

30 Big Ideas, Trends and Predictions for 2012

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What's in store for small business in 2012? We asked small-business owners nationwide to tell us what trends and big ideas they think will take center stage next year. Here's what they had to say:

Gesture-recognition technology. Voice is only the first step, according to Microsoft. The company envisions an interactive landscape that involves touch and [gesture recognition](#) as well as voice input. In fact, Microsoft is also beginning to bake that functionality into products such as the Xbox Kinect, where the user's body functions as the onscreen controller. – **Ilya Bukshteyn, [Microsoft's Tellme](#)**

No boundaries. Forward-looking brands and retailers are creating a new, universal shopping environment for consumers, giving the green light for their customers to shop across all channels. You wanna buy online? No problem. In-store? Certainly! You wanna shop online while in the store? Of course! Buy it online and pick it up at the store? You can do that, too. This whole division of online shopping versus brick-and-mortar will slowly fade into memory. – **Mark Grondin, [Shopatron.com](#)**

Cyberinsurance. We started to realize: When it comes to data breaches, small businesses are as exposed and, at times, even more exposed than large businesses. – **Matt Cullina, [IDT 911](#)**

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Proximity-based social networks.Talking to strangers will become a big trend in 2012. Proximity-based social networks will allow you to identify like-minded individuals who are near you. As you ride a bus or attend a seminar, your smart phone will identify individuals nearby you should probably know. Our smart devices will thus evolve to become a way to meet new people in realtime, taking networking, hiring, marketing, dating and other human-to-human interactions out of the Stone Age and into a new and much-more-efficient era. – **Ken Gaebler, Walker Sands Communications**

Public/private partnerships.2012 will see the strengthening of a decades-long move away from government providing basic services, in favor of private or nonprofit entities. Government has spent its [funds](#) so badly, at all levels, that it has to shed some of its load, and the private entities provide those services better and price them more wisely. – **Dan Biederman, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures**

Business rollups. Look for an uptick in companies that acquire small- to mid-size businesses and consolidate them into larger entities. Baby-Boomer business owners that want to exit their companies will have few other viable options than to sell out to rollup firms. That's because one-off acquisition financing will remain scarce and because there are not enough Gen X or Gen Y business buyers to consume the fast-growing supply of Baby-Boomer businesses for sale. Moreover, valuation multiples, the numbers used to determine how much a business is worth, are generally higher for larger firms. As such, simply by merging into a larger firm, a business owner can increase the valuation of his or her life's work, possibly allowing the business owner to exit a business that might otherwise be unsellable or sold for a less-than-optimal price. – **Mike Handelsman, Bizbuysell, Bizquest**

Strategic technology consulting will be an innovative service offering that gains traction in 2012. As more and more organizations start grappling with cloud computing models, technology scatter, virtualization, managing remote workers and branch offices, etc., the necessity for a company to come in and assess the current network environment and make recommendations for technological improvements that can provide significant business advantages will become apparent. – **Heinan Landa, Optimal Networks**

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Local and mobile search is a trend gaining lots of traction in both the organic and paid search-optimization and digital-marketing worlds. Statistics show that consumers prefer to shop locally within 10 to 20 miles of their home or workplace, and 45 percent do not have a particular business in mind when searching. Many of these searches are conducted with some sort of smartphone. It is imperative that businesses understand the dynamics of local and mobile search to capitalize on these growing consumer trends and habits. – **JoAnna Dettmann, tSunela**

Social media for hiring. More than 80 percent of surveyed HR professionals said they are using social networks to help them recruit candidates. Specifically, 79 percent search [LinkedIn](#), 65 percent have a company page on LinkedIn, and 63 percent have a dedicated Facebook page established for jobs and careers. – **Anne Berkowitch, SelectMinds**

Outsourcing IT functions.There is compelling evidence that managed services, even when implemented on a small scale, can deliver significant cost savings, freeing up cash for other businessneeds. More importantly, these savings are accomplished without impacting the availability and reliability of the technology solutions the company relies on to conduct business. – **Carolyn April, CompTIA**

Personalized business software. The last generation of business software was meant to optimize your back office, make accounting easier and keep up with tax rules. The new generation of business software is going to focus on creating value for your business, connect your customers and suppliers in a network and make it easier for you, not your accountant, to do business. – **Christian Lanng, [Tradeshift](#)**

Increased franchising. The franchise industry, which has been going strong, will see a big uptick in franchises with very low overhead costs and low start-up costs. For example, fitness boot camps require basically no overhead, as there is no facility to pay for. With successful franchises having a proven business model, many looking to start their own business see franchises as offering more of a guarantee than starting their own business from scratch. There are many franchises that can be started for less than \$10,000 and I think we will see a lot more of those springing up in 2012. – **Dan Martin, [IFX](#)**

Reputation reviews for business services and software will become the driver for accelerating adoption, especially for the business buyer. The fact is that business owners are using more online services to grow website traffic, members and sales. A lot more of these growth services will be purchased online via the B-2-B group-buying sites when the reputation of the site and its suppliers shine through. –**Van Jepson, [GroupPrice](#)**

The deals space will continue to expand in the next year. While we have started to see some consolidation in the industry, we're now seeing growth and expansion through specialization, and offerings in other verticals. – **Tom Aley, [RapidBuyr](#)**

With more than 50-million smartphones in the United States and the tablet market really taking off, companies will find it more effective and efficient to do more with less. **Mobile learning** is just beginning to grow, and companies will find that these mobile devices and tablets will allow them to help their employee learn, no matter the location or the time. – **Chad Udell, [Float](#)**

