

How to Win with Small Businesses

The LinkedIn Playbook

Top tips and insights for engaging the businesses driving the global economy

SMBs

LinkedIn

Why SMB strategy matters

Pick any business, anywhere on earth, and the overwhelming probability is that business will sit in the category we term, **'Small and Medium-sized'.**



Businesses with 500 employees or fewer represent around

95%

of all businesses on the planet.

They generate over

1/2

of global GDP

And serve as the driving force behind the world economy.

Engaging SMBs matters, and not just because of their collective scale and scope. They sit at the heart of many businesses' marketing strategies because of their inherently dynamic nature. SMBs' smaller size can bring challenges, but it also gives them an inherent energy. They are able to respond quickly to market conditions, pivot towards new opportunities, adopt new technologies with fewer constraints from legacy systems and processes, and make decisions quickly.

SMB strategy is therefore a priority for many businesses, and it is a particular priority for LinkedIn. SMBs sit at the heart of our purpose to enable economic opportunity for everyone on the planet.

We've built products to help them address their challenges and unlock their potential. Our success depends on our ability to reach and inspire smaller businesses with the solutions that turn them into growing businesses.

When markets grow, and economic upswings begin, the positive forward momentum usually starts with SMBs.

Source: United Nations, 2024 Theme: MSMEs and the SDGs

Our blueprint for SMB Marketing on LinkedIn

We've built our own strategy for inspiring SMBs to do more with LinkedIn by leveraging LinkedIn. After all, our platform is where SMB professionals come to grow their businesses, and discover insights and advice to help.



68%

of SMBs professionals

say that LinkedIn helps them find new leads and customers, more than for any other platform.

When it comes to inspiring SMBs, we've discovered that the best results come from tailoring messaging to the different points they've reached in their growth journeys. LinkedIn's unique capability for targeting by company size has enabled us to develop targeted campaigns with ads that are designed to resonate with businesses' changing priorities and motivations.

When we adapted our messaging around LinkedIn's Online Job Ads to speak to the experiences of businesses with fewer than 10 employees, we increased our click-through rate (CTR) by 5x.

Insights like this are helping us to drive ever-increasing engagement and results among SMBs, and helping other businesses to do the same. That's why we've created this Playbook. It's a guide to planning and executing campaigns to engage SMBs across a broad range of different sectors and sizes. It's filled with tactics and techniques that we know work – and that's why we use them in our own campaigns.

Source: LinkedIn + Interpret Meet the SMB Survey, June 2024. Survey conducted across 4,287 global SMB decision-makers aged 18-74.

Planning your **SMB campaign**



Setting your marketing objectives

The first step in planning your SMB campaign involves setting a clear objective and related KPIs that you can use to optimize your approach.

As with any B2B audience, **this could include:**

- **building brand awareness** by optimizing around reach;
- **nurturing consideration** by optimizing around clicks, website visits or video views;
- or **driving conversions** by optimizing around qualified leads or converting actions on your site.

As we'll discuss, a full-funnel strategy, which incorporates campaigns playing these different, complementary roles, is particularly effective when it comes to SMB marketing. It positions you to generate signals of interest and then respond to them. This aligns with the shorter buying journeys that SMBs often engage in. It helps ensure you build the awareness you need to make the consideration set, and engage SMB decision-makers when they're ready to pay attention to your category.

Segmenting your audience to enable relevance

A close look at LinkedIn data quickly confirms that SMBs are not all the same. These are dynamic businesses passing through many different stages of growth. Their priorities and interests change with each of these stages, and so do the ways that they respond to ads and make buying decisions.

In developing campaigns for the SMB audience, we quickly discovered the value of taking a granular approach and using targeting by company size to tailor our messaging to the mindset of SMB professionals at these different stages.

> **There's a big difference between a company with under 10 employees and one with 50 or more, and when we create specific campaigns for these different groups, we drive consistently stronger results.**

At the same time, it's important to recognize that an SMB decision-maker doesn't define themselves by the size of their business. Their interests and pain points aren't shaped by managing large teams, in the way that they might be for an executive at a mid-market or enterprise organization. The messaging they are most interested in is messaging that's specific to their industry, and what their business does.

