

Marketing Your Business

Marketing is a complex process of bringing your business to the attention of the right clients. It's often difficult to link marketing activities to results and that drives business people crazy.

The reality is that small business owners often fill the role of the marketing department and the sales department. Because one leads into the other, and because sales are results, marketing can become an on-and-off effort.

Here's the usual scenario.

You are in charge of generating business. You have to call a potential client and introduce your business. Then the potential client makes an appointment.

When you make the call to the potential client you are the **MARKETING** department. When that potential client calls you back to book a time to meet, you are the **SALES** department.

Marketing activities are also widely varied and there are hot trends you need to understand. For the small business owner, that can be confusing and an exercise in wasted effort of applying the wrong marketing strategy to your business.

The Ground Work

Find your ideal client

Before you choose a marketing strategy, you need to identify your ideal client. The reason you need to do this is that your marketing time and money is best spent where your clients hangout rather than where they don't.

The ideal client can be found by following these steps:

Conduct interviews with your clients. You can conduct the interview yourself, or you could delegate this to someone else. Just be sure that the interview is done in-depth.

- Select 5-10 clients and set up phone interviews
- Dig into the answers so you get usable information
- Ask for examples of service experiences
- Ask for details of 'good service' or 'bad service' statements
- Ask about behaviours
- Ask what publications they read
- What associations or organizations they belong to
- What trade shows/conferences/community events they attend
- And what is their preferred marketing approach

By knowing their behaviours, you will know where to find more clients that fit the same profile.

When you do the interviews you'll discover a lot of valuable information including pitfalls about your competitors. For instance someone might say, "you are the only ones that really deliver on time, everyone else is always late."

Now you know what your ideal client values about you, you can look for ways to attract more of these clients.

Develop your message

By writing down the possible needs of your clients and identifying how the needs present themselves to the clients, you can decide how to address those needs and how you already take care of them.

Let's say for example that you create a medication for people who are allergic to perfume. If you go ahead and advertise perfume allergy medication many people won't know that this affects them.

If, instead, you focus on the presenting symptom, you need to know what the effects of a perfume allergy has on sufferers. So your question becomes, 'Do your eyes itch when you are standing next to someone wearing cologne?' Now, people will understand how your medicine will help them.

By getting their attention, you are able to engage them and take them to the next level and they'll more likely become customers.

The main marketing strategies

Marketing strategies for small business fall into two main categories; organic and prescribed. Organic marketing refers to activities that will cost you little or no money but take a lot of your time. Prescribed marketing refers to activities that will cost you money and only some of your time.

Choosing a strategy for your business will be a combination of where you find your ideal client, your ability to undertake the organic strategies, and the availability of a marketing budget.

The low hanging fruit

Repeat business is the easiest strategy and one that is often overlooked. It is cheaper for businesses to retain current clients than to attract new ones. So taking care of the clients you have is an investment worth making. Don't make the mistake of saying, they are already clients, we don't need to spend money on them.

The strategies that you can use to keep their loyalty are as simple as sending Christmas cards to let them know that you appreciate their business, creating discount coupons to

thank them for their continued support, inviting them to a client appreciation party and offering exclusive ongoing promotions.

Generating or asking for referrals is another easy strategy that busy entrepreneurs don't tap into often enough. The best time to ask current clients to refer you to their friends or colleagues is while you are working on a project with them. This is the point when they are most engaged with you and it is the most likely time that they will refer you.

Even if you have finished doing business with a client, it is acceptable to follow up at any time with an email to remind them to keep you in mind for future projects and let them know that you appreciate referrals.

The Organic Strategies

Networking is an easy strategy for everyone, although introverted personalities find this very challenging. For many businesses, this is the best way to get out and connect with communities that can help them grow their companies.

It is important to attend networking events where your clients might be hanging out rather than where your peers might be gathering.

- If you are an introvert, bring a friend or an employee along to the event to be able to push yourself out of your comfort zone.
- Set some goals and choose an event with a small group so that you can work on your confidence.

For small businesses, there are many networking groups available through Meetup, associations, events, and referral groups.

Joining associations may prove to be lucrative as a long-term strategy. Look for associations where you can find and meet potential clients that are open to visitors. Meet the members and find out their interests in order to assess if there could be a public speaking opportunity at one of their events. Your goals for this strategy will be to create long-term relationships to add to your referral network.

Public speaking is one of the least used and most effective ways to attract new clients or customers to your business. To find opportunities, you need to contact the event coordinator of each association, chamber of commerce, and business event in town and ask 3 questions.

1. Are they looking for speakers?
2. What their members would find interesting?
3. How do you get onto the calendar?

Trade shows and conferences are opportunities for some businesses. To be successful, you need to have a plan about how you are going to engage with tradeshow attendees. If you are the only person in the booth: always stand, smile and look engaged. Never sit or text or look bored.

Prepare a couple of conversation starters that are non-threatening to warm people up and get them to ask questions. Ask open-ended questions: How is the show going for you? What was the most interesting thing that you've seen here today?

Once you have their undivided attention, you can ask if they have heard about your company and the great benefits of your product.

