

[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.

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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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