

OWEN MORRIS ‘*Smart Marketing*’ Bulletin

Nov / Dec 2008

PROMOTE YOUR BUSINESS BY ‘WORD OF MOUTH’ AND GIVING IT ‘WOW’ APPEAL!

If you want your business to really grow, forget the traditional ideas you may have of advertising and promotion. Instead, start “wow-ing” your marketplace !

Most marketing of the last 50 years – and indeed still today – has focused on ‘*pushing*’ products or services at customers by using advertising and other promotional methods. The company advertises.... the customer is interrupted and his attention gained and the focused presentation of a few features or benefits leads the customer to buy.

Actually, this is no longer how more and more customers buy. For three key reasons.

Firstly, customers can hardly hear you. Every day all of us are exposed to an avalanche of commercial messages – perhaps over fifteen hundred ads every day. To protect themselves, consumers filter out most of the messages they are exposed to from the general media.

Secondly, consumers are increasingly sceptical and distrustful of companies. Unfortunately, most of us have experienced bad service or been let down from suppliers we have used, so we are pre-programmed to expect the worst from a company – until proven otherwise.

Thirdly, customers are themselves better informed about many types of products and services *and* make use of social networks (family, friends, work colleagues etc) they belong to for finding out additional information and deciding what to believe and buy.

Today, to promote your business effectively, you need to think in terms of ‘*pulling*’ customers to you rather than pushing products at them. This means doing two critical things:

- ensuring that what you offer your customers not only stands out from your competition but has one or two compelling ‘*wow factors*’; and
- developing marketing ‘*buzz*’ about your business and products/services, whereby your customers spread favourable word about you in the marketplace

Focus

A key question for any business today: If you are no different from your competitors, then why should customers bother to buy from you?

In a world where competition seems to be everywhere, you need to separate yourself from the rest. If you compete on price, only the customer will win – the company with the lowest prices (which means

the biggest buying power) will get the business. If you try to be same as the rest, a ‘me-too’ business, it is normally extremely difficult to survive in the long run.

The rule of the game nowadays in business is that you need to *differentiate* yourself to survive and prosper. You can do this in terms of *focusing on selected parts of the market* and/or offering *something distinctive or better than what your rivals promise*.

If you are wanting to focus on a certain target group in your market, select these people on the basis, for example, that they are particularly numerous in your local area or in your existing customer base; or they are poorly served currently by your competitors; or your business has particular strengths or capabilities that are relevant to them.

‘Wow’ appeal

The alternative way to stand out – offering something distinctive or better compared to your competitors – requires a considered review of the competitive strength and quality of each of the key features/benefits that a business like yours offers to customers. Work through each of these factors and consider if you offer just about the **same quality, better quality, or truly outstanding quality**.

For example, a review for a small healthcare retail chain might produce the following assessment:

Element	Same	Better	Outstanding
- Convenient locations		X	
- Clean/tidy/attractive premises	X		
- Expert knowledgeable counter staff	X		
- Can easily speak to pharmacist	X		
- Staff are friendly and courteous	X		
- Wide range of products		X	
- Range of extra health advice services			X
- Low prices / lots of special offers	X		
- Range of health information leaflets			X
- Pleasant consultation area			X
- Staff know me and my needs well		X	

In this example, the business would do well to emphasize its extensive advisory/consultation services and facilities.

To help arrive at a reasonably accurate assessment for your business, it is best to involve a number of people in carrying out the exercise, including a range of staff and some willing ‘friendly’ customers and potential customers.

Those elements where you think you are ‘better’ than your competitors represent specific factors for you to differentiate your business with. You should develop and enhance these areas of strength further as much as you can.

If your review turns up any ‘outstanding’ elements, then you are very fortunate, as these are ‘wow’ factors that could well give you a real, strong competitive edge in your marketplace. Do a bit more consultation and checking out first in more detail amongst more customers to double-check, but you should plan to major on these factors in your future marketing as a strategy for differentiating you over your competitors.

Don't worry if your business review does not identify any obvious operational 'wow' factors, as there are other sources of 'wow' appeal you might be able to focus on. It is a matter of looking and thinking creatively around all aspects of your business and trying to come up with an 'angle' – an idea, message or notion – that sounds interesting, different and fresh which you could use to help create a 'point of difference' for your firm.