For these reasons, we recommend approaching an SMB campaign by segmenting your audience in two important ways. **Segment by industry first,** identifying the types of business and use cases where your solutions have most value to add.

Once you have identified these, **segment each industry by size.** In each case, aim to identify the growth tipping points when the ambitions and needs of a company start to change. A business with 30 employees could be a large hairdressing chain, but a small manufacturing business, for example.



Aligning to how SMBs make decisions

Another important consideration is the speed at which SMBs make decisions, and the fact that SMB owners and other decision-makers often wear different hats at different times. One week they may be focused on hiring people, the next on marketing strategy, the next on cybersecurity. Timing matters, since SMB professionals tend to ignore ads that don't relate to what they're focusing on.

The best approach is often to target broadly when it comes to job titles and functions, and plan a full-funnel strategy that enables you to build awareness, capture signals of interest and intent, and respond to them.

> **At LinkedIn, we divide our budgets between broadly targeted campaigns with top-funnel messaging to drive awareness of solutions, and then more focused campaigns which retarget SMB professionals who engage with these broader campaigns.**

In our experience, the most effective overall approach is to reserve the majority of your budget for these action-oriented, retargeting campaigns. Because they respond to signals of intent, they ensure you are putting the right message in front of SMB professionals at the right time.

LinkedIn's checklist for setting objectives and segmenting your **SMB audience**

- ☐ Map the industries and use cases where your solutions can have the greatest impact for SMBs
- ☐ Within each industry, create segments based on company size that relate to the different stages in business growth
- ☐ Take an inclusive approach to targeting by job title, recognizing that an SMB decision-maker gets involved in all kinds of buying choices, not just a specific category
- ☐ Plan a full-funnel strategy that will enable you to capture and respond to signals of intent

The SMB View

"My advice to businesses marketing to SMBs on LinkedIn is to listen. Use the insights you get from following businesses on LinkedIn to **understand their pain points** and what they're trying to achieve. Share content on LinkedIn that speaks to those issues, and don't be afraid to try different approaches to discover what resonates."



Ian Newfield
CEO, Appnomix

Developing your targeting approach

Once you've decided on how to segment your SMB audience, it's time to start translating your strategic approach into effective targeting on LinkedIn.

> **The key here is to test and optimize as you go.**

We've found that this is the best way to zero in on the SMB sweet spots for your solutions.



Leveraging your first-party data assets and scaling your audience

Relevant first-party data can provide a great foundation for SMB targeting. At LinkedIn, we're fortunate to have a wealth of such data from SMB professionals registering for LinkedIn Live Events, webinars and other content assets. With **LinkedIn Matched Audiences,** you can use captured data or website retargeting to reach SMBs that have shown an interest in your business in the past.

Once you've created a Custom Audience in this way, you can use **Audience Expansion** to reach similar SMB professionals, and **Predictive Audiences** to target LinkedIn members who are likely to behave similarly to those in your data.

Targeting by industry and company size

In parallel to any Matched Audience campaigns that you have data for, **create additional campaigns that target your likely SMB audiences through industry and company size.**

If you've segmented your SMB audiences in the way that we do, you'll have a range of potential SMB Ideal Customer Profiles (ICPs) to target in this way.

Taking an inclusive approach to roles and titles

Adding job titles to your targeting can help to increase relevance, but it's important to remember the multiple roles that SMB professionals often play for their businesses, keep your approach broad and keep an eye on your predicted audience size to ensure you're not narrowing your approach too much.

When it comes to job titles, we distinguish between general decision-makers, such as SMB owners, founders and directors, who will have a say in every type of purchase or investment, and specialist decision-makers in functions like marketing and sales. SMBs who have people in these roles are sending a signal that they are actively investing in these types of categories, and so there's real value in including these functions and titles. Be inclusive when it comes to seniority, since a marketing manager or a sales rep at an SMB might well act as a de-facto head of department. Remember too, that they won't just be involved in decisions about marketing solutions or sales software.

