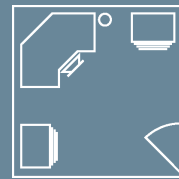


beyond the office



Marketing for Small Businesses

Contributed by Joanne Myszkowski

For many small businesses, marketing is scary. Some business owners dabble in it, while others avoid it altogether. Or worse....they buy into some marketing concept just because a slick sales person told them that it's the latest marketing trend. But don't be afraid.

Marketing is not brain surgery. It is not rocket science. But it is a science that can be manageable and is necessary in order to grow your business.

Know Your Competition

The only way that you can make your business stand out and have customers take notice is to differentiate your business from your competitors. This is **the most crucial base** for any marketing that you decide to do. Without knowing who your competition is and what their strengths and weaknesses are (yes, they do have strengths), any money you spend on marketing is a waste.

List two or three of your competitors. If you don't know who they are, do some simple homework. Go to a trade show. Read trade, business and consumer publications. And ask your best customers why they chose your company over your competition.

Set a Budget

Next to meeting payroll, your marketing dollars are the most important expenditures that your company will make. Too many companies make the mistake that if sales slow down and revenue is falling, the first thing to get cut is the marketing. If you follow that pattern, how can you grow your business? Set a budget and stick with it.

A few guidelines for how much to spend:

- The first year to three years that your business is in operation: 12%-15% of (projected) gross revenue
- Three to five years: 8%-12%
- After five years: 7%-8%

Establish a Consistent Image

Your company name and logo should be on every piece of paper that goes out of your office: letterhead, envelopes, fax cover sheets, invoices, statements, etc. The same holds true for electronic imagery. Your name and logo should be on every page of your web site.

Your name and logo is the foundation of how your company portrays itself. If you do not have a logo, hire a graphic designer to create one that reflects the products and personality of your company. A graphic designer can also set up the design for your

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letterhead, too. If you cannot afford a graphic designer, there are many software packages that you can use to create your own. The most important thing to remember is that once you create your logo, maintain consistent usage of it. Don't alter the colors or fonts every time you create a new document. Your logo should remain the same all the time.

Keep Your Existing Customers Happy

It costs much, much more to lure a new customer into your business than it does to keep an existing customer coming back for more business. If your customers are happy, not only will they keep coming back, they will most likely refer other people to your business.

Don't be afraid to spend a good chunk of your budget on Customer Appreciation initiatives but make sure that the gift is memorable and is easily associated with your company. A coffee mug with your logo on it is not memorable unless you happen to be a coffee bean company, and even then, I would send a monthly gift of fresh coffee beans to keep your company in the forefront of their minds.

Create Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

Partnering with other businesses can exponentially grow your own business, but **only** if the partnership makes sense to your customers. Here are a couple of examples to start some brainstorming:

- Financial Advisor partnering with a Realty Company
- A Gourmet Food Store partnering with a Personal Chef
- Graphic Designer partnering with a Copywriter
- Home Cleaning Service partnering with a Landscape Service

A partnership may be as simple as a reciprocal link on your websites, or as creative as promoting each others' products/services in *all* your marketing endeavors. The important aspect to remember is that the relationship be mutually beneficial between the businesses as well as seen as a true value by the customers of both businesses.

Choose Your Marketing Wisely

If your company gets 80% of its business through personal referrals, it is a complete waste of money to spend 30% (or more) of your budget advertising in the Yellow Pages. The sales people from the Yellow Pages will tell you otherwise.

If the majority of your business comes from personal referrals, focus your attention on all your existing customers. They are ambassadors for your company, which is almost like "free" advertising. In addition to any Customer Appreciation programs that you set up, consider setting up a Customer Referral Award that is meaningful to your customers, and reflects not only the cost of your product or service, but also your true appreciation for their referred business. If a customer referred new business to you worth \$10,000, a \$10 gift certificate to the local donut shop will be insulting. This is where your partnerships can really make a significant and memorable impact.

The bottom line is that advertising sales reps can tell you that they get a billion hits on their web site, their publication is read by a 100 million readers, their radio station has 10 million listeners.....if your potential customers aren't the majority of those 'amazing numbers', then you are paying to market to people that don't care about

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you and your company, and most likely never buy your product or service.

Marketing does not have to be intimidating. As a matter of fact, it can actually be fun if you allow yourself to be creative. Brainstorm with colleagues. Throw some ideas around with friends. And if you still are uncomfortable, enlist the help of marketing professionals who can not only guide you through the process, but also take on the projects altogether so that you can keep your focus on running and growing your business successfully.

About the Author

Joanne Myszkowski is a Marketing Consultant who has helped businesses grow through creative and cost-effective marketing endeavors for more than 20 years. She has worked with companies in New England as well as throughout the United States, including Business-to-Business, Consumer, and Trade industries. Joanne can be reached by phone at 863-529-5291 or by email at joannemysz@cox.net.