



Strategies to Boost Your Business

Part 2: Reevaluate your marketing plan.

By Lana Straub

One of the most important lessons my parents taught me was not to be a braggart. It's good advice for a little kid, bad advice for an entrepreneur.

You have to toot your own horn as the owner of your own business or no one will ever hear you. And in these economic times, it is more important to toot your own horn. In fact, it couldn't hurt to invest in a horn that puts out 100 decibels.

When was the last time you bragged about your business to someone you didn't already work with? When was the last time you advertised your business to clients you don't already serve? When was the last time you changed your business card or your phone book ad? If you have been busy in the everyday aspects of running your groundwater business, it's probably been awhile since you looked at your marketing materials.

In the second installment of this four-part series designed to help you boost your business, we are going to talk about ways we can improve our business image and better market ourselves. We will discuss ways to reevaluate our current marketing plans and modify them to reach new customers and recon-



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nect with old ones. Best of all, we'll discuss modern ways to market our businesses that won't break the bank—even if you don't have a marketing budget.

Marketing Audit

Just like a business plan audit, it is important to audit your marketing plan and skills prior to trying something new. The Small Business Administration suggests that you perform an audit of all your marketing efforts prior to making any changes so you can focus on the things that need improvement first and let items that are still working continue to do so.

The first step in the audit is to become intimate with your business marketing practices once again. You can start by asking yourself a few questions.

- Who are your customers?
- Do potential customers know about you?
- Are you still located in the same place doing the same activities?
- Is your market clearly defined?
- Do you know who your competitors are and where they are located?
- Are you meeting your sales goals?
- Are you asking for and listening to customer feedback?

Each of these questions is pertinent to creating a full marketing strategy. Once you've thought about them, you will see your business in a completely new light and want answers right away. And the way you answer the questions is through market research.

Market Research

This is important in defining your current markets and breaking into new ones. The average person might think to do market research you must search outside your business. That's only partially true. Market research starts with your business. Your current business habits are at the heart of conducting market research. All roads to greatness start from within.

The Small Business Administration suggests there are six steps to a successful marketing plan, and they all involve market research. Market research helps you focus your business around your customers' needs, not your own. The SBA suggests, "It is the process of learning what customers want or need and determining how to satisfy their wants or needs."

Oftentimes as entrepreneurs, we focus on what we want out of the business or what we see for the business. So we focus all our efforts on satisfying the needs of our families and our own perception of what the business should be. So much so that we forget that without customers we have no business.

According to the SBA's informational pamphlet *Marketing Strategies for the Growing Business*, the following are five lessons you can learn by conducting market research:

- Who your customers are and what they want
- How to reach your customers and how frequently you should try to communicate with them

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- Which advertising appeals are most effective and which ones get no response
- The relative success of different marketing strategies and thus improving return on investment
- How not to repeat your mistakes.

Traditional Market Research

Traditional market research involves doing research the way all the business management books of years passed have dictated.

You might take an informal survey of your customers, where you ask them a few questions during a transaction about how they feel about doing business with you. Another example would be a suggestion box, which might be a little more helpful because your customers won't feel threatened by telling you directly how they feel. Another option might be to create a "want list," where you write down all the products and services you don't carry but that a customer has asked for.

Of course, none of these methods furthers your business unless you review them and act upon them in a timely manner.

Modern Market Research

Non-traditional market research means thinking outside of the box and using things such as social media and e-mail surveys to find out what your customers are looking for.

You can send e-mails to customers to notify them of upcoming sales events or ask them questions about current needs. You can also research media Web sites to find out what your competitors have been up to and why your customers are turning to them instead of you.

You can study census data and market research data to find lifestyle characteristics of your customers and some of the habits they may have so that you can focus your marketing efforts in that direction. You can also get media kits from consumer, business, and trade magazines to gain some insight into the demographics of the consumer who goes for your kinds of products.

Now is the time for modern marketing. We have gone beyond the basic Web site. The age of instant communication is here.

Why Do Your Customers Buy from You?

There are several reasons why a customer might buy from you instead of a competitor. In her book, *Successful Marketing: Secrets & Strategies*, Rhonda Abrams lists the following as some of the many factors affecting your customer's choice of you over someone else. She calls these factors "customer motivation aspects."

- *Awareness.* Your customer knows about you, but not your competition.
- *Features and benefits.* You provide groundwater services your competitor doesn't and those services improve your customer's life.
- *Price.* You are less expensive or give customers more value for their dollar.
- *Brand.* You have a good reputation and the customer trusts you.
- *Convenience.* You are closer to the project than your competitor.
- *Word of mouth.* Other customers have recommended you.
- *Online opinions or views.* Customers recommend you on the Internet.
- *Affiliation.* You are a member of trade organizations such as the National Ground Water Association and your competitors are not.

Each of these reasons has one key element in common—trust. The customer either gains or loses trust in your business, based on these motivation factors. Your job through advertising is to develop trust with your customers and let them know you will always be there when they are in need.

While rewriting your marketing plan, it's important to look at what you are currently doing to develop trust through the customer motivational factors listed above, and determine ways you can enhance each aspect and gain more confidence, respect, and trust with your current customers and new ones.

"Understanding what motivates your customers," Abrams asserts, "why they

buy your product or service, and especially why they're likely to buy from you is an important first step in developing your marketing plan."