> **If the SMB is hiring more salespeople, any existing salesperson is likely to be involved. If the business is looking at logistics or real estate for new stores, a marketer might well be a key decision-maker, since specialist roles for these areas probably don't exist.**

Testing and optimizing your targeting approach

Creating parallel campaigns that take different approaches to targeting your SMB audience enables you to **monitor performance and switch budget to those that generate the strongest engagement rates.** You can also use the demographic data available in LinkedIn Campaign Manager to analyze the profile of people who engage with your ads, and feed these insights into future campaigns through Matched Audiences.

Broadly targeted SMB campaigns are the best foundation for a full-funnel strategy that enables you to invest the majority of your budget in ads that respond to signals of intent. In our next section on Activating your SMB Campaign, we'll explore ideas for ad formats and messaging that can help with this.



LinkedIn's checklist for SMB targeting

- ☐ Upload any existing first-party data that you have through Matched Audiences, and **use Audience Expansion and Predictive Audiences to reach similar SMB profiles**
- ☐ **Create parallel campaigns focusing on different SMB ICPs**, so you can monitor performance, and optimize around those that deliver the strongest engagement
- ☐ Take an inclusive approach to job title targeting, **adding roles and functions rather than excluding them,** and remembering that SMB professionals contribute to a wide range of buying decisions
- ☐ **Divide budget** between broad campaigns with top-funnel messaging, and more focused campaigns that retarget SMB professionals who engage, with the majority of your budget reserved for targeting intent signals

The SMB View

"Most people at businesses with fewer than 50 employees are doing lots of different things. **They're hiring, they're marketing, they're selling.** They wear multiple hats, and so you can't rely too much on job titles when you're targeting them. On the other hand, when you do have a specialist job title at an SMB it's a signal of intent in itself, so you definitely want to include that role in your targeting approach."



Adam Yinger
Group Manager Digital Marketing, LinkedIn

The Marketers View

"The people within SMBs who are most likely to use our product are those in the marketing, sales or customer success function, so we can recognize opportunities by looking at businesses that have just made their first sales or marketing hire. That's often when they're somewhere between six and 10 employees. Another key point is the moment when they raise Seed or Series A funding and they start ramping up growth. That's when we want to position ourselves as the platform for their go-to-market."



James Gilbert
VP Partnership Marketing, HubSpot

SECTION 2

Activating your **SMB campaign**

Once you've identified your objectives, segmented your audience and built your targeting approach, it's time to activate your campaign strategy. The key to success here is developing personalized messaging that can resonate with your audience segments' different priorities. Don't be afraid to keep testing different ad formats and variations to find the approach that connects.

Tailoring messaging to your SMB audience

As a rule, **SMB audiences respond most strongly to ads and content that reference what they are focusing on then and there.** It's not that decision-makers at these businesses don't care about strategy. Of course they do. However, the time-poor nature of running a small or scaling business requires them to focus on what's on their horizon over the next few months. We've had greatest success targeting SMBs with messaging that talks to immediate needs rather than longer-term benefits.

Because relevance matters, ads that call out specific pain points and priorities tend to perform most strongly. We've had success tailoring our messaging in two different ways. The first involves calling out the specific result or benefit that an SMB decision-maker is interested in. The second involves referencing their industry by name, and aligning to hot topics of the moment.



Personalizing ads to SMB audience priorities

#1

The first approach had a transforming effect on the CTR that we generated for campaigns promoting Online Job Ads to SMBs. Because **we segmented our audience in a granular way, we were able to create specific ads for businesses with fewer than 10 employees**, who are in the early stages of their hiring journey and don't yet have an HR team, a recruitment agency or anybody taking specific responsibility for talent acquisition. We tailored our ads to speak to the priorities of SMB owners in this scenario, who don't have budget to put into talent strategies and want to fill roles with the right people, quickly.

> **Our headlines and images stressed ease, speed and cost-effectiveness and delivered an immediate**
>
> **5x** increase in CTR

#2

The second approach leverages an enduring insight about advertising on LinkedIn that's consistently backed up by data:

> **Ads that reference an audience group in the headline get a**
>
> **53%**
> **increase in click-through rate (CTR)**

This could involve calling out manufacturers looking to cut the cost of training or meet health and safety regulations, small-business marketers seeking an easy way to increase leads through AI, or ice-cream parlour owners thinking about electricity bills or refrigeration services.



