

Marketing, public relations: Beyond word-of-mouth

The best marketing programs are strategically planned to give your company the best possible exposure to the right audience.

■ Marketing and public relations are the most multi-faceted of business activities.

Listen to any trade show speech on marketing: the speaker asks, "What is marketing, what is public relations?" He'll take just about any answer, from free samples to door-to-door canvassing to presentations in city shopping malls.

Public relations is the great enigma of all communications disciplines, primarily because many people feel it's nearly impossible to judge the value and effectiveness of a public relations campaign.

Simply stated, marketing is the act of getting your company and its product in front of the buying public. Public relations involves image building and image maintenance in a community, city, state, or even nation.

Business consultants Michael Phillips and Salli Rasberry, authors of *Marketing Without Advertising* (Nolo Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1986), tell us that a specific marketing action plan includes four basic elements:

- The product you sell or service you perform;
- The people you already know who are in a good position to recommend your business to their friends and acquaintances;
- The list of marketing actions and events that will stimulate the people on your list to actually make recommendations; and
- A calendar of events to make your plan take flight within a specified time frame.

"Be aware," say Phillips and Rasberry, "that your general objective in designing a good marketing plan is to give your customers, associates and prospects a sense of participation in your business. When done well, this allows you to share your sense of excitement about your business at the same time that you enhance trust in your business."

A marketing action plan, according to the authors, falls into three categories: direct, parallel, and peer-based.

A landscaping company can market directly by inviting the

public to tour some of its best projects. Some of the bigger nursery companies hold annual field days for their industry customers, in a small trade show format.

A parallel marketing plan might include having some of your best customers' home landscapes or commercial sites appear in the company brochure or newsletter.

Peer-based marketing includes participation in the local landscapers' association.

If a friend's company can't handle a certain job, he's likely to think of you and refer the customer to your company. There's also no better way to learn what's going on in the business than mingling at association functions.

Market diversity—"In Wisconsin in the last few years, we've seen an interest in the use of perennials, nightlighting, and low-maintenance landscapes," says David J. Frank, president of David J. Frank Landscape Contracting in Germantown, Wisc. "We have to consider that in our ad copy; these new trends have to be supported by ad programs."

John Hooks, president of Post Properties in Atlanta, believes in promoting the value of landscape in out-of-the-way areas, like between buildings, or other unused areas. "It's not just dead space," says Hooks. "Convince people to turn those spaces into gazebos or gardens."

Frank believes the spoken word can lose its effectiveness over time, thanks to companies that promise the moon and don't deliver. "How frequently have you heard terms like 'competitive pricing,'



Frank: Tell them what you do better than anyone in your market.

'high quality,' and 'good service?'" asks Frank. "It's almost insulting at times because even the worst operator is talking about high quality products and services. It's terribly important that we demonstrate what we can do for the customer."

According to Frank, company marketing literature should say what you do better than other

Showing off at home shows: put your best work forward.

(Photo courtesy of David J. Frank)



people in your market, your purpose, tell something about the quality of your employees, past performance, productivity, products and services.

And, while you're at it, you might as well include information on products and services, affiliations, awards and technical information.

"We've taken the big brochure and reduced it for a direct mail program," Frank explains. "We qualify the prospect before we send the brochure; and we've gotten good response from this type of program."

Frank's company has been especially active in meeting with the public in two distinct ways: a home improvement show, and the annual "Parade of Homes."

The home improvement show is held at a local exhibition center, and is open to all design/build companies that want an opportunity to show the public what they can do.

For the "Parade of Homes," the public is allowed to visit the various residential properties designed and built by the company.

Market the value—Hooks believes strongly in marketing the "value" of landscape services. But to make it work, you need:

- commitment to excellence;
- commitment to customers; and
- reliance on employees.

"Failure to deliver is an Achilles' heel for many companies. Once we fail to deliver with a degree of regularity, our word becomes a fal-lacy," says Hooks.

Post is first and foremost an apartment developer, with 40 apartment communities in Atlanta, Florida and Washington, D.C.

More companies have found that involvement in their community is an effective way to practice good public relations and establish visibility.

Post's promotional activities include participation in an adopt-a-school program, in which it donates landscaping services; plantings at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens, and free maintenance of a public park in Marietta, Ga. "It's not inexpensive," admits Hooks, "but it gets our name out to the public."

An important ingredient in the marketing message, says Hooks, is a company's professionalism. "We've got to promote professionalism to the public and our people." Hooks devotes a lot of time to the

Phone Accessibility Checklist

We Offer		Updated Yearly?
<input type="checkbox"/>	White page listing in appropriate areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yellow page listing under applicable topics and in appropriate geographical areas	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Answering services/system with clear instructions	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"800" numbers	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Numbers listed on cards, receipts, order forms, mailers, vehicles, repair labels, and publications	<input type="checkbox"/>

Help your customers find you with ease. Use these checklists to rate your accessibility to prospective customers. (Excerpted from "Marketing Without Advertising," by Michael Phillips and Salli Rasberry, Nolo Press, and reprinted with permission from Nolo Press, Berkeley, Calif.)

Mail Accessibility Checklist

We Offer	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clear, stable address
<input type="checkbox"/>	Return address on everything we distribute Mail forwarding up to date
<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal relationship with mail delivery person to avoid mistakes
<input type="checkbox"/>	Clearly identifiable mailbox, with alternative places to deliver packages and postage due mail
<input type="checkbox"/>	If in out-of way location, maps are included in mailings

people. "Don't think regularly scheduled meetings alone will foster communication," says Hooks, who believes in promoting an atmosphere that allows communication to occur at any time, both ways. This is done largely through company social events, with family participation.

—Terry McIver

For best ad results, choose the right approach and message

■ "Control your destiny...and don't fall victim to haphazard advertising," advises Barbara Lambesis, author of *101 Big Ideas for Promoting Business on a Small Budget* (Marketing Methods Press, Phoenix, Ariz., 1989). Plan your advertising and promotional activities, and select those that are likely to reach and motivate your potential customers. Other points to remember:

● **Choose your approach.** Decide what you will emphasize in your advertising. Your approach should be one that you believe in and that you are comfortable with. If you don't believe in what you are presenting to the public, nobody else will. Remember the needs and wants of your preferred customer.

● **Examine your entire business,** including the environment, service capability, facilities, dress of employees, and attitude toward the customer. Determine what you think makes your business different from your competition.

● **Select the right media.** No single media approach will reach and motivate all your prospects and customers. Repeat your advertising in the selected media as often as you can afford to do so.

● **Develop an advertising and promotion budget.** There are several ways to determine an appropriate budget. One is to determine a percentage of the operating budget, an amount per unit, or a percentage of gross receipts to apply to advertising and promotion.

● **Give your advertising and promotion plan time to work.** A business owner should develop a plan that covers at least a full year. Stick to the plan, and make adjustments as needed after six to eight months.

● **Be consistent** in message, methods and image. Make a commitment to one approach and stick to it.

Lambesis says landscaping is a strong referral industry, and existing customers are the best source of new ones. "Send thank you notes to customers, and tell them you're looking for new clients, 'just like them,'" Lambesis advises. Another suggestion: tell your existing customers they'll get a free service for each referral.

—Excerpted from "101 Big Ideas," by Barbara Lambesis. Available in bookstores, or by calling (800) 745-5047.