

THE MARKETING MENAGERIE: WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU?

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As seen originally in "Gear Technology" magazine.

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You are probably contacted frequently by people wanting you to use their ad agency, their direct mail program, their web site company, public relations or marketing firm to promote your business. It seems everyone wants you to spend your money to communicate to your prospects and customers. But what's the best method for you?

How do you sort through the clutter, the hype, and the "better get on the bandwagon" pitches to reap some real business?

Or maybe you've tried "marketing" before with only limited success. Maybe an agency, a web site developer, a magazine, a printer, or someone else promised big results, but didn't deliver. On the other hand, maybe your experience has been like Fred Young's, president of Forest City Gear. Forest City Gear has a reputation for aggressive marketing, and Young credits it with "filling in the gaps" his sales force can't cover, and keeping Forest City's name in front of customers and prospects."

Everyone talks about marketing, advertising, and public relations, but few fully understand the choices, the variables, and the possibilities involved, or what makes the difference between a successful plan and a real dud.

Here, then, is a brief overview of the scope of marketing and some of the strategies, creative techniques, media, and timing concerns every business person should consider in order to launch a successful marketing campaign.

The first step in any successful marketing program is planning. Like any other part of your business plan, marketing needs time and effort devoted to it. Marketing, as traditionally defined, oversees and directs pricing, distribution channels, new market research, and product characteristics, as well as sales and communications to the marketplace. Yet, "marketing" is rarely given more than a couple of pages in an ordinary business plan. When marketing is discussed, the focus is generally limited to the communications aspect or confined to research. Marketing personnel in your company (or an outside agency) may be told they are to penetrate a new market, increase sales, or launch a new product; yet, they are often denied the ability to influence the factors that will let them present a powerful communication. Careful planning is what builds a solid foundation for the marketing program.

The scope of marketing is the first item you must address in your marketing plan. Ask yourself these questions:

- 1) Do you force customers to buy what you have to sell? Or do you ask your marketing advisors what customers need or want to buy?
- 2) Do you focus your sales efforts on a specialized industry or do you accept nearly any job?
- 3) Do you mirror the advertising and marketing approach of your number-one competitor, or do you explore new media and new sales approaches?

Your answer to Question One indicates whether marketing can be a driving force in your organization, or if it is a servant to your production limitations.

With the second question, you come to grips with your future. What if the industry you serve nosedives? What if your market niche becomes crowded? While you may accept nearly any job, many customers will want to feel that you specialize in their field. How you accomplish that is a major challenge. If you have narrowed your target industries, the challenge is to keep up with those industries' perceptions of their needs.

And Question Three?

Don't feel ashamed if you said "yes" to mirroring the advertising and sales approach of your number-one competitor. If the competitor has the greatest market share, he or she must be doing something right. As long as your message is different, you may not be faulted for copying the media, the frequency, or the promotional ideas of your competitor.

The challenge may be to out-maneuver the budget of the competitor. Big budgets are no match for results. The right message delivered at the right time can yield much more than an oft-repeated mediocre message.

The second marketing item you must address is strategy. The crucial matter is to discover what distinguishes your product or service from any other. What is your Unique Selling Proposition (USP)? Forest City Gear, for example, boasts it has "the newest gear-cutting equipment of any manufacturer in the world."

Once you know your USP, you will know how to position your product/service in the marketplace. Caution: Define your buyers carefully and know their level of understanding. Don't talk down to them, but don't make the fatal error of assuming they know more than they do, either.

The next question to ask is, "What persuasive techniques to use?" Everyone may be shouting better price or better quality. How do you prove that's what you actually offer?

Here is a sampling of some ways to communicate your strategy:

- 1) Customer testimonials.
- 2) A case history story explaining your problem solving capabilities.
- 3) An educational article explaining your innovative manufacturing procedures.
- 4) An announcement of something NEW (for example, business expansion, new technology that solves a customer problem, etc.
- 5) Questions and answers that will explain your product or service
- 6) Before and After photographs to demonstrate your work.
- 7) Startling facts or analogies to set you apart from your competitors.

Too often, companies prepare sales messages and materials based on what they think the market needs. A wiser approach may be to survey your customers, reps or distributor selling channels.

Reps or distributors may be the key to reaching your customers. They may have a better understanding of what the end user needs. They know what they can sell. Perhaps a well-planned and well-executed distributor promotion could deliver better results than ideas aimed at end users.

In any case, everyone must be able to understand how your product is different and how those differences can benefit him or her.

This brings us to the third marketing item you must address: your creative presentation. How will you communicate your strategy?

For example, if you believe a graph or photo is the best way to prove your product/service benefits, you must ask how dramatic the photo needs to look. Should your visuals emphasize depth and dimension? Do you need to show or explain a size relationship? Is it more important for the customer to see differences in terms of a long-term application rather than short-term results? Should you prospect be able to request an engineering study substantiating your claims?

How can benefits be dramatized? Words are as important as pictures here. "Meets tolerances within .001" after running 5,000 hours" is much stronger than saying "Dependable."

Is your message distinctive and memorable, or does it fade fast because it looks like everyone else's in the market? Should you use the colors and typefaces everyone else uses?

The fourth item to consider is which media to use. What is your objective for the media? Will you use media to enhance and build upon your other communication channels, or do you need media to multiply your sales efforts rapidly? Will you put all your marketing eggs in one media basket, or use multiple media to complement your efforts and deliver greater overall results?

Consider the following advantages and disadvantages of each medium (listed in no particular sequence.)

