

12 High Impact Marketing Programs You Can Implement Today

Ideas about marketing have changed dramatically during the past several years. In contrast to the 1980s approach of creating aggressive strategies to compel sales, the new style focuses on developing a service-oriented business dedicated to solving customers' problems.

It's sometimes called "customer-centered" marketing, and it's not as simple as it sounds. For one thing, providing customers with real solutions requires a good deal of research and insight. Yet businesses too often adopt a quick-fix response convenient for them and call it customer-centered. For example, 24-hour service lines are easily set up and seem customer-focused, but research might show that what a firm's customers actually need is a toll-free fax line for describing operating problems to technicians. In short, mere lip service to customer support is not enough. Companies must truly look beyond their internal considerations to focus squarely on their target audience.

The other challenge in customer-centered marketing is that it must also be competition-centered. The reason, say Al Ries and Jack Trout in *Bottom-Up Marketing*, is that the only way to "pry customers loose" from your competitors is to offer better solutions than they do - and exploit new markets or new opportunities your competitors haven't thought of. And that means being constantly aware of what the competition is doing.

A further hurdle is that many firms are simply not marketing-oriented to start with. Where does your company stand? According to John Graham, president of Graham Communications in Quincy, Massachusetts, a key sign of problems is that businesses have no established marketing plan, taking action only when sales lag. Moreover, they balk at spending money for marketing yet expect big results from small-budget, amateurly-produced advertising materials that simply imitate the competition.

Marketing-oriented companies, on the other hand, says business development consultant Jack Harms, see their primary job as attracting and keeping customers by satisfying customer needs. They're externally focused, concentrating more on customers than on internal benchmarks such as productivity. They measure success in terms of increased gross revenues and market share, not profit margins. In addition, they move quickly to provide new products and services once the need for them has been identified.

All told, the way to success is clear. Go the extra mile to give your customers high-quality, competitive products and services. Spend money to make money. Work to attract and, more important, retain your customers with every well-produced marketing device appropriate to your business: newspaper and Yellow Pages ads, brochures, direct mail, TV and radio spots, newsletters, telemarketing, public relations, community sponsorships, trade shows, billboards, special events and more.

Start by considering the 12 fast, low-cost, easy-to-implement marketing ideas outlined below.

1. Survey Your Customers

Salespeople can tell you a lot about your customers, which is why they're the source of customer intelligence for many companies. Yet because their job is to sell existing products or services, as opposed to perceiving and addressing unmet needs, there are limits to what salespeople can offer. So get your own firsthand view as well by taking a shift on the sales floor or with a service crew.

Better yet, survey your customers directly. What you need to learn from them, says Joan Koob Cannie, author with Donald Caplin of *Keeping Customers for Life*, can be summed up in five points:

- Why they buy from you.
- How they use your product or service.
- What they like and dislike about doing business with you.
- How you compare to the competition.
- What you do that "annoys, infuriates or delights" them.

Put these points into a short questionnaire and ask customers to return it, anonymously, in the stamped self-addressed envelopes you provide. Ideally, survey all customers during the course of three or four weeks, so that even a small rate of return will give you a meaningful sampling of opinions.

Above all, be prepared to change to solve what customers identify as problems. If they complain of delayed order-processing during peak season, for example, offering apologies or recommending pre-season ordering is the response of an internally-centered company. The customer-centered company, by contrast, hires more staff.

2. Follow Up On Every Sale

Don't stop with a one-time customer survey, however. Regularly evaluate all your transactions with customers to monitor the quality of your products and services, and ask customers how you can improve it. Fortunately you can do this easily, again using a questionnaire.

Keep questionnaires short, advises business writer Jacquelyn Lynn, and make sure each question concerns only one issue (e.g., "Was the delivery crew prompt and courteous?" is two questions, not one). In addition, try to avoid yes-no questions and offer check-off ratings in no more than four questions, ensuring that customers are putting their ideas into short answers more often than mechanically checking boxes.

To keep the questionnaire well-focused and concise, stick to the big issues or the critical points. Begin constructing your questionnaire by writing out every potential question you can think of; then narrow it down to the six to 12 that matter most.