Leveraging AI for tailored creative and testing

With tailored messaging, as with targeting, testing is the key to success. Aim to create four or five alternative ads for each target audience and campaign that you run, so that you can try referencing different benefits, pain points or industry priorities and optimize around those that resonate most strongly.

LinkedIn provides a range of **AI-enabled tools** that can help you quickly and easily create different ad variations for these experiments.



With LinkedIn Accelerate, our AI Assistant for campaign setup, you can upload a description of your product and service, set your campaign targeting, and automatically generate creative suggestions for ads to drive a response.



With Dynamic Ads, you can automatically personalize ads with your audience members' names and profile pictures, to easily create individualized creative.



Tailoring your messaging doesn't just apply to conventional Image or Video Ads. We've found that Thought Leader Ads are a particularly effective format in SMB marketing, especially when they amplify the voices of SMB customers whom your audience can relate to. Creating a range of Thought Leader Ads with voices from different industries is one of the most effective ways of signalling relevance.

LinkedIn's checklist
for tailoring your SMB messaging

- ☐ Create 4-5 ad variations for each of your campaigns, so you can test which messaging resonates most strongly with each specific SMB audience.
- ☐ Experiment with calling out the particular results and benefits that matter most to SMB decision-makers, depending on their business size or priorities.
- ☐ Call out SMB industries in images and headlines to stress relevance for time-poor owners and managers.
- ☐ Use LinkedIn Accelerate and Dynamic Ads to quickly create tailored advertising at scale.
- ☐ Explore creating Thought Leader Ads with SMB customers from different industries, whom your different audience segments can relate to.

The LinkedIn View

> **With SMBs our recommendation is not to try and sell a long-term investment to help the company's strategy over the next five years.** Your real focus is on solving a problem for them in the immediate term. They want to solve the to-do list for today or next week rather than invest in something that's going to deliver a return a year or two from now. Frame your solutions and benefits in those terms, whenever you can. **Personalize your messaging around their immediate 'Jobs To Be Done'."**



Allen Pang
Digital Marketing Strategist, LinkedIn

Choosing the right ad formats and creative tactics for your campaign

SMB decision-makers associate LinkedIn with growth. It's the platform they trust to generate leads, reach out and make connections to potential customers, and tap into insights and advice from business leaders and entrepreneurs that they admire.

> **We've discovered that some of the most effective LinkedIn Ad formats are those that align with the organic LinkedIn experience that SMBs attach so much value to.**

Conventional ad formats are very effective for building awareness and establishing credibility around your brand. Combine these withnative ad formats for driving engagement and enabling SMBs to signal their interest in your solutions.

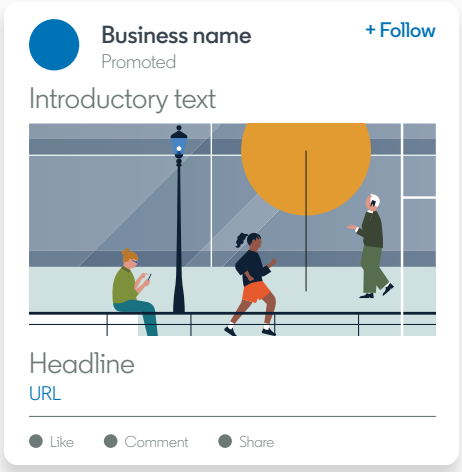


Based on our experience, it's worth making room in your SMB campaigns for all of the following ad formats – and then optimizing your budget around those that drive strongest engagement for your audiences:

Single Image Ads

The visual impact of Single Image Ads in the LinkedIn feed is a **powerful vehicle for emphasizing benefits that resonate with SMBs.**

This is the approach that we took to raising engagement with Online Job Ads as a quick and convenient hiring approach for businesses with fewer than 10 employees, generating a 5x increase in CTR.



Thought Leader Ads

Encouraging your existing SMB customers to share their experience of your solutions is a powerful strategy for establishing social proof among SMBs considering a purchase. Thought Leader Ads **enable peer-to-peer influence at scale, giving future customers a voice they can trust.**

Self-recorded, organic video is a particularly powerful format to combine with Thought Leader Ads and help humanize your customer stories for an SMB audience. View rates and Completion rates also provide valuable signals of interest to use in your retargeting strategy of interest to use in your retargeting strategy.

