

MARKETING SKILLS:

How To Learn Any Skill

In 11 Simple Steps

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Introduction

It was a turbulent plane ride from a frozen Fargo, North Dakota, to a sunny Santa Monica, California.

The question had been on my mind for a long time... something I wanted to ask my mentor sitting next to me who'd previously worked in marketing at Microsoft, Exact Target, and more.

"How did you learn *how to do* all of this?"

The flight took most of the day, which made it the perfect opportunity to ask. The guy always seemed to be two steps ahead with *everything* marketing.

His answer?

You need to do it to learn it.

Those eight simple words changed my life. Because marketing can be overwhelming, right? And I didn't need a daylong flight to learn that lesson.

Every marketing blog out there tells you there are *hundreds* of marketing skills you need to build in order to be successful...

- Write blog posts, design better graphics, manage social media, publish landing pages, host contests, record videos, reach out to influencers, build free tools, redesign your website, create e-books, pay to promote your stuff on social media, and don't forget to A/B test everything!
- Publish *all* of those things consistently to build a loyal audience!
- Use data from what you've done to improve the new stuff you publish!

...but what if you don't know how to do any of those things? Where do you even start learning a new marketing skill?

Let's remove the overwhelming nature of marketing.

You can learn any marketing skill you want. And while some of the how-to and step-by-step blog posts out there will help you learn the details—which *is* important—building your skill involves three simple steps:

1. Start.
2. Ship.
3. Commit.

This guide is dedicated to teaching you how to develop any skill you'd like, backed by psychology, science, and data. When you follow this advice, you'll implement new marketing strategies, tactics, and projects faster than ever before.

- Never published e-books on Amazon but would love to? This guide is for you.
- Never managed website redesign projects, but your business drastically needs them? This guide is for you.
- Never built email lists with thousands of subscribers, but always wanted to? This guide is for you.

Let's Define *Marketing Skills*: What This Guide *Is* And What This Guide *Isn't*

Let's define skill as *the ability to do something well with expertise*. In this guide:

- **You'll learn how to build the marketing skills *you* actually care about.**
- **You'll develop habits that will make taking on any new project possible, regardless of how much background you already know about it.**
- **You'll create frameworks to understand how you work currently to improve not just your marketing skills, but your overall self-development in your personal and professional life.**

So, this guide is dedicated to helping you learn how to do just about anything in marketing (and beyond) consistently while constantly improving.

How To Actually Acquire And Build Skills (For Marketing And Beyond)

There are three stages of skill acquisition found by Paul M. Fitts back in 1954:

1. **Cognitive skill:** Doing something well enough to produce at least a crude version of the desired behavior. This includes rehearsing—or repeating—the actions required to execute the skill.
2. **Associative skill:** Smoothing out the skill to find and remove errors from your execution.
3. **Autonomous skill:** Continuously and indefinitely improving, albeit gradually.

Later, researchers like John R. Anderson built upon Fitts' original concepts with noteworthy findings with stages of skill acquisition:

1. **Declarative stage:** Those learning do so through instruction and information. Then they use what they've learned to turn knowledge into action. This matches with cognitive skill.
2. **Knowledge compilation stage:** Practice and repetition of the skill turn into procedure. This stage is similar to associative skill.
3. **Procedural stage:** This includes further refining of skill knowledge and tuning the processes accordingly. The procedural stage aligns with autonomous skill.

To put it simply:

1. You acquire a new skill by learning how to do something, then doing it just good enough to produce the desired action. You need to do it a few times before anything sticks.
2. Once you know what you're doing—even if what you've done at first wasn't that great—you can easily repeat the process and remove errors as you hone your repetitive procedure.
3. You never stop improving your process if you're serious about building the skill you've acquired.

According to this definition, **skill acquisition and building are not one-time projects**. For example, you can't publish an e-book once and consider it a marketing skill.

How Learning A New Skill Really Works

John R. Anderson, *Acquisition of Cognitive Skill*
(visualization may not reflect views of researcher)



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Anderson begins one of his famous skills research studies with a bold statement:

It requires at least 100 hours of learning and practice to acquire any significant cognitive skill to a reasonable degree of proficiency.

For you as a marketer, this means **publishing content consistently is a terrific way to build proficient marketing skills.**

Whatever marketing skill you'd like to build—writing blog posts, sharing social media messages, designing graphics—**the key is doing these projects consistently to learn and refine your process.**

Luckily for you, consistency is also good for building your audience, as Joe Pulizzi and Robert Rose from Content Marketing Institute suggest:

“...excellent content, combined with a consistent publishing schedule, creates ‘anticipatory delight’ in your audience.”

