



BEST PRACTICES

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The “forgotten” marketing best practices for small business

Recently I observed three different companies try to ignore the same three marketing best practices. In their rush to complete their annual business plans, they avoided identifying their ideal customer, got sidetracked by the tools they were going to use (instead of what they wanted to accomplish) and decided that marketing results couldn't be measured.

Every day I experienced the same trifecta of marketing planning missteps and knew what the inevitable results would be. The intent of my points here is to help you rescue yourself from the same blunders by using best practices.

Identify the ideal customer

A frequently neglected best practice is identifying the ideal customer. One of the more common rationalizations is “everyone is a potential customer.” This is like shooting an arrow at a target with your eyes closed. Defining your ideal customer will allow you to hone in on a specific and unique marketing strategy that will get you noticed.

Recently, we benchmarked the marketing efforts of an engineering firm whose differentiating claim was based on its principals' collective experience and the diverse clients they had serviced. They assembled a brochure highlighting this expertise, peppered with testimonials from various industries. They believed the brochure appealed to everyone. The

problem was that by aiming to hit everyone they stood out to no one. The message was so diluted they seemed to have dabbled in everything, but have no expertise at all.

Define your target customer and base it on the criteria of who is more likely to buy, buy more often, at a higher margin, stay with you longer and need less convincing than others. Your business can have several targets, but the messaging should be different for each because the needs of each will be different.

Focus on the goals

A marketing plan states the company's goals and outlines the specific tactics that will be executed to achieve those goals. Many companies start with specific goals but get distracted by the latest and greatest tools. As the fixation grows on the need for the latest application of **Foursquare** or beta testing the up-to-the-minute sales force automation software, staff members lose sight of the effectiveness of these tools as they relate to the achievement of their goals. The decision becomes what software to select, not whether new software is the best use of resources.

One design client had set her firm's marketing goal for the year to attract 20 new active clients. She had a very specific ideal client in mind. Her company was then approached by a search engine optimization company. Next thing I

knew, the firm had spent \$100,000 in six months, redesigning its website, setting up an e-commerce store and hiring a person dedicated full time to Tweeting and blogging.

It developed quite a following in the design world – more than 1,000 followers in very short order. The problem? These followers weren't in its target market and weren't there to buy, just to look.

Had the design company not set goals from the outset, it

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could have rationalized that it had achieved huge exposure in a short period of time and that the “success” would turn into revenue and customers sooner or later. Because of the goals, however, the situation was salvageable.

At the six-month point, the firm embarked on a strategic review of its efforts and the results, which were zero new customers. It changed tactics, reallocating their resources to focus on more traditional media that was more likely to connect with its ideal customers. It ended the year having at-

tracted 12 clients – far short of the 20 it had targeted but not bad for the remaining six months of the year, given the original missteps.

Measure the results

Why do so many businesses think marketing efforts cannot be measured? Part of the problem is not setting goals in the first place and therefore being unable to reverse engineer the measurement. Or maybe someone told them marketing results can't be measured, and they decided to believe it so they didn't have to try.

Without measurement, it is impossible to know what resources should be dedicated to marketing and whether you have exceeded expectation, fallen flat or fall somewhere in between. A company that does not measure its results is condemned to forever repeat its mistakes and fall further and further behind its competitors.

Your company should identify its ideal customer, stay focused on the goals and measure results. What next? Instead of saying “huh” and turning the page, decide that your company will follow best practices. ■

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