Writing articles, blogs, and books is a dual purpose activity. If you are presenting yourself as an expert, articles and books are a great way to support that claim. And if you are conducting online marketing, writing articles and blogs will provide you with content that people can find and read.

When it comes to writing articles, having one published in a newspaper or magazine is an ideal way to build social proof quickly. The advantage of having an article that has been published is that it immediately becomes your top marketing piece and it can be more impressive than a good testimonial.

The Prescribed Strategies

Public relations can be organic, but often is about hiring a PR specialist to get the word out.

If you have an event to talk about that would be of interest to a specific audience, this is the time to prepare a news release and send it out to as many newspapers as you can.

It helps to follow the work of a newspaper columnist or a reporter to get a good understanding of the kinds of stories that they write about. Nowadays, you can tweet ideas directly to them and, if they like your story, you will get a response right away.

Direct mail is still a great way to contact new customers. You can do this as physical mailings or email. Response rates for Direct Mail have held steady over the past four years. Letter-sized envelopes, for instance, had a response rate of 3.42% from a list of addresses gathered by your business. And 1.38 percent from a list of addresses you may have bought.

For this strategy to be worth your while, make sure that the 3% response rate covers the cost of your campaign and yields profits. Before you embark on this type of investment, test your message. Make sure that you get the response you'd expect from a few people or a few groups of people. Never assume that people care, make sure you know they do.

Advertising in publications or directories is a way to get your company in front of people with a common need. The best way to evaluate these opportunities is to call other

advertisers. Look for the other people that have placed ads and find out what success they've had from their ads. This will quickly tell you if this strategy is for you.

Remember, if your business is relationship based, ads are not likely to work for you. You will need to focus on relationship-based strategies.

Special promotions or coupons are a popular way to attract lots of new customers in a very short amount of time. One very popular channel for this is Groupon or other electronic coupons promotion. This is a great option when you have a service that can be sold multiple times, or you have a loss leader product.

Online Strategies

The latest marketing strategies are online and social media marketing. These strategies get a lot of attention, but they aren't for everyone. For the most part, these are organic strategies because you can get a website done cheaply, and there's little cost but time for social media.

Websites

What we know about the internet is that there are millions of websites out there and that every new site starts at the back of the line.

Search Engine Optimization is the key to a successful business generating website. There are other search engines, but Google is currently the big fish in the pond. Google organizes its results from a search that has to do with ranking. Every page is ranked according to keywords. Keywords are the equivalent of every search word, term or phrase that people will search.

Google will rank how relevant the content is in supporting the keyword and the number of links on the page. If those links are coming to your site from another website, Google assess how high the profile of other site is and how much time your website has been live.

What this means is that the ranking for each page of your site is different. It also means that it takes time to establish a presence online. Although you can pay for specialists to work on your SEO and help your ranking, it takes a lot of time to rank with popular keywords. Getting into the first page of Google can be a challenge unless you have a niche market that has not being tapped by many people yet.

Social Media

Social media can be a great way to build a following for your business. The most important thing to remember is that it is called social media for a reason. Think of it as a party. Would you want to be next to the person who just keeps promoting their business at a party? No, and that's the trick to social media marketing. Be social and then market a little.

You can see that this is organic marketing, and it can be a big time commitment.

In order to create a successful social media strategy, you need to outline the goals for each social media platform.

For both Facebook and Twitter, the first step is to build an audience of fans and followers. It is important that you migrate your traffic from Facebook or Twitter to your site in order to make a sale. Circulating coupons to your fans is one way to do that, be careful you keep track of your budget so you are always in control of your cost to acquire customers.

Facebook is a place to build an audience. To be able to promote a post, or advertise, you need to build a specific number of fans, aka likes.

If there is an opportunity to create a community amongst your clients who share a common interest, then the social media environment will help support your goal of keeping in touch with customers. For example if you have a bike shop, there is a big opportunity for your customers to want to share stories, equipment notes, good bike trails, and other interests. This will organically attract people who may be new customers.

Twitter is different from Facebook and could be used very effectively to communicate the special of the day. This strategy is ideal for short cycle, quick sales businesses.

Remember that in addition to promotions, you will also have to provide value to maintain your presence to your followers so before you make a big time investment on creating all this content, outline your goals and estimate what effort it will take you to achieve them.

Advertising online

Another way to promote your website is through pay-per-click advertising on Google, Bing, or banner ads.

Remember when you are online, you are not promoting your business, you are simply driving traffic to your website and once people get to your site you still have to convert them, meaning they still have to call you or buy from your site.

Advertising on Google or Bing, whether it is on a banner, on the side columns or at the top of the page, is costly. The keywords that are in highest demand are the most expensive. Prices range between \$4 and \$8 per click.

The good news is that if you limit your budget and stay highly targeted, you will be able to quickly find something that works for you, or equally fast you'll see if this is not an option that will get you large profits.

Overall banner ads have dropped in effectiveness, and prices have lowered but there are many other online strategies that may have the potential of building a better following and a lasting network than this one.