DIRECT MAIL (Snail Mail or Email) *Advantages:* You can target a message precisely to the person or the characteristics of the person to whom you wish to speak. You can select your audience by title, SIC code, gross sales of business, number of employees, affinities (e.g. Web sites representing the best profile of your target market), geographic area or purchasing characteristics. Asking for some response makes this a highly measurable device. ***Disadvantages:*** Clutter of mail, chance of print materials being thrown away by protective secretaries. If the list you're using is not current or accurate, you may be wasting time, effort and money.

PUBLICATION ADVERTISING. *Advantages:* You can reach a wide audience in a specific market. For example, if you want to sell your lubrication products to engineers of all kinds, you might choose a horizontal magazine, such as *American Machinist*, which reaches individuals in all types of industrial businesses. However, not all its readers may be buyers of lubrication products. On the other hand, if you want to target readers who are likely buyers, you might choose a more verticle publication like, *Lubrication Engineering*, which reaches individuals whose sole interest is the lubrication business. Bingo cards or other calls to action in your ad may generate measurable results. ***Disadvantages:*** Wasted circulation to readers who lack influence or buying authority. Inability to control when the message may be seen/read. Poor position in a magazine could mean your message is "buried".

INTERNET (Web Site) PRESENCE. *Advantages:* Perhaps the most customer-friendly media available today. Gives people with access to the World Wide Web the freedom to view information about you and your company at their discretion and interact with you. If designed with enough sophistication, your Internet site can be an extension of virtually all segments of your business that communicate with others while giving you a versatile, global communications tool whose content can be virtually unlimited for sales (including product demonstrations), training, customer service, distributors, employees, etc. Password-protected areas and advances in security will help you transact business or conduct video conferencing on the Internet. Collecting e-mail addresses of visitors to your site and analyzing statistics of all site visitors can help you better understand viewer interests and help you implement customized, one-on-one communications with people. ***Disadvantages:*** Requires that your target audience be equipped with computers, modems and Internet access that can accommodate the speed and special effects your site features. Slow-loading sites kill visits. Like television shows that are promoted to gain an audience, you must invest in the promotion of your Web site before it can function as a communications tool for you. Communicates as fast with competitors as with prospects and customers. If not designed well or if it malfunctions, your Web site is an easily accessible tool your competitors may use to discredit your company, products and service.

TRADE SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS. *Advantages:* Positions you as an expert in your field. Delivers a captive audience for a specified amount of time. Permits a dialogue with your audience to answer their questions, probe their thinking and support your message. ***Disadvantages:*** Requires

presentation skills. May invite hostile questions. May reveal proprietary information. (Interestingly, Fred Young believes the proprietary issue often prevents companies from capitalizing on innovations that could arouse customer interest and enhance company image.)

TRADE EXHIBITS. *Advantages:* Permits demonstration to a wide audience. Usually permits a dialogue with your audience. Group excitement and the “keep up with the Joneses” pressure often encourages sales. Encourages quick comparisons with competitors. *Disadvantages:* Pressures you to respond when competitors may offer discount show prices. Cannot hide malfunctions or equipment failures. Attendance often subject to weather, location attractions and economic outlook of your industry.

BROCHURES. *Advantages* Ability to furnish comprehensive data about your product and service. *Disadvantages:* Inexperienced buyers may be dazzled by an exciting presentation, rather than thoroughness. Generally little interaction with customer. Inability to customize message.

VIDEOTAPE. *Advantages:* Tells your story the way you want it told every time. Demonstrates what is difficult to transport or see. A dramatic, portable selling tool that may be viewed out of the office in a relaxed, uninterrupted setting. ***Disadvantages:*** Often limited to one-on-one or small group presentation. Requires VCR equipment. Can lead to one-way communication.

Of course, in all cases, your product or service may be diminished if the level of sophistication of your audience is not reached. In other words, a brochure or Web site that looks cheap may communicate that your product is "cheap" as well. On the other hand, an exotic, splashy design may undercut a plan to promote Old World craftsmanship instead of new technology. If your sales force can't explain why your communication materials look the way they do, your customer may also be puzzled about your philosophy and whom you really serve.

The fifth marketing item to consider is timing. When should your message be received (or be posted on your Internet site)? How frequently must your potential customer see your message before he/she is ready to take action?

For example, a rule of thumb for ads placed in trade magazines is a minimum three-times consecutive "buy" to measure results. But which three times? Will an advertisement running October, November, and December reach readers while they are planning budgets for the following year? Is this better than January, February, and March, when budgets may already be approved? Or would it be better to feature ads in July, August, and September to support appearances at trade shows, a distributor promotion, or a direct mail campaign? These questions don't have "right" answers; they only have answers that are right for your particular circumstances and marketplace.

Despite all the research, all the gut feelings and all the rationale, some efforts deliver significant bottom results and others seem to fizzle. Why?

When an advertisement, Web site, direct mail letter, videotape, or other communication tool doesn't deliver the expected results, people are quick to condemn the media and the effort in total, when really a different creative approach, a better offer, an incentive or better timing could deliver better results. In the case of direct mail, the validity and accuracy of the list must be scrutinized. Testing all the elements of your communications should be ongoing program.

Just as a good business needs a good business plan, good marketing requires a comprehensive communications plan. With such a plan, you are less apt to go in various directions with no consistency or measurability. A plan can make you an active, not a reactive marketer.

A plan is especially helpful when the printers, advertising agencies, magazines, and others call you. Your budget, your media, and your frequency of communication will already be decided. You will have defined your target market and decided how best to explain your benefits. Then, you'll be ready to respond intelligently to people who want to talk with you about your marketing.

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