

Tricks of the Trade: Ready for the upturn?

“I seldom saw an opportunity until it had ceased to be one.”

Mark Twain

Be vigilant over the coming months and keep an open mind. With some straightforward but insightful marketing, you could be in better shape on the way *out* of this downturn than you were on the way in. These five top tips can make a big difference.

Tip 1: When did you last ask your customers what they thought of you?

Your customers know your business very well - what you sell, how you sell it, the accuracy of your paperwork, how you handle complaints, whether they *enjoy* doing business with you, who your best people are, what else they'd like to buy from you - and much more. If anyone's going to have valuable advice to improve your business, they're it. So when did you last ask them?

Let me quickly reset anyone who's thinking that surveys are expensive. No Nonsense uses a powerful technique to survey up to 50 customers in personal interviews *and* analyse the results for a three figure sum. Now we've got over that, what's stopping you? The results will help you recoup your investment several times over in a matter of weeks.

As well as driving tangible product/service additions and improvements, surveys have intangible benefits too. Customers feel valued when you ask for their opinion. They're delighted to hear how you're going to act on the results because they know they've played a part in helping your business. What you decide to change benefits them - so everyone's a winner.

For your business, survey results have even more uses. They're a quality improvement benchmark because you can repeat the survey at a later date and compare results. They're great for comparing your business vs. its competitors. They're a great motivator for your team and a PR opportunity too.

That's a lot of value in a short time for a modest outlay that you can easily recoup!

When would you like to start?

Tip 2: Keep in touch with customers and known contacts

It's too easy to get hung up on political correctness, costs and the articles to include. As your marketing consultant, I'm going to make it very easy and tell you to make *sure* that you keep in regular contact with your customers and all known contacts!

Why?

To let them know you appreciate them, value them and would like to provide them with some interesting and useful material to help their businesses. That's what the content of your newsletter should be, by the way. Get out of the mindset that you're pestering them and get into the mindset of providing really useful hints, tips, information etc that can help them in their businesses.

Often, customers and known contacts are severely underestimated by businesses; they are your fastest route to new customers so look after them! Known contacts can quickly become customers - they've probably made a decision to buy from you already but haven't yet had the opportunity to do so. Keep in touch and one of these days, the order will arrive.

Let's tackle the frequency of sending a newsletter before moving on to the next tip. Daily and weekly communications are the province of the news wires - so keep it that way. Monthly is a possibility but I still think it comes round too fast. In my experience, 3 - 4 communications per year is enough to remind people that you're still around and the elapsed time since the last newsletter is enough of an event in their inbox/post that they'll open it to have a quick read. How do I know? It's what I do for No Nonsense.

Tip 3: Adopt a charity - how good karma adds £££s to the bottom line

Two-thirds of customers would rather buy from a company who supports a charity. Three-quarters of employees would rather work for a company who supports a charity. Picking the right charity is crucial, but why does charity support work so well?

- It says your business isn't just in it for the money (but you're still allowed to make a profit, by the way...).
- It says your company is in touch with the times and cares about wider issues.
- You raise awareness of the charity and the charity raises awareness of you - it's a win-win situation.
- Association with a charity helps buyers and prospects to remember *your* company ahead of its competitors.
- Being proud of the charity you support makes customers and employees proud to be associated with you.

So how do you make it work? The golden rule is to pick a charity that fits well with your brand:

1. Same location

If you're a national company, pick a nationwide charity. If you're a local company, pick a local charity and so on.

2. Consistent aims

No point supporting Cancer Research if you make sunbeds. No point supporting Keep Britain Tidy if you make chewing gum (Wrigley's famous backfire). If there's no obvious match with your business, tap into a cause close to your customers' hearts. This Charity Brand Index (PR Week, November 2009) may help, but if you're a local business, keep it local if you can.

1 st	Macmillan Cancer Support
2 nd	Cancer Research UK
3 rd	NSPCC
4 th	RSPCA
5 th	BBC Children in Need
=6 th	British Heart Foundation
=6 th	Comic Relief
8 th	Marie Curie Cancer Care
=9 th	British Red Cross
=9 th	RNLI

3. Supported by your staff

Getting your people involved with the charity you support gets them closer to your brand - and that improves retention rates (another win-win). Make sure it's something they can believe in and support genuinely too.

The final word is on being carbon neutral. It's good, takes determination and cuts costs, but I don't think it passes the "So what?" test so easily these days because customers expect you to treat the environment with respect. You can express more of your company's personality by picking a charity, but if you're unsure, children and cancer related charities have the widest audience and highest appeal - as proved by the brand index above

So polish your halo, pick a charity and start enjoying the good karma that comes back!

Tip 4: High on success, low on cost: references are the V8 engine of marketing

Reference marketing is one of marketing's silver bullets. It could increase your sales leads by 30% or more and it works for everyone. Your customers feel valued. It costs little to do and can be used in a vast variety of ways. And it really impresses prospective customers because they get a free try before they buy.

So what is it? Reference marketing means using the positive feedback and experiences of your existing customers to attract new ones.

"Can't you just make them up?" I'm often asked. If your reference is from the likes of BMW, HSBC or Vodafone, no, you need their approval (and they're usually very helpful). And I wouldn't

recommend making references up anyway because it's too easy to be found out in our socially networked world.

Another great plus point (and money saver) is the versatility of references. They can be written, in audio or video format, posted as a comment or blogged. You can use them on your website, in sales literature and presentations, in your reception area, at your shareholders' meeting, in employee appraisals, in your online PR..... that's enough! For the costs involved, reference marketing is the marketing activity with the most consistent and highest return on investment that I've ever seen.

So where to start? Get a list of your happy customers together and ask them for a reference! If you're a little embarrassed by that, call No Nonsense for some helpful tips. The designers and corporate video partners in the No Nonsense Network may come in handy too. Enjoy!

Tip 5: Get your own house in order

If there's something that's been preying on your mind about your business, something uncomfortable, something you know your company needs to change....

- To make it easier for customers to do business with you
- To get slicker in your business
- To motivate your people
- To "wow" your customers
- **Then do it now!**
- And if costs are against you at the moment, budget for it and do it soon.

You know what that "something" is and you've been putting it off. No excuses now. No procrastination. No guts and no glory. It might be a bullet but you only have to bite it once - and it could turn out to be silver in the end ☺.

For more information

For more information, please contact Penny Lines at No Nonsense Marketing on 01625 410681 / 07932 158845, by email at penny@no-nonsense-marketing.co.uk or via the enquiry form on the contact page of the website at www.no-nonsense-marketing.co.uk.

Wishing you all the best in your marketing - and no nonsense!