How To Build Habits (For Marketing And Beyond)

If repetition and procedure improvement are necessary to acquire skills, then habits are an important part of skill development. After all, habits are repeated actions—*routines*—that people do nearly subconsciously.

Charles Duhigg is the author of *The Power of Habit*, a book that analyzes what seems like hundreds of studies to help readers understand how to use habits to change their lives.

Habits are made up of several parts:

1. **Cue:** The event that kicks off a process. It's a trigger that seems to automatically stimulate a certain behavior.
2. **Routine:** The behavior that follows a cue. This routine, Duhigg says, can be physical, mental, or emotional.
3. **Reward:** The good that comes from the behavior. The reward can also be physical, mental, or emotional—it is the felt outcome of the routine.
4. **Craving:** There needs to be a longing or desire—a craving for the reward—to continue building a real habit.
5. **Belief:** The faith that the system you're following will continue to work and fulfill the craving.

Like Fitts and Anderson discovered by researching skill acquisition, Duhigg's habit research suggests that **as you repeat your routine processes, your brain literally does less work**. That means the amount of effort to think through every detail fades while your productivity rises.

How Habits Actually Work

Charles Duhigg, The Power Of Habit



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Here's an example case study from Duhigg's book that explains how the concept works (through an example of rats navigating through mazes):

“As each rat learned how to navigate the maze, its mental activity decreased. As the route became more and more automatic, each rat started thinking less and less. It was as if the first few times a rat explored the maze, its brain had to work at full power to make sense of all the new information. But after a few days of running the same route, the rat didn't need to scratch the walls or smell the air anymore, and so the brain activity associated with scratching and smelling ceased.”

Sure, that was rats. But the same can be said for building skill (and thus, habits) for marketers: **The more you do something, the easier it becomes.** The easier the process becomes, the more productive you'll be.

But to do something easily, you need to start. So what's the best way to start a habit?

Write down your goal.

Duhigg's research found that people who write down their goals are more likely to be successful at maintaining their habits than those who don't write them out (through a case study of patients recovering after hip or knee replacement surgeries):

The patients who had written plans in their booklets had started walking almost twice as fast as the ones who had not. They had started getting in and out of their chairs, unassisted, almost three times as fast.

What if you could build marketing skills to reach your goals two or even three times faster than your competition?

Let's explore what this means for you as a marketer with the example that you want to build the *skill*—and subsequently, the *habit*—of writing a comprehensive blog post once a week:

1. **Write it down:** Literally write down your goal on a piece of paper, along with your plan to make it a reality to keep yourself accountable. You could write your goal on a Post-It note and hang it in your office, then use an editorial calendar to plan one blog post idea per week for the next several months.
2. **Cue:** It's Monday and you just arrived at the office.
3. **Routine:** You immediately check out your editorial calendar to see the topic you'll write about. You then open WordPress, create an outline, and start filling in the blanks with well-researched and actionable goodness.
4. **Reward:** You feel awesome because you've kept your promise to yourself to write a blog post once a week, and you did it!
5. **Craving:** You repeat that process next Monday because you love the feeling of sticking with your goal. Your written goal and editorial calendar keep you interested and engaged.
6. **Belief:** You maintain faith in yourself and that your process—writing down your goal, planning your blog post ideas once a week on an editorial calendar, and writing your content on Mondays—will help you consistently write one new blog post every week.

Build A Skill By Developing A Habit
This will help you learn any marketing skill you'd like.

- #1 Write it down
- #2 Cue
- #3 Routine
- #4 Reward
- #5 Craving
- #6 Belief

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In this example, the Monday blogging habit will help you build the skill of writing a

comprehensive blog post once a week. As you work through the first phase of skill acquisition, you'll hone your writing process to write quicker and easier than when you started.

The key word there, however, is that **you need to start**. Which leads me to...

1. How To Acknowledge The Resistance Of Status Quo To Start Meaningful Change

If you don't start, you don't change.

So if you don't start repeating a process, you can't build a new marketing skill.

That may sound obvious. But why, then, does it feel difficult to start something new, and what can you do to break through that feeling?

In 1947, psychologist Kurt Lewin developed a model that explains why people resist change called the force field analysis.

This psychological principle suggests that some forces are driving change while other forces resist change. This pressure leads to an equilibrium that leaves you in status quo.