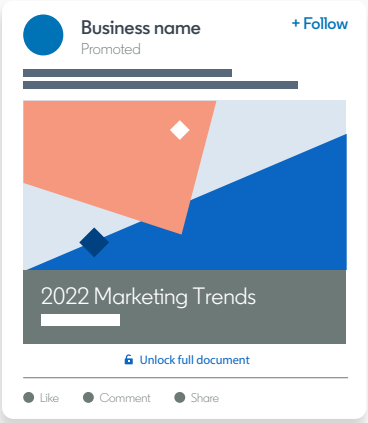
Video Ads across the LinkedIn feed, BrandLink and CTV Ads

SMBs' engagement with video ads in the LinkedIn feed is growing at a rapid rate, generating engagement and attention through video's capacity for relatable humor and empathy, and valued by a majority of SMB decision-makers as a format for engaging with information and discovering new suppliers.

Extending video ads to play within video content from recognized publishers, through through BrandLink, helps to establish all-important credibility and trust. Leveraging Connected TV Ads puts your brand in front of SMB professionals who spend less time at a desk.

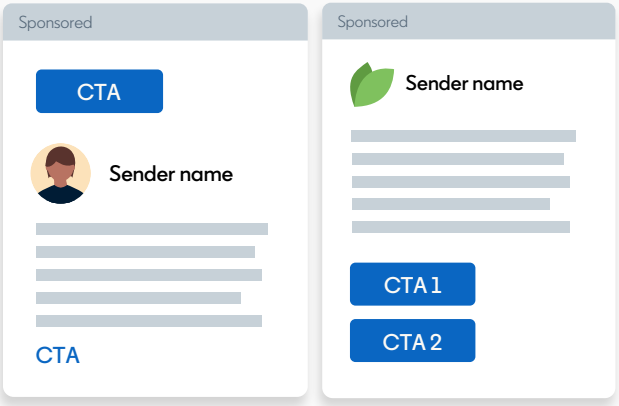
Document Ads

Document Ads are a highly versatile format that **can both build awareness and drive conversion through a single ad experience.** They excel as a means of capturing intent signals from SMB professionals, with the decision to click through the pages of a customer story, infographic or product sheet providing a powerful basis for retargeting. This format fits seamlessly with how SMB decision-makers engage on LinkedIn. They're actively looking for practical, self-serve content that helps them make smarter, faster business decisions. Document Ads are a flexible solution that supports the entire marketing funnel—from building brand awareness to driving conversions, especially when paired with Lead Gen Forms.



Conversation Ads

We've found great success retargeting SMB professionals who engage with awareness-driving ads through the Conversation Ad format. Because t**hey fit naturally within the LinkedIn messaging experience, SMB members treat Conversation Ads as an extension of their LinkedIn experience,** which often involves reaching out to their networks for advice on solutions and suppliers. You can enhance this by adding macros that integrate profile details like first or last name, company name, job title and industry into the body copy of the ads' messages. The multiple-choice format helps you to gauge interest quickly and follow up with more relevant content. This aligns with SMBs' instinct to gather information and make decisions quickly.



The LinkedIn View

"Native is the hottest trend that we're seeing in SMB marketing on LinkedIn at the moment. **Formats that don't look like advertising really, really resonate with people.** Thought Leader Ads that feature interviews with small business owners are a great use of the format. They feel very authentic, and they cut straight to the benefits that SMBs are interested in."



Allen Pang
Digital Marketing Strategist, LinkedIn

SECTION 3

Measurement and optimization

LinkedIn provides a powerful range of measurement tools that you can use to optimize your SMB campaigns through demographic insights, refine creative and targeting through A/B testing, and prove value and Return on Investment (ROI) by tracking engagement through to business outcomes and revenue.



Capturing and responding to intent signals

When it comes to marketing to SMBs, there are things that you can predict about your audience and, just as importantly, things that you can't.

LinkedIn data and insights helps to identify which needs businesses have at different stages of growth, and how your solutions will be relevant to them. What's much harder to predict is exactly who will be involved in making decisions about those solutions, and when they are ready to make those decisions.

