related creative services to the public and private sectors including technology/industrial, retail, B2B, arts and culture, government, and education. Perko's success is a result of customer service, care of execution, integrity, cost effectiveness, and timeliness.

Studio Fourteen

The CA14 Marketing connection: Experience and Capacity-Building

AGL Marketing Limited combined strengths, creativity and resources with the CA14 Marketing Team to bring a new level of service excellence on a global scale to a wider range of clients.

Combined portfolios ensure practical strategic marketing, and marketing communications for small to medium-sized enterprises.

CA14 CELEBRATING 10 YEARS
CA14 MARKETING

See the CA14 Marketing website that summarizes the services that help many companies improve marketing performance.

CA14 Marketing Website

About Cabbages & Golf Balls

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