



10 Top Tips for Marketing a Growing Business

Sales are the lifeblood of every small to medium-sized business. Many businesses are founded by entrepreneurs with a flair for sales and marketing, or engineers who enjoy tinkering with web sites. All too often, when they retain responsibility for marketing way beyond the initial set-up period, these business leaders can become too thinly spread and have difficulty remaining focused on mission critical activities. Marketing falls to the bottom of the priority list, leading to last minute execution and poor quality results.

Here are 10 top tips for SME marketing, which won't blow your budget or increase your headcount.

1. Put yourself in your customers' shoes

Many businesses place high value on a specific feature set, unaware that customers view their services in a different way. Understanding the needs, desires, aspirations and motivations of your target audience is the bedrock of any product and market development programme, and should underpin all marketing activity. Use the "so what" test to ensure you spell out the benefits of your offering in terms your customers will respond to.

2. Understand your competition

Know your competitors like the back of your hand, understand their value proposition and be able to articulate how your product or service compares with theirs. What constitutes value for money? Are you cheap or expensive and can you justify your position? Find out what guarantees, prices or fees you're up against and then beat them by adding more value!

3. Have a plan! Be realistic and remain focused

Understand where you are now, where you want to be and how you can realistically get there in a specified timescale. Without a pre-defined marketing plan it's easy to waste a stack of money on the wrong marketing tools. Make sure your plan includes effective strategies, then ensure you're implementing them correctly. If it's not working, stop, re-evaluate and modify your plan!

If you don't have in-house marketing resource, get professional help from a specialist agency providing a virtual marketing manager service. It doesn't necessarily cost an arm and a leg to leverage the experience and knowledge of a seasoned marketing professional, and will be far more effective than hiring an inexperienced new graduate.

4. Apply good housekeeping to list maintenance from the start

Any form of direct marketing – email or paper-based – requires accurate, up-to-date customer and prospect lists. Lists must be managed centrally and cleaned regularly to avoid duplication and ensure accuracy. Think about how you want to use your lists in the future and set them up appropriately from the outset. If you're planning an email marketing campaign be sure to understand what constitutes opt-in for email and make sure you can prove that everyone on your list was willing to receive your content.

5. Less is more!

It's essential to define and remain focussed on your value proposition. Prospects are easily confused when lots of different messages are competing for attention on a page. Keep it simple, understand the incentives that will entice your target audience to contact you and make it clear what you want them to do as a next step.

Striking the right balance between giving enough or too much information is essential, particularly for businesses that involve consultative selling. Not enough, and prospects may not understand your value proposition; too much and they have no need to contact you unless they are completely sold already.

6. Internet marketing – start taking your web site seriously

As a marketing tool your web site is unique – it can kill or boost the response rate to all other marketing activities in an instant. This is a big subject, but there are four crucial things to consider:

- *Lead generation*: a professionally designed web site that is optimised by a proven SEO expert can generate stacks of high quality enquiries, leads, phone calls and sales.
- *SEO is king*: just having a web site is not enough. Successful web sites need search engine optimisation (SEO) to ensure they appear at or near the top of Google listings. Regular content

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refresh is needed to remain on Google's radar. When a website is professionally optimised, it's like relocating a corner shop from the middle of nowhere to a prime location in Oxford Street.

- *Visibility:* all sales and marketing activity drives traffic to the web site. Whether you're advertising in a trade journal, organising an email campaign, issuing a bid document or creating paper-based brochures, your customers and prospects will refer to your web site for further validation and more detailed information *before* they decide whether to contact you. If they find a damp squib of a web site with poor structure and un-engaging content, you may fall at the first hurdle.
- *Content:* web site copywriting is an art. It forces you to think about every aspect of your business, and often results in a through housekeeping exercise. What first impression is formed when visitors land on your web site? What does it tell them about your business? What do you want them to do after visiting? Having captured their interest it's essential to lead them to the next phase in the sale cycle. External copywriters are often better equipped to deliver engaging content that is SEO optimised.

7. Start using email marketing now!

It's a fact; email marketing is extremely cost effective and perhaps the single most powerful marketing tool available to small businesses – for those who maintain accurate, qualified, opted in lists, that is! Here are a few things for you to consider, before you start using email marketing.

- *Build your own email database.* It's the most reliable way to ensure the integrity of your contacts, and most reputable email distribution agencies now refuse to handle bought-in lists. Start by asking all existing clients and contacts for their email address and permission to email them. Add email addresses gathered via a website or blog, in exchange for something of value; a white paper, industry report, free gift, ebook, discount. Make sign-up easy, request minimal information and make it crystal clear you will never pass their details on to anyone else.
- *Keep it relevant and timely.* Nothing will solicit unsubscribes faster than low quality, irrelevant information sent too frequently using a shotgun approach. Once a month is enough for most people, unless there is a genuine time-limited special offer.
- *Use word of mouth to the full.* Ask readers to forward your emails to their contacts. If the content is timely and relevant, they will.

8. Be a master networker

When it comes to networking, size is important but not as crucial as quality. It's better to have a small network of influential contacts than a large network of superficial associates. Don't waste time competing for volume of contacts on social networking sites... focus on a realistic number of movers and shakers in your industry, and invest time and energy to become associated with them.

9. Let your customers do the talking

Customer testimonials and references are marketing gold dust – they are one of the most powerful tools for demonstrating competence and track record. If you don't ask, you don't get, so secure their buy-in as early as you can. Most customers wait until they have taken delivery of a product or service to be sure it does what it says on the tin, but the earlier you can gain buy-in the better.

When writing case studies, focus on the customer's problem and solution rather than mentioning your own company's name every other sentence as this can be a turn off. External copywriters are usually better able to see the wood for the trees than your sales manager, and will focus on aspects that will generate interest.

10. Disclose price at the right time; ensure your fees match your service level

E-commerce sites selling products with fixed, non-negotiable prices should publicise an online price, although special volume pricing may be offered on request. In most other situations it's best to omit pricing from marketing materials.

- High value products or services rely on an appreciation of value and pricing may be variable. An exchange of information may be needed before an appropriate fee can be set.
- Prices published on your web site are as visible to competitors as they are to prospects.
- Perception is reality. If you promise high quality at bargain-basement fees, you'll send mixed-messages to prospects and will lose every time.

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