



Branding and Marketing - Thoughts, Secrets and Tips

As a small business operator myself, there is a constant question on my mind - am I doing enough to attract, satisfy and retain my current and future customers? Since my business is essentially a professional service (creative and strategic imaging for marketing and advertising), my answers may differ somewhat from yours, but the question has universal application. Regardless of your business, whether selling a product or providing a service (or doing both), the question and the process of examination both have tremendous value.

But why torture yourself when you are so busy just keeping up with your current demands? For **two** ever-present reasons: **first**, if your marketing doesn't keep pace, a slow period will certainly come your way and may threaten your survival; and, **second**, the time spent developing and maintaining your market message and brand has a way of keeping you in closer contact with your client base so you are more nimble and responsive to changing market conditions. And guess what? *Both you and your client benefit from this!*

Something that is often overlooked when developing a marketing campaign is the ongoing contact with your customer that can result from the image and message you present. Persistent and well-timed marketing essentially initiates a dialogue with your existing and potential customers. This is always a good process to promote in addition to inviting higher sales. Don't forget, if you have confidence in your offerings, **who better than you to provide the product or service to your customer** (certainly better than letting your competitor steal the sale).

I am often asked if there are any secrets to good marketing? The answer is yes, but they are not really secrets. The things that seem to work are tried and true - the "hip" presentation veneer may have changed, but the underlying structure has been constant. What are these secrets? In no particular order -

Know your customers' needs and why those needs exist.

When you deliver a product or service, strive to exceed expectations (especially true for after the sale service).

Know your competition and strive for a competitive advantage.

Keep your message clear, simple and unique.

Establish your brand and get it out there!

Be gently, mindfully persistent with your messaging (social media can be a friend in this regard).

Remember, there is an adage that says a prospective customer must cognitively experience your name and message at least **seven** times before she or he will begin to put some faith in your brand and begin to trust that you will deliver on what you promise. Don't be afraid to persistently toot your own horn - *most certainly, no one else will - except a satisfied customer.*

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Additional Random Thoughts and Observations:

- 1 - Articulate your business mission in one sentence.
- 2 - Are you familiar with the product and/or services of your competitors - what makes them unique and how do they message to and connect with their customers.
- 3 - How well do you know your customers and is this information current?
- 4 - Can you identify the reasons a customer should buy from you and not a competitor?
- 5 - Do you have an “elevator” speech that will quickly describe the capabilities you bring to the table that inspire a prospective customer to buy from you (see 1)?
- 6 - Is your marketing message clear and consistent? Does it inform as well as call a potential customer to action? And, does your message support and build your brand?

Did you know that creating a brand identity can actually *help you understand and simplify your own understanding of your company's purpose* and what it is you do for your customers? Whether you are selling a product or offering a service (or both), the branding process will help to identify attributes and competitive advantages that will suggest a creative foundation for your new brand identity. Don't just think of a brand as a customer experience, but also as a foundation for your business culture, your products/services and how you and your employees interact with your customers. Branding done well is an immersive experience and process - done well, it will help to create enduring success.

Some of the objectives of branding are consistency of overall look - logo, type faces, color palettes, certain graphic combinations - all to unify your marketing presentations so that a customer immediately knows it is your company offering an important message. Properly implemented, *your brand will touch everything you do*, from business cards and letterheads to visual/functional cues for product design and even uniforms for service personnel - from web site presentation and organization to instruction manuals and internal communications (and so much more - branding is rooted in all the details of your business experience). **Your brand will become a foundation from which all good efforts spring.**

Did you know that responsive customer support is a brand necessity. If you don't meet or exceed expectations then all your hard work establishing your brand will be lost and virtually impossible to regain. No one is more persistent or shrill than a customer who has had a bad “after-the-sale” experience - whether a disappointment with the functionality of an item or a warranty repair gone bad - and no one has ever had more ways to make their displeasure known than they now have on the internet. **Food for thought!**

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