The true quest of market research is to know your business again. Oftentimes, we are caught up in the daily grind and forget why we were drawn to the business we are in. Market research helps us to focus on the reasons we got into this business in the first place. Market research helps us reacquaint with our original passions and find some new ones.

Traditional Marketing

Traditional marketing campaigns consist of items like a phone book ad, baseball caps, or T-shirts with your company name or logo on them, sports sponsorships, and so on.

These are the methods of getting your business name, brand, and image out there to potential customers. Traditional marketing is useful because customers aren't intimidated by it. They expect to see you advertising in the yellow pages, in the newspaper, on radio or television. What they don't expect is modern marketing strategies.

And using modern marketing strategies is what could catapult you past your competitors and into the front of your customers' minds.

Modern Marketing

Now is the time for modern marketing. We have gone beyond the basic Web site (which every business should have). The age of instant communication is here. You can find your favorite business on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and other business-oriented forms of social media. There are Web tools that mine your data from both personal and business sites, so it's important to put information on the Internet that accurately describes your business.

Facebook

Facebook is a great place to start. First, create a personal account. Once you have your personal account, you can become an administrator of any subsequent pages you create such as one for your business. On a page for your business, you can showcase your products and services and certain promotions you are having.

Your customers simply “like” the page and will then be sent any updates you post without any extra effort on your part. It is up to you to continue to post to your page so that it remains fresh.

Facebook also helps you create simple surveys for your customers so you can take polls of their needs. You can also support causes and link to information about drought, flooding, and contamination to keep your fans focused on groundwater and focused on your business.

The key to success is updating the page and posting to it. There are always 20 to 30 of my “Facebook friends” online at any given time, so Facebook is always alive with potential customers.

Twitter

Twitter has grown in use, especially by those who like to abbreviate their thoughts. Twitter accounts allow you to communicate quickly with your clients through few words—actually 140 characters or less.

Clients have the ability to “follow” you. If they do so, they get your updates

immediately as you send them out. The key to making Twitter work for you is to do your market research first so that your messages—your “tweets”—go to the right audience.

RSS Feeds

An RSS feed is similar to Twitter. RSS stands for “really simple syndication.” Subscribing to an RSS feed is like subscribing to a newspaper. Through an RSS feed, people ask for information about a Web site and whenever it is updated, so are they.

Once your customers subscribe to your RSS feeds, they get your information quickly. Your customers will know about any posts that you update and any Web pages you change as soon as the RSS feed is distributed.

YouTube

YouTube creates an advertising opportunity that hasn’t been afforded in the past. Through YouTube, a company can create free advertising videos and show them on their own “YouTube channel.” Essentially, you can show videos of how you accomplish certain tasks, your equipment in action, public

appearances, or anything you or your business has done or accomplished.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is what I call a business professional’s Facebook. You create your profile just like Facebook, and fill it with personal and professional information including Web sites and e-mail addresses so people can “link” to you.

It offers customers the ability to recommend your work product and write reviews about you that are then posted on your LinkedIn profile for other potential customers to read. It also mirrors Facebook by allowing you to make status updates and update projects that you have been working on.

Whether you choose traditional or modern marketing strategies, it’s important to keep an “advertising book” that shows the types of marketing campaigns you’ve done and how successful they were. This could be as simple as keeping a copy of your phone book ad and listing how many times a customer said they were referred this way. To keep up with which campaigns are working,

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make sure to train your staff to ask customers which marketing method drew them to your business.

Is Niche Marketing Right for You?

Before you go jumping off into that groundwater niche you've been thinking about, make sure you do some research. Specializing has both pros and cons, and it's important to understand both prior to narrowing your markets. Finding your niche does allow you to become an expert in your field and it will distinguish you from your competitors.

Keep in mind, though—the tighter your niche, the harder it will be to branch back out in leaner times. Once you identify yourself with a niche market, you will work toward becoming an expert and should be able to charge more for your goods and services as an expert.

With the niche also comes strong word of mouth activity. Positive word of mouth is good for business. Negative word of mouth could become a business

Tooling Up

Here are some common and not so common market research resources.

**U.S. Census Bureau:
American FactFinder**
<http://factfinder.census.gov>
<http://factfinder2.census.gov>

**U.S. Census Bureau:
County Business Patterns**
www.census.gov/econ/cbp

**U.S. Census Bureau:
State and County Quickfacts**
<http://quickfacts.census.gov>

Statistics Canada
www.statcan.gc.ca

Industry Associations
[www.planningshop.com/
tradeassociations.asp](http://www.planningshop.com/tradeassociations.asp)

Mintel
www.mintel.com

News Media Web Site:
www.newslibrary.com

Library of Congress
www.loc.gov/rr/news/lists.html

**Internet Public Library list
of newspapers worldwide**
www.ipl.org/div/news

killer. Niche marketing is good for business as long as you understand all the risks as well as the benefits in narrowing your business focus to a particular set of products and services.

Changing your marketing strategy doesn't have to be expensive or painful, but if you haven't updated your strategy in a while, it might take some time to get going. The key to making it work is

to do a little research, tune in to your customers and their needs, and start marketing.

Remember, your business is a living, breathing organism. It should be ever evolving with the changing tides of the business ocean. If you spend a little time concentrating on how to market your business, you'll ride the tide just fine.

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