

Digital trends that can help change the game for small South African businesses

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Since optimising their websites for mobile devices a few years back, many South African companies have mostly made small and superficial changes to their digital presence. But the growing maturity of the next wave of emerging technologies means your website could look very different by 2023 compared to how it looks today.



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Here are four major trends that could change the game for small local businesses over the next few years:

Chatbots

Conversational agents, commonly known as chatbots, are one of the hottest topics of the digital world. These artificially intelligent systems can understand human conversations via text input and respond to people with useful information, presented in a natural way. It is possible to interact with chatbots via text message, websites and, most commonly, through social networks.

Chatbots are getting more sophisticated all the time. Already, they're capable of having full conversations regarding most customer concerns. In 2019 and beyond, chatbots are going to become cheaper, more capable, and more accepted by the general population.

The potential of chatbots for small businesses is immense. As a small business owner, you probably cannot afford a 24/7 call-centre or a large sales team to handle sales and support. But you can afford a chatbot that answers simple queries and helps customers get responses quickly or while they are actively considering your small business.

Chatbots are becoming smart enough to answer a range of customer questions, which means your prospects and clients can get meaningful answers when they need them. They are useful for answering the routine queries that account for the bulk of calls most businesses receive. For example, a customer changing an address, getting a quote or trouble-shooting a technical problem.

Voice-optimised interfaces

Voice assistants like Siri, Alexa and Cortana, plus smart speakers such as Google Home and Amazon Echo, are seeing a surge in growth. Towards the end of 2017 and throughout 2018, consumers started to grow comfortable with these audio-based digital assistants. By 2020, they might be a common feature in South African homes.

This means ordinary users are going to grow accustomed to interacting with online material through their voices. If you want your brand to stay relevant in the long term, you'll need to adapt.

In some cases, that means optimising your content to better address simple user questions (so you can be featured in the rich answers at the top of Google's search rankings). In others, that means simplifying your content so it can be easier to engage with through smart speakers or mobile devices.

How are some ways you can already excel at voice search and SEO:

1. Look at your "[Google My Business](#)" listing: When you claim your company, you add a range of useful information to Google that increases your website's chances of appearing for voice search queries.
2. Adapt keywords for natural speech: People talk to Siri in a more natural way than they phrase a search in Google. Think about the questions people may ask a voice assistant about your business or product range, and optimise accordingly.
3. Build a search-optimised frequently asked questions (FAQ) page: You can use your FAQ pages to create question-based keywords that align with the sort of questions a user might ask a voice assistant like Siri.

VR/AR content

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) have yet to be widely adopted. When the Oculus Rift VR headset came on the scene, some international brands were excited about the marketing possibilities. Due to a combination of factors, sales were lower than expected, and VR remained a niche technology. Microsoft's [HoloLens](#) is another good example.

Now, global headset sales are taking off, and more people are warming up to the idea of VR (and by, extension, AR). It's still in its early days, but we can expect to soon see some pioneering South African companies introduce VR- and AR-based content for their websites and apps.

So, what is the technology all about? AR uses a camera to superimpose a computer-generated image on your view of the real world – a simple example is how a smartphone app translates a street sign in a foreign country into your own language on your screen. Conversely, VR immerses you in a virtual artificial environment through a headset.

VR and AR both offer some interesting ways to blend your real-world and digital presence. A virtual tour of your store, an immersive 360-degree experience of an event you're attending, or an AR game that keeps your customers engaged – the possibilities are numerous. In a world where people are hungry for interesting experiences, AR and VR might create new opportunities to engage with your customers.

There is still a long way to go, but the technology is improving all the time. Customers are already interested. In a [consumer](#)

[study](#) by GfK South Africa, 59% of respondents said they are more likely to visit a retail store that offered some sort of VR/AR experience.

Live video

Internet users are increasing their consumption of online video. The [10th annual Cisco Visual Networking Index \(VNI\)](#) forecasts that video will make up 73% of mobile data traffic in South Africa by 2020, compared to 52% at the end of 2015. Globally, video will comprise 82% of all IP traffic by 2022, according to Cisco.

To remain competitive by that date, you'll want to become comfortable with video as part of your web content strategy. With so many other businesses competing for attention in the space, you'll need to find ways to set yourself apart.

One way to do that is via live videos. Stream yourself during a speaking engagement or host a live Q&A session to engage further with your audience. It's authentic, fun and spontaneous. It can help you to get closer to your audience on a reasonably small budget.

Closing thoughts

There is no one-size-fits-all recommendation for how and when to adopt these technology strategies, or how to balance them. Different brands and audiences require different combinations – and it's up to you to figure out what those combinations are. Don't be afraid to experiment. That can be a great way to learn and to get a head-start on your competitors.

ABOUT STEFANO MARUZZI

As more small companies look to establish their online presence around the world, GoDaddy is expanding its European operations and has appointed Stefano Maruzzi as its Vice President of BVEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa).

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