

## **Marketing Basics: Attracting Customers**

Launching a successful company involves more than hanging out a shingle. And, while you probably don't need a huge marketing budget or slick ads like the major corporations – who are rarely your true competitors – you WILL need basic marketing programs to inform potential customers: (1) that you exist; and (2) why they should buy *your* services or products. Here are some key steps to help you do just that.

### **Leverage your *value proposition***

Designing a marketing plan around your unique value – one directed at solving a problem or providing value to your “ideal” customers – is the first step in growing (and better understanding) your business. Please note: the *value proposition* should be documented, forcing you to think about your business and customers in a systematic and disciplined manner.

Define your business in terms of pricing – high or low; fixed or negotiable – and also in terms of marketing to customers: word-of-mouth vs. advertising; Web, print or both.

A basic marketing plan includes:

- Things that make your business better than your competitors'.
- How you'll get customers to notice what you have to offer.
- An estimate of your sales volume and expenses.

But it's that first bullet – clearly explaining why customers should buy from you, not the competition – that should be your primary focus. The goal here is to

develop a clear and powerful message that you can deliver again and again in a minimum amount of time. Think of this as your 30-second or one-minute *elevator speech*. The term derives from a thought experiment like this: You're in an elevator, and the woman next to you introduces herself and asks, "What do you do for a living?" You want to be able to answer that question clearly, concisely and consistently. Once you figure this out, the rest of your marketing plan will be easier to complete. It will become an extension of that short and straightforward elevator speech.

### **Getting people in the door takes advertising—and more**

Once you have your value proposition, you'll want think about spreading the word to prospective customers, about advertising and getting the maximum results for your efforts and money.

Consider (again) who your customers are, and determine what they read and how they spend their time. Do they read newspapers, or spend more time on the Internet? Do they belong to your local church, visit the corner coffee shop, or spend their free-time at the local pub? Conduct enough research to ensure you're getting the most return for your investment. If you simply can't settle on the best ways to advertise and market, seek out help. There's a tremendous amount of free advice on the Web and at your local library.

Because word-of-mouth is the most powerful form of marketing, keep your customers happy, and ask for referrals to earn *more* happy customers. There's nothing wrong with asking satisfied customers to mention your products and services to their friends. Most will be happy to do so.

And if you have a website or brochure, ask several customers if you can include short testimonials from them that sing your praises. If these customers are frequently pressed for time, write a few sentences yourself on behalf of each person, and then submit the copy to each person for approval. In most every instance, your customers will quickly “OK” the testimonials you’ve written, and some will even rewrite the testimonials to make them more flattering.

### **Write a (free) press release**

Your first press release should be a simple announcement that you've launched a business in a certain location to sell particular products and/or services. If you're unsure whom to send it to, call the business editor of your local newspaper: he or she will offer advice on submitting the release, as well as a few editorial guidelines regarding length and format. If your business is in an industry that has its own specialized trade magazines, get in touch with those publications, and follow the same process.

While press coverage isn't guaranteed to drive customers to your doorstep, getting mentioned by a newspaper or magazine will, at minimum, convey a certain credibility to your business – a “stamp of approval” that comes only with third-party recognition (which often implies *endorsement* in the minds of readers).

### **Prepare an information packet**

Determine what you want people to know about your business, and create a standard information packet that can be mailed in the length of time it takes to insert the materials into and address an envelop. A one-, two- or four-page brochure can be expensive, but it's required for most businesses. Your local Kinko's or printer may help you create a simple and effective brochure.

A good brochure is straightforward, and explains the *benefits* you offer your customers. It does NOT go into exhausting detail about you, your background or the products or services you provide, unless those are unique and define your value proposition. *Always stress benefits over features!* If you've ever talked to a computer salesman, chances are he or she droned on about gigabytes, processing speeds and peripherals. Meanwhile, your eyes glazed over, because you just wanted to know which machine was most *beneficial* for your personal or business use.

### **Create a website – online marketing**

The next five to ten years will be a period of transformation in the marketing industry. As consumers continue to embrace the Web – the ultimate direct-to-consumer meta-medium – it will become almost impossible to attract the best customers without a website.

The Web is where many, if not most, customers search for products and services today, and that trend is accelerating. As a business owner, you should assume that anyone who seizes the initiative to search for information on products or services is ready to move quickly toward a purchase. Over half of marketing executives polled in a recent WebTrends CMO Web-Smart Report indicated that the Web will be the hub of their marketing strategies. The bottom line: You *must* have a website.

If your target audience is businesses, not individuals, state that upfront in your Web and brochure copy. If you're driving online sales, you might mention that a credit card is required. And, if you eliminate words in your copy that stimulate high visitor volumes but attract the *wrong kind of visitors*, you'll see a decrease in costs relative to sales.

Consider a sub-navigation that lets visitors self-identify. “I am an investor, first time visitor, returning customer,” etc. You can use that knowledge, and a little technology, to create individualized pages and “site-tours” so that people visiting your website can enjoy a semi-personalized experience.

Remember: Having a Web site doesn't mean people will visit you, so educate yourself by talking to your hosting company or hiring a marketing/Internet consultant to help design your site, so it can easily be found on the major search engines. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is one of the fastest growing fields in marketing.

### **Keep marketing**

One of the exciting things about running a business is developing scores of satisfied and happy customers who will return repeatedly because they find value in what you offer. Be sure to stay in touch with these customers! Send them (direct) mail and emails keeping them apprised of special offers and new offerings. And never forget the adage: Old customers are the best source of new business.