To start building a new skill with strong habits, change requires five steps and a simple exercise to identify your next to-dos:

1. **Define the problem:** What undesirable thing do you need to modify now?
2. **Define the goal of the change:** What is your end-game result behind implementing this change?
3. **Define the driving forces of change:** What factors are supporting the change you'd like to make?
4. **Define the resisting forces of change:** What is preventing you from changing?

5. **Create the strategy to change:** How can you mitigate the restraining forces while empowering the driving forces of change?

This exercise reflects what senior lecturer of Ed Hill University, David Stonehouse, calls *planned change*:

“An intentional attempt to improve.”

That means to start learning a new marketing skill, **you need to *strategize to change what you are doing today***. Stonehouse also suggests that planned change is a:

“Cyclical process involving diagnosis, action and evaluation, and further action and evaluation.”

If you’ve been reading along, that last quote should come as no surprise... the definition is super similar to acquiring a new skill.

11 Steps To Start, Build Habits, And Acquire Skills For Marketing And Beyond

It's your choice—an active decision—to learn a marketing skill.

So based on everything you just learned, these are the steps that may work best for starting something new, building good habits to maintain that behavior, and develop your marketing skill well into the future (all backed by psychology):

1. **Spell out your problem:** What skill do you want to develop or what do you want to overcome?
2. **Determine your goal:** Why do you want to develop this skill?
3. **Explore the forces of change:** What will *help* you develop this skill?
4. **Brainstorm the forces of resistance:** What may *prevent* you from developing your skill?
5. **Define your strategy to start:** What can you do to acquire this skill with a simple cue, routine, and reward process?
6. **Write down your goal and strategy:** How can you *literally* write down your goal and strategy to reference whenever you need it most?
7. **Follow your strategy:** How can you stick to your strategy to build repetitive behaviors that will help you build your desired skill?
8. **Crave the results:** What feeling do you lust after as you finish the desired behavior?
9. **Believe that you will build the skill:** How do you *know* your strategy will work, even if you hit a snag?
10. **Hone your procedure:** How do you remove errors from your process?
11. **Never stop improving:** How do you continuously improve your skill?

Lessons Learned From A Guy Who Has Done This

Not long after that plane ride with my mentor, I decided to start a personal blog about how I'd run a marketing team if I were given the chance.

I'd never blogged before. It was intimidating.

But I wrote down the goal to publish one new blog post a month. And I committed to a strategy of writing on Saturday mornings over a steaming cup of coffee with a vinyl record on the player (Louis Armstrong and I became good friends).

After only a few months, the process became easier, and I actually started chatting with our Co-Founder at CoSchedule, Garrett Moon, who had found my personal blog. Shortly after that, CoSchedule gave me the chance to join them as the content marketing lead where I upped my publishing from once a month to twice a week.

Since I've joined CoSchedule, I've had the opportunity to start lots of things I'd never done before:

- Guest posts
- Twitter chats
- Webinars
- Content upgrades in every blog post
- Product landing pages
- Podcasts (coming soon!)
- Video series (check out the video at the beginning of this blog post; it's the first of its kind with many more to follow!)

...and a whole lot more.

Here is my best advice to someone looking to start building a new skill that could change their life, a lot like how blogging changed mine:

1. Start, Even If You Know Nothing

You're not going to know everything a mastermind would. And that's just fine.

The point is to not let that hold you back from learning. Define a minimum viable process—keep it simple—and start now.

2. Don't Wait

It's easy to say, "I'll do that tomorrow." But you said that yesterday.

If you're serious about building a skill, start as soon as you can because you'll have more opportunity to improve after you begin.

3. Make Time

You have about 1 bajillion other things on your to-do list. What of those things do you actually *want* to do? What of those things will help you grow personally, and for your business?

I'd be willing to bet big money that the new marketing skill you want to learn will help the business far more than some of the things on your current to-do list. Review, eliminate, and start something new now.



4. Fail And Improve

You're new to this, so mistakes and regressions will happen. Watch out for them, and treat them as lessons learned.

Hone your process afterward to make the mistake only once.

5. Ask For Help

Flying solo is great for productivity. Sometimes.

But there are others in your company, community, and niche who can help you develop your skill. Reach out.

6. Do One Thing Well

If you try to change everything you do at once, you're in for a world of trouble. Start one thing. Hone a consistent—and amazing—process. Repeat. Then think about acquiring your next skill.

And That's How You Can Learn Any New Marketing Skill

This is how I learn new skills. It's not fancy, but it works. I hope you crush it!



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