

[SALES & MARKETING]

Marketing through a recession

Every business looking to thrive today needs solid strategies for finding new customers. BY JOE SHOONER

THE CURRENT ECONOMIC downturn has had marketers and business owners scratching their heads looking for new ways to motivate buyers. Every company looking to thrive in a recession needs a strategy for finding new customers and creating interest and revenue in spite of economic uncertainty. Though no single approach is a guaranteed winner for every business, some basic steps will guide you to greater success.

Call in the experts

A common thread running through the history of most successful green industry companies is the use of outside consultants. Since we tend to seek the path of least resistance to getting our production complete on a day-to-day basis, we're apt to develop operational blinders as a result.

Consultants have a wealth of experience with budgeting, operational systems and defining roles within an organization, but they're free of the baggage that can keep you tied to your status quo. Florida's Nanak's Landscaping, for example, has made extensive use of outside consultants over the last 20 years. President Sampuran Khalsa finds the assistance instrumental in building his company's financial structure. "For a smaller landscape company that cannot afford an in-house CFO, the right outside consultant can bring a high level

of analysis that can be instrumental in establishing healthy financial practices," Khalsa says.

There are plenty of consultants available to help guide your business through periods of growth and organizational challenges, but be sure to do your homework to determine what type of company they have the greatest success with. The needs of a commercial landscaper and that of a design/build contractor will vary greatly, and you should find a consultant who focuses on your type of business. Khalsa also warns about taking the short view with consultant relationships. "It is important for landscape company owners to realize an outside consultant is not a quick fix," he says. "It is best to establish a relationship and work together over the years."

Invest in your current customers

Any politician will tell you, "You don't win an election without securing the base." Likewise in business, it is more profitable to keep a current customer happy than it is to find a new one. Satisfied customers are the most valuable marketing assets you have. They provide a stable foundation of business on which to grow, they provide opportunities for recurring and expanding revenue streams, and they represent a tremendous potential for referrals.

According to a recent Accenture Study of Customer Service, 73% of



GROWTH GOALS

1. Put someone in charge of your marketing and have a plan.
2. Improve visibility and public image.
3. Invest in your current customers.

consumers who changed service providers did so due to poor service vs. 47% who left due to price. Keeping customers happy keeps their business.

According to Marty Grunder, owner of Grunder Landscaping Co.

in Dayton, OH, “you can’t give a client any reason to go looking elsewhere these days. When our clients say ‘jump,’ our teams jump. A lot of companies in all sectors are providing bad customer service because they’re

too worried about the future to pay attention to current clients. If you do good things for your customers, you can really stand out.”

Ask for feedback

Consumers are bombarded with marketing messages every day and can be distracted by your competition. Good communication from your organization



reinforces their buying decisions by reminding them you provide the easiest and best solution to their needs. In a larger company, you need to create a communication plan that utilizes print or electronic newsletters, follow-up phone calls and personal contact in a way that reinforces your client relationships. Ask about problems. If you solicit complaints, you diffuse potential anger and work toward a productive solution.

Ask for the referral

Satisfied customers are a tremendous source of potential business, but you have to ask for it. There is no shame in looking for work, and if you aren’t willing to ask a happy customer for help growing your business, who will you ask? Simple systems can aid in the process. For example, consider printing a self-addressed, postage-paid postcard with areas for your customer and their referral to fill in and mail back. Satisfied customers want to send you work, but you have to tell them you want it, and you have to make it easy for them to send it.

Put your product into words

What are you selling? What are people buying? Do you say you’re selling com-

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mercial maintenance services or do you say you're providing an attractive environment for commercial tenants? Do you say you build patios or do you say you create living spaces to serve as a backdrop for countless good times with friends and families?

Successful communication requires identifying with the listener, and good marketing relies on the ability of the marketer to clearly promote the benefits of their services. Write down the services you offer. Then write down the benefits of each of those services. People buy benefits.

Put someone in charge of your marketing

The best person for your marketing position may already be working for you. Look for an employee who seems to "get it" and understands why people are buying from your company to begin with. An ideal marketing coordinator will be able to think like your clients in order to plan creatively for future marketing efforts. The owner generally has the clearest vision of the company's unique selling proposition and should be involved in the marketing plan. However, green industry business owners often have significant operational responsibilities and need to delegate marketing responsibilities to other individuals.