An even more important part of follow-up than questionnaires is to thank customers for their business - which you can do in a short note - and put their names on a mailing list. Then send them any of a variety of useful mailers: notices of new products or services, information about products and services related to recent purchases, sales notices, special promotions and newsletters.

Whatever else you may include as part of your marketing plan, don't skimp on follow-up. For follow-up, emphasizes marketing guru Jay Conrad Levinson, is "the key to loyal customers."

3. Use Your Database To Write Customers a Personal Letter

Database marketing, explains business writer Mark Hendricks, aims "not to make the sale, but keep the customer." The underlying technique is to use database records of customers' latest purchases, and frequency and amount of past purchases, to create targeted mailers that let you stay in touch with your customers.

The most popular of these mailers are listed above. But another type of mailer, fast and inexpensive to produce, sometimes proves the most powerful of all: personal letters.

A personal letter, as advocated by Jay Levinson, is a one-page letter that recaps what a customer has just purchased and then describes new products or services the customer might need - or simply



provides helpful professional information. It conveys, in short, what you can do for that customer in the way of service, attention and expertise.

Take the time to concentrate on customers individually by writing them letters personally tailored to their specific situation. Mention that you'll phone in a week to follow up on the matters you've broached. And add a handwritten P.S. recapping your main message.

4. Try Niche Marketing

Many of today's most successful companies have stopped marketing to the broad, some say meaninglessly broad, customer categories of the 1980s (e.g., "heavy users" or "women aged 25-49"). Instead they reach out to narrowly-focused groups, using a strategy called "niche marketing."

Niche marketing gained wide popularity through Donald K. Clifford, Jr. and Richard E. Cavanaugh's *The Winning Performance*, which studied 6,117 small companies that had grown four times faster than the Fortune 250. Ninety percent of these firms, the authors found, competed in small market niches. All were customer- rather than sales-driven. All developed new products with the end-user in mind. And all concentrated on advertising to - and generating repeat sales from - not just any customer, but a small, credit-worthy, qualified group.

Clifford and Cavanaugh present a series of steps companies can take to adopt niche marketing for themselves:

- Compile a comprehensive list of your prospects and customers.
- Narrow the list to a profitable group you believe you can serve better than the competition.
- Create a profile of the traits common to these customers, such as sales volume or location.
- Use this profile to tailor products, services and advertising to your niche market and qualify new prospects.
- Be prepared to experiment with several niches before finding the one that fits your company best.

5. Distribute Free Samples

Free samples are always welcome. Food and beverages are natural candidates, as are free trials of non-consumables like furniture or office equipment. In fact, anything customers must try in order to appreciate lends itself to sampling. Sampling has historically produced great successes, from the free nibbles that have launched cookie stores to the mass mailings and giveaways that have introduced products ranging from cereals to Post-it notes.

When distributing free samples, be sure you have an adequate supply, advises writer Jacquelyn Lynn. And try to combine free samples with coupons or other marketing techniques.

6. Present Free Demonstrations, Consultations & Seminars

An analog to free samples is free demonstrations or consultations, which can take place on your premises or that of your customers, or at homes, community centers, rented conference rooms, trade fairs, festivals or other events. When staging demonstrations, talk for no more than 15 minutes, recommends Jay Levinson, and end by closing the sale. When doing consultations, determine how much information you must impart to prove expertise without giving away too much; end again by closing the sale.

Levinson suggests extending demonstrations and consultations into free seminars. Promoted through signs, circulars, media ads and other publicity, these one-hour lectures should concern a topic related to your business and comprise 75 percent information, 25 percent sell. Give participants an easy, compelling way to sign up for your services before they leave.

7. Hand Out Free Gifts

If you want guaranteed attention, offer a free gift. A free gift for a particular amount or item of purchase. A free gift for responding to a direct-mail solicitation. A free gift of a second item with the purchase of a first - a more tantalizing and successful version of the two-for-one sale.