One of the most important differences between SMBs and larger businesses is the role of general decision-makers. These are the owners, founders and managers who will have a say over all aspects of the business's spending, but only have time to focus on one thing at once.

Predicting exactly when a general SMB decision-maker is interested in your category is very difficult. This puts real value on using ad formats that can capture rich signals of intent, to help you focus in quickly on the most relevant SMB audiences. Because SMB audiences are highly engaged on LinkedIn, there are a wide range of engagement signals that you can use in this way.

In addition, you can use LinkedIn measurement solutions like the Conversions API (CAPI) and Insight Tag to track the actions that LinkedIn SMB members take on your website, capturing wider signals of intent that you can use to target campaigns.

Effective signals of SMB intent include:

- Watching more than 25% of relevant Thought Leader Video Ads sharing customer testimonials from other SMBs.
- Engaging with Conversation Ads that invite SMB professionals to express their priorities and what they're interested in.
- Clicking on Document Ads to find more details of a customer story or get further details about a product or solution.
- Clicking through to blog posts or web pages from Image or Video Ads in the LinkedIn feed.



The LinkedIn View

"One of the great things about Conversation Ads is the way you can gauge intent through the choose-your-own-adventure dynamic that they have.

You can start with a more general message and then drill down to figure out what the SMB is actually looking for, so that you can prescribe the right product or path for them. The understanding that you get on intent is then a great basis for retargeting that SMB through a format like Thought Leader Ads."



Adam Yinger
Group Manager Digital Marketing, LinkedIn

Enabling experimentation through A/B tests

As we've explained in this Playbook, there's great value in testing different targeting, messaging and creative approaches when marketing to SMBs – and optimizing around what works.

> **A/B testing is the key to this approach. It enables you to change one variable between two different versions of a campaign, and then see which version performs best against the most relevant metric for your objective.**

The variable could be your targeting approach, the ad format you're using, or the creative and messaging. The key is to change only one variable at once, so it's clear what's driving performance improvements.

Proving value and ROI

LinkedIn's Campaign Demographics and Campaign Reporting provide the granular insight that confirms you're engaging relevant SMBs in the right category and the right stage of growth. They also confirm when you're reaching the people within these businesses who are most likely to be driving buying decisions. Revenue Attribution Reports track exactly where this reach and engagement leads.

> **By synchronizing with your CRM and website conversions, revenue attribution reveals when engagement with your LinkedIn ads leads to sales – and the revenue that these deals generate for your business.**



CONCLUSION

Bringing it all together SMB Marketing on LinkedIn in **five steps**

Here's your quick, five-step guide to engaging SMBs effectively on the platform they trust to help grow their business:

#1

Start with strategy, **segmenting your SMB audience by industry and company size** and identifying the use cases, needs and priorities for each group.

#2

Feed this into your targeting strategy on LinkedIn, leveraging first-party data and LinkedIn targeting criteria to target each of your SMB Ideal Customer Profiles, and **testing different targeting approaches** to see which perform best.

#3

Tailor your creative and messaging to each SMB segment, focusing on their likely Jobs To Be Done, and framing your solutions in terms of immediate benefits.

#4

Focus on capturing signals of intent through formats like Conversation Ads, engagement with Document Ads and view time for Video Ads. Make sure you reserve a healthy slice of budget for retargeting based on these intent signals.

#5

Prioritize native ad formats, such as Thought Leader Ads, which align to SMBs organic experience of LinkedIn and their appetite to reaching out to fellow SMB owners for advice.

#6

Use LinkedIn's sophisticated measurement tools to **enable A/B testing,** refine your approach through demographic insight, and prove ROI through Revenue Attribution Reports.

Additional resources

Get more of the insight you need for planning an SMB strategy on LinkedIn:



Meet the SMB

Insights from our global survey of 4,287 SMB decision-makers.



The Growth Threshold – How SMBs Buy and what Marketers should Know

We explore the key tipping points in SMBs' journey when budgets and buying intent increase.



Meet the SMB: Big Ideas for Engaging Small and Medium Businesses

Our LinkedIn Live Event with practical advice from Chase, AT&T, Appnomix and LinkedIn's Economic Graph and B2B Institute teams.