Develop marketing channels

Look at each segment of your client base as an individual channel to target. If you offer a diverse group of services, this segmentation can be done in terms of which services certain clients buy, leading you to develop mini marketing plans for individual types of consumers.

If you offer a narrower set of services, you'll need to develop a clear picture of who your buyers are. For example, Gary Donovan's TurfMasters has grown to one of the largest independent lawn care companies in Connecticut in just six years by avoiding diversification in favor of specialization. "We've developed a strong sense of who we are and, more importantly, who we aren't, which has allowed us to focus all our energy on our best prospects," Donovan says.

Go on the offensive

At the outset of the current economic downturn, many companies made a hasty decision to cut marketing expenses. If you look at marketing competition as a battle, this is equivalent to retreating. Every company needs to watch costs, but if other companies are reducing their marketing efforts, you have an immediate advantage by maintaining or increase yours.

Polish your public image

Ideally, your employees and vehicles will add to your company's professional image. Practically speaking, landscaping is a



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dirty job. Ask a friend or family member to drive by a couple of job sites and give you an outside perspective on the image your employees are portraying. Based on what you learn, develop a written policy for appearance on the job site.

It's a small part of successful marketing that's consistently overlooked.

Become more visible

Opportunities abound for landscape companies to provide community ser-

vice. Schools, churches and community groups of all sorts can use your help. If your locale has a community vegetable garden program, volunteer to prep beds in return for posting a sign with your company name and logo. Or, visit ProjectEvergreen.com/gcft and become a GreenCare for Troops volunteer. Through GreenCare for Troops, you can donate services to a family with a loved one on active duty in the military.

Use job site signs

Job site signs are a simple and effective means of communication. Posting signs enables neighbors to see a new landscape installation and immediately get a visual referral to your company. You can also post a sign to mark a job in progress, which is a good idea if you're on the property for more than a week.

Say thanks

Thanking your customers is one of the easiest things you can do to improve your image. It's also the right thing to do. Our businesses only operate because of our clients, so show your appreciation. I prefer to pick up the phone, though handwritten notes and e-mails do the job as well. The key is to be sincere.

Act like success matters

"More than anything else — more than tactics, more than money — marketing is a matter of will," Donovan says. "It's creating a will and a desire in your organization to succeed, and then using that attitude to outthink and outwork your competition." The culture of a company is created by its leadership. As an owner, you need to lead your army into the competitive marketplace by example. Create a marketing plan and champion it to your staff. Then work harder and smarter than your competition. *LM*

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When good referrals turn bad

WITH ALL OF the effort you are putting forth to excel in your career, there's nothing worse than wasting a perfectly good referral that was hand delivered to you by a happy customer (associate, friend, family member, and so on).

There are a few things you can do to destroy a referral and any possibility for a sale: poor follow up, poor service, a comment you made to the referral that you were better off keeping to yourself, or a sales tactic that turned the warm referral into a cold fish.

Think about what destroying that referrals costs you. The most obvious cost would be the loss of a perfectly good selling opportunity. However, there's much more at stake that you stand to lose.

Think about the person on your referral team (a select group of individuals who provide you with a steady stream of referrals). This person is putting their neck on the line for you. Once your referral source gets wind of what happened, you can bet this will be the last time that person ever sends you another referral. It not only costs you one possible sale but all of the potential future sales that you have lost because you compromised the relationship you have with your referral source.

To take it one step further, what if it was a customer who sent you this referral? How does this customer now perceive you? Demonstrating this less than admirable trait to a customer may change their once positive perception of you and tarnish the trust and confidence they had in you. Not only have you lost the chance of getting any future referrals from them but you now run the risk of losing this customer's future business that you would have normally earned.

How to protect and encourage continued referrals and sales.

BY KEITH ROSEN

Just like your customers, referrals are a privilege, not a right. You don't automatically deserve referrals, you have to earn them regardless of how long you've been in your position, known someone or how much work you've already done for a customer.