Examples of other aspects of your business where you might find some potential 'wow' factors you could use:

- Unusual or extra-ordinary approach to customer service
- Specific product lines. Do you sell any special or unusual products?
- Specific services – Do you offer any very specialist or unusual service?
- People – e.g. have all of your customer service staff passed a high-level qualification?
- Your location – e.g. is there something noteworthy or unusual about it?
- Relationships with other people/organisations e.g. do you give money to a local charity?

Another potential source of differentiation for you is to come up with and promote a distinctive '*point of view*' concerning issues relevant to your customers. Do you have a particular belief, prediction, or opinion that is rather unusual and, ideally, a little bit provocative or unexpected? The more you can back-up your beliefs or arguments with good insight or relevant expertise or services in your business, the stronger and more credible your 'wow' point of difference will be.

Ideally, your chosen 'wow' factor will have some semi-permanence and sustainability to it rather than being transient. It should also be rather difficult for any competitor to copy. If this is not possible, though, you will have to use more tactical, shorter-lasting ideas. Examples of such topics:

- A promotional sales offer you are running
- A marketing gimmick or eye-catching stunt of some sort
- Provision of some free information or advice
- Holding of a particular event
- Comment on a particular external topic in the news currently or coming up
- Support or sponsorship you are giving to a local charity or health activity

Stimulating the buzz

Once you have selected, developed and fine-tuned your particular source of 'wow' appeal for your business, you obviously need to 'spread the word' – amongst your customers and other groups of people you come into contact with. The pleasing fact is that, to a significant extent, you can rely on the word spreading quite a lot by itself by sheer '**word of mouth**' communication by your customers and other people – provided, that is, your 'wow' factor is perceived as credible as well as fresh and interesting to talk about.

Humans are born to talk to each other and will naturally ‘pass the word’ on about you as the opportunity arises – to other customers, family members, friends, work colleagues and so on. In turn, some of those people will contact you and also may mention you to contacts in their own ‘social network’. So the chain of ‘marketing buzz’ moves on.

However, you cannot rely on this chain to work by itself to its fullest extent. For example, some enthusiastic customers may be poor at describing you to others or may take a long time before they mention you to others. Therefore, you need proactively to nudge, stimulate and assist the ‘buzz’ to flow as fully and widely as possible.

The first thing to do is to make sure that you speak to all those individuals who you know to be your keenest supporters - across all your different ‘stakeholder’ groups – and make sure they know about and appreciate your defined ‘wow’ factor(s). Furthermore, be sure to say that you would positively like them to pass on the word about you to their contacts and answer any questions they may have. Most individuals won’t need to be asked to mention you to others, but it does no harm and gives an extra nudge to those that might be rather hesitant or unsure.

The most important ‘advocates’ for you to talk to early on are all your employees and your most loyal and satisfied customers. Next consider other professionals, managers and contacts you deal with or work with from other organisations, together with contacts from your suppliers (e.g. wholesaler, manufacturers). Other people to consider include, for example, any local key contacts in the local community (e.g. local councillors), your professional arena (e.g. membership body) and perhaps the local media.

With all these individuals – from your own employees to external contacts – it is vital to use a ‘*keep in touch*’ communications programme so that everyone keeps up-to-date – and reminded – about what’s going on at your firm and so are helped to feel involved, motivated and positive towards you.

However, a range of useful tools and techniques are available to boost further the buzz you create about your business and help make it easier or more likely for your ‘supporters’ to interact with other people and talk about your firm when they do. These include:

- Flyer / hand-out leaflet, which gives succinct information about your firm
- Email newsletter (which people can easily forward to others)
- Informal / social event for your customers
- Information seminar – to which customers and non customers can come
- A customer discussion area, message board, or similar on your website
- A blog or online discussion forum
- Promotional give-away items branded with your firm’s name e.g. pen, bag
- Coupons or discount vouchers
- A short video, DVD, podcast, webinar or other similar electronic information piece

Start ‘buzzing’ about *your* business today! It’s the future way to grow your business.