Also consider handing out specialty gifts to prospects and customers: free pens, scratchpads, mugs, T-shirts and other items printed with your company name, address, phone number and business slogan. To explore the range of gifts available, consult some of the "Advertising Specialties" firms listed in the Yellow Pages. Ask the reps to suggest gifts that have been used successfully in your industry and pay special attention to new, just-introduced items whose advanced design or technology may appeal strongly to your customers. Select gifts based on their appropriateness to your customers and your business, quality of construction and tastefulness of design.

8. Use Coupons As An Advertising Vehicle

Coupons offer a proven method of generating trial. Enclose them in invoices. Hand them out at the cash register. Distribute them through your sales force. Include them in a coupon pack prepared by a direct-mail advertising house.

If you decide to produce your own coupon, study samples around you to see how they're written and designed to specify the product and trumpet the savings boldly and unequivocally. If you give your coupon an expiration date, which you should do to encourage prompt use, make sure it's conspicuous.

Like all other forms of advertising, coupons work best with repetition. You'll need to try four or five, issued on a regular basis, to know how well they're working; measure their effectiveness simply by counting the number redeemed.

9. Build Awareness Through Sweepstakes or Contests

Sweepstakes and contests provide exciting ways to build awareness of your products, services and company, as well as produce the goodwill that giveaways naturally inspire. Whether entrants will win a free lunch at your restaurant or a free week in Paris (perhaps co-sponsored by a local travel agent), you must check the legalities with your lawyer before you start.

Then plan out your promotion step by step, from how customers will enter and how entries will be handled to whether you'll award prizes below the grand-prize category. For example, will everyone win something just for entering?

Finally, create an entry form and eye-catching collection box and advertise with flyers, mailers, banners, store signs, newspaper ads or radio spots, as appropriate. If you'll collect entries in your store, place the box at the back of the premises so everybody must pass through your merchandise to reach it.

Afterwards, generate publicity about the winners - and display photocopies of all resulting news stories at your business.

10. Be Creative With Telephone-hold Marketing

In most businesses, callers will at some point be placed on hold. So play a telephone-hold audiotape that, over background music, talks about your products, services or even your company itself. Besides helping the time pass faster, tapes can answer callers' questions and even inform them of products or services they need but didn't know you provide.

To find a company to produce your telephone-hold tape, check the Yellow Pages under Telecommunications-Telephone Equipment, Services & Systems." Most firms provide everything you need - produced tape, hookups and phone equipment - for a monthly fee.

11. Sell With Store Signs

Use interior signs to tell customers about the goods and services you offer, such as free delivery, free alterations or free trials. If you stock a specialty line, like environmentally-safe products, point it out. If you've just received merchandise with a high-demand feature, let customers know.

Signs also provide an easy way to answer customers' most commonly-asked questions. Post explanatory labels to help customers differentiate among various models. Write out shelf signs describing special features that make products outstanding values or unique in their field, or telling customers where to find accessories.

Use signs, in short, to tout your company's competitive advantages and to make shopping easier, more informative and more motivating for your customers.

12. Act Now to Extend Your Seasonal Sales

Is your business seasonal? If so, suggests business writer Carol June, utilize year-round marketing to improve your sales. Before the season, stimulate repeat sales by sending coupons to current customers for upcoming purchases or offering special deals on early orders. After the season, use follow-up mailings or phone calls to stay in touch with customers and encourage their loyalty. Or maintain interest with an end-of-season or off-season sale of leftover merchandise.

In the longer term, consider a second-season business or product line that would both be a logical extension of your current operation and appeal to your customers. A holiday fruitcake company, for example, might branch out into year-round baked goods; a ski shop, into camping gear. Or, if you're a retail firm, expand not your season but your customer base by adding a catalog or direct-mail wholesale operation.

To sum up, marketing is a 365-day-a-year job. It demands persistent attention on satisfying customers' needs. Equally important, it requires a constant program of efforts to develop your customer base and stimulate sales - a program initiated and implemented most effectively by putting your own twist on direct, hard-working, tried-and-true ideas such as the 12 described above. For it doesn't take novelty or large sums of money to succeed in marketing; first and foremost, it takes action.