Keep in mind the players on your referral team are doing you the favor, so make sure you appreciate their efforts in a measurably visible way. They are the ones who are taking time out of their busy schedule to help you.

The biggest blunder people make is, once they start getting referrals, they forget to thank the person who provided them. Thank each person on your referral team when you:

1 Get the referral. Call with words of thanks or send a thank you card letting them know how much you appreciate

ate them thinking of you and taking the time out of their busy day to send you a referral. Reinforce the fact that each referral will be taken care of and given the exemplary service and attention that every one of your customers deserve.

2 Meet with the referral. After you connect with the referred prospect, call or send a thank you card as well as an update on where each referral stands as it relates to your selling cycle.

3 Turn the referral into a customer. Once the sale is made and the referral becomes a customer, rather than waiting until you have completed this project, immediately call your referral source and send a thank you card. This way, you are the first person to let them know their referral is now a customer of yours, rather than having your referral source hear it from the person who they referred to you.

Before you know it, you may not have to market or prospect as much as you think due to the influx of referrals you are generating. **LM**

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GROWTH GOALS 1. Ask for referrals. 2. **Protect your referral team, thanking them regularly.** 3. Follow-through with referred potential customers. 4. **Turn referrals into customers.**

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E-newsletter marketing

MOST COMPANIES HAVE exciting news to share with their customers. Great deals, special pricing and informative articles can turn readers from casual customers to product evangelists. Finding the right method to deliver your message can make all of the difference. E-newsletters, if done correctly, can deliver the right message, to the right people, at the right time. If done incorrectly, they can ruin your business.

So hopefully, your traditional and online search marketing efforts have met some level of success — and you now find potential customers hitting your website to learn more about your services. What's the next step? Web traffic can be a fickle friend. You typically have a few fleeting moments to capture potential customers' interests and motivate them to action. First and foremost, that action should be to buy.

But what about customers who need more information or a higher comfort level before doing business with you? You can't count on them returning to your website, so motivating them to opt in to your e-mail marketing campaigns ensures you have several more chances to convert them into customers.

Just about every large online retailer offers e-newsletters of one sort or another. The online shoes and clothing retailer Zappos.com, known for its customer service, offers a weekly e-newsletter listing special deals and new products. But e-newsletters don't need to be strictly sales related to be useful. You may want to consider an e-newsletter with helpful "how-to" articles that are informative and help position your company as an expert in your industry. Building credibility can lead to great word-of-mouth advertising and sales.

The key to a good e-newsletter is consistency. Carefully describe what type of publication you are offering on the web signup page, and then stick to it.

Dos and Don'ts

When it comes to e-newsletters, there are a couple of rules to follow. I'm referring to the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003. The Federal Trade Commission has a great compliance guide (online at FTC.gov), which can result in penalties of up to \$16,000 if not followed. In essence, these guide-

Using the right technology, following the law and providing customers with relevant and engaging content can significantly improve your business and build great word-of-mouth advertising and sales.

BY TYLER WHITAKER

lines can be characterized by the ideas of not being deceptive, being forthcoming on who you are and your location, and allowing people to easily opt out of future e-mail — all things a normal company, looking to grow, would do by default. But it's surprising how often companies stumble by not paying attention.

The best way to handle the details involved with successful e-newsletter campaigns is to use the right technology. There are several online services that can turn your ideas and content into professional marketing pieces that conform to the law and deliver the results you want. Look for a solution that offers e-mail templates, signup forms, list management tools and, most importantly, reporting analytics for tracking who reads and clicks through to your website. Vendors such as VerticalResponse.com, ConstantContact.com and iContact.com have spent years perfecting the art of e-mail marketing. Pricing is typically based on the number of subscribers you have, which makes it easy to get started and test things out. Most have plans that start around \$10 to \$15 per month.

One tried-and-true method for reaching your customers on a regular basis is through e-newsletters. If your business doesn't have something to share, you've got other problems. But if you've been doing direct mail, consider making a small shift to e-newsletters — and start building your business. **LM**

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GROWTH GOALS 1. Use e-newsletters to reach your customers on a regular basis. 2. Use sharp and relevant content to keep customers interested and continually checking your website. 3. Once you start, be consistent.