The **expense management of mobile applications**, cloud computing and SaaS subscriptions (salesforce, LinkedIn, etc.) are three areas that we feel will significantly challenge many organizations in 2012. – **Kurt Brown, [Quickcomm](#)**

Companies [investing](#) in "**bolt-on**" **acquisitions** to their current company. These bolt-on acquisitions are typically new business niches or companies that would provide added strength to the core business. However, if the small bet does not end up working as intended, it would have a low risk of polluting the core company. Entrepreneurs who have mastered this small-bet approach often prototype their small bets, letting their mentors and customers give them feedback on how to morph and design the final bolt-on concept. – **Dennis Stearns, [Stearns Financial Services Group](#)**

This year was all about the power of group purchasing, in which consumers band together to receive better deals from retailers. For 2012, we'll see this concept evolve from the opposite direction: **group incentivization**, with retailers, developers, and merchants banding together to offer a singular, more rewarding incentive for engagement. And just as Groupon defined a new vertical, companies that incentivize, like Swagbucks.com, can do the same. – **Eron Zehavi, [Swagbucks](#)**

Firms in industry after industry will see the competitive landscape shift **as Chinese companies become a force in global markets**. These firms will first be seen in emerging markets in Asia, Latin America and Africa, but shortly thereafter will begin to compete in the developed-country markets of North America and Europe. A common characteristic of these new competitors from China is their ability to offer "almost-as-good products at a very attractive price point," reflecting their fast-follower and fast-learner competencies.– **George F. Brown, Jr., David G. Hartman, [Blue Canyon Partners, Inc.](#)**

The focus of marketers in 2012, as involves social media, is going to be on **understanding chatter**(those billions of data points being created by people every day as they interact online, with each other and with a multitude of websites and social networks), and understanding how chatter can be used to improve customer relationships and drive sales. – **Neil Rosen, [eWay Direct](#)**

More ad measurement. Measuring the success of advertising and marketing campaigns has historically been a challenge for marketers, most notably with print campaigns. With social media emerging as an appealing channel for many brands today, marketers are likewise faced with similar challenges in regards to tracking campaign success. In 2012 you'll see more marketers tracking the ROI of campaigns like these through call tracking. – **Irv Shapiro, [Ifbyphone](#)**

Websites being more accessible on televisions and the ability for users to be able to **navigate the Web using voice command**. It is rumored that Apple is coming out with a television and the interface might be more streamlined for your living room. Additionally, accepting and processing payments on your smartphones will be a growing trend in 2012. – **Kevin McNally, [Interactive Palette](#)**

Consumer products and technologies will start to make their way into businesses. Tools and technologies that started as consumer products or look like consumer interfaces will become more popular, as the adoption rates increase when employees need less training to use the tools. This will also provide businesses with a competitive advantage for bringing in and retaining younger talent. 2012 will be the year of consumerization and consumer-friendly business applications. – **Rob Bernshteyn, [Coupa](#)**

Innovative workspace services. 2012 will mark an inflection point in the consumerization of real estate. Tools that put power directly in the hands of individuals will give them the autonomy to choose a workspace that optimizes their productivity by the hour, day, or month while increasing flexibility and reducing risk and overall cost for their companies. Workspace-as-a-service is the concept of providing a variety of workspaces on a subscription basis by the hour, day or month in facilities like business centers and co-working centers. – **John Jordan, President, [Global Workspace Association](#)**

With employees increasingly moving toward using three to four different devices to do their jobs, the term "endpoint" is becoming more complex. The new endpoint, the user (versus the old endpoint, the device), will require more **friction-free mobile-device management** strategies as environments become more distributed. To provide the flexibility needed for employees to maintain productivity, IT will need to operate with more transparency, without losing control over the environment. – **Steve Workman, [LANDesk Software](#)**

There will be a rise in the building of **customized enterprise application stores**. Smartphones and tablets have little value without applications and the increased use of these devices creates demand for more applications that IT groups need to manage. An application store makes that process easier. – **Dan Croft, [Mission Critical Wireless](#)**

The **disintegration of "channels."** Shoppers, especially those under 35, don't think in terms of channels. Consumers are beginning to expect the same story, assortment, and prices no matter how they are consuming content. Their brand and transactional experiences blur across channels. We can see evidence of the disintegration on our news shows, as they now frequently pull from social media channels and evaluate the trending topics. Even retailers such as Walmart are using Facebook as their primary localization tactic for in-store promos. Brands and retailers that align their organization and budgets around brand, editorial and product content, not individual channels, will gain market share in the very near future. – **Jeremy Gustafson, [KSC Kreate](#)**

Cloud-based documents and information resources. After decades of being a resource primarily accessible to the wealthy and/or those with serious problems, specialized advice and situational training will go mainstream through a combination of on-demand experts, social graphing and mobile devices. Think of it as OnStar for your personal and professional life. – **Jason Nazar, [DocStoc](#)**

2012 begins the year of the **"Digital Coupon Book."** Discount directories empower the consumer by allowing them to search for interesting deals, transforming passive discount recipients into active couponers. Digital "coupon books" will dominate within the next two years, offering small businesses an engaged, active audience and another way to leverage their existing consumer relationships with hyper-local offers. – **Jerry Nettuno, [Schedulicity](#)**

By the end of 2012, making a website will not be something you pay thousands of dollars for, it will be something you create and maintain yourself. As a result, **the small businesses that do not currently have a website will be able to get online**. Those businesses that do have websites will be able to develop something modern that attracts clients, works with search engines, and helps build their business. - David Rusenko, co-founder and CEO of Weebly.com