

Ten Low Cost Strategies To Promote and Grow Your Business

By Linda Welter Cohen, APR

If you're a small business owner, no matter what you sell or what service you provide, you have probably discovered that your best customers not only enjoy but demand a personal relationship with you. Since that's the case, it's logical that the better you and your prospective customers know each other, the better you get along, and the better your chances to convert them to customers.

A few key promotional buzzwords and ideas are pervasive throughout the business community. They may not all apply to your particular business. However, thinking about each of them in a new and different way may be the difference between merely maintaining or moving your business forward.

1. Network, Network, Network

Answer this question honestly: What do you typically do each day for lunch? If you're munching at your desk more often than not, then you're not networking as much as you should. In addition to attending monthly industry and trade group lunches, you should be getting out a few times a week with customers and referral sources. The expense of these lunches is relatively small when you consider the potential rewards.

Also look for opportunities to attend community and civic meetings and forums that discuss topics relevant to your industry or an issue you're personally passionate about. You'll stay on top of trends and meet individuals outside your usual sphere of influence who may one day be your customers.

2. The Theory of Reciprocity

You know. Do unto others, etc. A basic theory of human nature is that we like to help those who have helped us. Look for ways to assist your customers beyond just good business practices. If you know your customer is involved in a community or charitable group, offer support or volunteer in some way. Even the smallest level of participation will connect you with your customer on a higher level.

3. Lose the Stage Fright

Yes, most of us would rather go through an IRS audit than have to speak in front of a group. But speaking at seminars is great for establishing your credibility and getting face time with your constituents. Join your local Toastmasters or hone your skills in a class, but conquer your fears and get yourself out there.

4. Say Thank You

Such a simple rule of etiquette and business development, but so often overlooked. Send a note of thanks to anyone who does a kind deed for you or refers customers to you. Also, recognize your customers by setting up a system to acknowledge special occasions such as their birthdays. Send cards prior to Thanksgiving thanking them for their business. Or send a personal note to recognize instances where clients or their families are mentioned favorably in the news media.

5. Develop and Stick to a Sound Sales Plan

As a marketing consultant, I often counsel businesses that are needlessly struggling. Often a sound plan with strong sales strategies has been overlooked or ignored as business parameters or market forces change. Go back to the strategies you developed when you were fresh and optimistic and they may well be just as valid today. As a business grows it's easy to get caught up in day-to-day needs and discard the strategies that got you there in the first place.

6. E-Communications

Don't have a company website? What are you waiting for? At <http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com>, you can put together a Web presence easily and at nominal expense. Get help there or from a local HTML guru. You'll wonder how you got along without it.

An e-newsletter is another electronic avenue for communicating with your current and potential customers. Two examples are at http://www.imninc.com/imn_index.htm and <http://www.enebuilder.com>. Organizing a meeting can be simplified by using cvent.com, or use evite.com for electronic invitations to your next party or more personal gathering. An online survey service such as www.zoomerang.com should be on every small business owner's short list of bookmarks.

7. Co-op Advertising

If you're not doing it already, look for ways to further leverage your advertising dollars by seeking out joint advertising opportunities through your franchise or trade group. Also, if you are in a service industry using materials or components to serve your customers, nearly all manufacturers have co-op funds available for the asking. If you need help creating a proposal, ask a media representative to work up a plan/schedule and show how both you and your manufacturer or distributor will benefit.

8. Keep Your Customers Satisfied

Take care of the customers you already have. Take no relationship for granted. Make sure you and your staff are regularly serving your clients and staying on top of their needs and concerns. Carefully managing these relationships to make each customer as satisfied as possible will help ensure that they stay with you for the long haul.

9. Publicize Your Business

Establish yourself as a credible expert with the news media. Positive news stories about you or your business often carry more weight than paid advertising. The only downside is that generating effective media coverage can be time consuming and take you away from running your business, so it may be to your advantage to seek a professional.

10. Do What You Do Best

Your business may be better served by hiring a firm to help you create your marketing plan and coordinate your advertising and publicity efforts. The biggest danger to your success is getting tangled in the process, and many small business owners find it is more cost effective to hire an expert so they can concentrate on doing steps one through eight above.

Linda Welter Cohen, APR, is CEO of The Caliber Group, a full service brand marketing and public relations firm. She is a past recipient of the Arizona Small Business Association's Rainmaker Award, Inside Tucson Business' Up & Comers Recognition, and BizAZ's Up & Coming Advertising & PR Firms and Woman-Owned Businesses. Linda can be reached at (520) 795-4500 or lcohen@calibergroup.com.