

Five easy and inexpensive ways to market your business and endear your customers

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Too often in today's business environment, marketing activities are the first expense to be cut from a company's budget. If you don't promote your business, it may become very difficult to grow or even maintain it. Without consistent promotion, how will new prospects hear or learn about your offer? Marketing is more than just added 'fluff' or a 'nice to have' bonus - it can greatly contribute to your profits and bottom line. Yes, marketing your small business can be a tricky proposition, particularly when you're working with a limited budget. Don't get intimidated! Try thinking small to start.

Traditional mass media advertising, for example, is not always your best option. It can be expensive and might not effectively target your audience to provide you with the best return on investment (ROI). Try tying your marketing efforts into other existing business costs, and you'll need fewer marketing pounds than you think. It's such a relief to realise that you don't need the marketing budget of a huge corporation to effectively promote your business. Consider these five simple tactics that may help get you on the fast track to growth and profits.

1. The Open House

We'd all like to have more customers walk through our doors. It's your best chance to develop a relationship, as well as do some one-on-one selling and put your products in their hands. So why not hold an open house? With the customer coming to you, this saves significant costs. There's no travel expense...and the 'event venue' is already accounted for! Most businesses hold an event like this for grand openings or after a major remodeling project. But why wait? Hold an open house any time of the year and promote it as a 'Customer Appreciation' event. Save on postage and printing and send electronic invitations to, say, 200 of your best customers. Set up some in-store specials that only those select customers can take advantage of by bringing the invitation to the open house. Then,

give them an incentive by offering a discount on any order they place during the event if they bring a friend. Offer the new customer a special discount as well.

If you want to open the event to the general public and draw in new interest, place additional event flyers around town in local shop windows. If your store is located next to several other businesses, such as in a strip mall, see if they want to join in on the fun and have one big open house. Another great advantage to this is that all the businesses can share in the cost of promoting the event. You could also approach the Small Business Association in your local area. They might be willing to list your event for free in their communications.

2. Use your business cards to your advantage

Business cards are cheap, easy to reprint and fit just about anywhere. Many people only hand out business cards at trade shows or when someone asks for one...what if you put them to use in more creative ways?

For example, have you ever included your business card in the envelope when you pay a bill? Let's say you sell trophies. Slip a business card in the envelope with your next bill payment and write '15% off your next order,' on it. Maybe the person who opens the bill won't need it, but they may pass it on to the Human Resources manager or someone in the office who is coaching his son's football team, for example. Consider how many potential customers may need your product or service, but aren't aware of your business - this is why marketing is so helpful. At the very least, it will get noticed and it costs next to nothing in upfront promotion. An added benefit is that by writing the discount on the card, you can actually track its effectiveness by seeing how many people redeem the cards. Again, it's cheap, it's easy, you're already paying for the postage to send the bill and you have business cards on hand.

Engage. Interact. Share.



Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn - social media is an excellent way of reaching your target audience

3. Practice some co-marketing strategies

Have you ever thought about a co-marketing strategy? There's strength in numbers. Ask a variety of privately owned businesses in your area if you could use a small section of shelf, counter or wall space in their shop, office or showroom, in exchange for a small section of space in yours. What's the harm in asking? It benefits you, it benefits them...and without direct competition, it's non-threatening. This provides you with the opportunity to market your products and services within a completely different business that may somehow be indirectly related to your own. For example, maybe you own a trophy shop that sells a lot of football trophies. What if you asked a local pub to allow you to set up a trophy display or post some flyers? Many sports fans are likely to leave next week's football game or tennis match and file into the pub for a drink and some food. It's also likely that many of the customers visiting the pub enjoy watching, playing or coaching football...which could drum up some more business. If nothing else, most pubs are bound to have a lot of business and all kinds of different customers day in and day out - that's an advantage in itself.

Co-marketing tactics can be even more effective if you know the owner or an employee. Developing close, trusted relationships with other businesses and professionals in your area is always a good thing. Those relationships could be of a huge benefit to you when you least expect it. Think about who you know...and maybe start there?

4. Take advantage of online social media websites

If you have not yet used social media for your business, you are missing out on an easy and inexpensive way to potentially reach your target audience. Social media has always been a great social tool, but it's now a great professional and marketing tool as well. Now, more than ever, these sites are becoming an extremely popular and economical

way to interact and keep connected with customers...and creating an account is free. Facebook is the most popular social media site today, hosting 750 million users, with Twitter and LinkedIn coming in second and third with 250 million and 110 million...that's a ton of potential business.

Invite your email or customer database contacts to 'like' you. Post photos of events, new products or even customers using your products and ask questions your audience cares about to get people talking. Connect with your business partners and use their pages as a way of cross-promotion. Link to important areas on your website, educate prospective customers and become known as the go-to expert in your industry. Motivate your customers by holding contests and giveaways for all those who subscribe to your page. If you've got the budget for it, you can even post ads on Facebook and set them to show up only with a particular demographic...you'll pay very little upfront to get started. The key is to post regularly and show customers that your webpage is a place they can go to get assistance, stay connected with your business and read frequent news/updates. You may say that your customers don't use social media. Maybe they're resistant to it. This may be all very well...but if your customer has to create an account or 'like' you to register for a free gift or to get a coupon code on your social media page, that may just be enough to motivate them. Think about it.

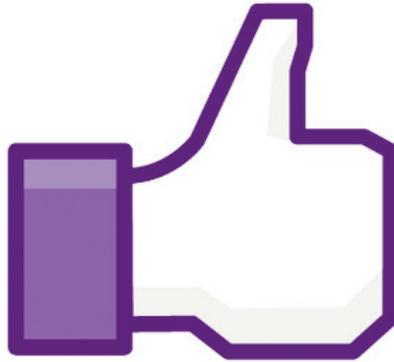
5. Never underestimate the power of a happy customer

There's no question that someone else's recommendation is more powerful than your own. Few things are more beneficial than having a satisfied customer openly promote your business to a friend - online or through word of mouth. Acquire testimonials as often as you can from your customers and post them on your websites and in your

industry tips

marketing materials. This will make your customers feel good and promote both you and them in the process. The more loyal, satisfied customers you have, the better you can establish credibility and trust with other potential customers and validate your claims about your products/services.

Take a moment now to think about some of the other resources you may have at your disposal to help keep your business front of mind with your customers. Do you use email marketing on a monthly or even weekly basis? Can you create a simple e-newsletter to send to your customers? Some email marketing programs will charge as low as \$10/month (about 6 British Pound Sterling, €7.5) to send unlimited emails to up to a couple of hundred subscribers. Could you place a business card drop box in your showroom or office to build your database? And what about asking your employees for ideas they may have to promote your business? With such a wide variety of options available, (many of them at a low cost to you), why wouldn't you be marketing your business on a regular basis? Think creatively and maximise your spending!



Invite your email or customer database contacts to 'like' you on Facebook

Our thanks to Kristin Kachur at Rowmark for writing this article. If you would like more information please visit the website at www.rowmark.com.