

How to get the results you want from your marketing. Four steps to a marketing plan that really works

By Jane Heaton

This article gives a practical insight into creating a marketing plan that really works for entrepreneurs, micro and small businesses.

Mention those two words, “marketing plan” to many small business owners and, at best, you hear a stifled groan and see their eyes start to glaze over. But the fact is that most people are disillusioned with marketing plans simply because they have not yet found the right type of plan that works for them. If you did one once (maybe for your bank manager), and it’s been sitting in your bottom drawer for the last two years or more, then, clearly, it’s not doing anything for you.

If, at the same time, you are struggling to make the most of your marketing budget, are unsure about what marketing activities you should be doing, and have no real idea what results you’re getting from the things that you are doing, then you need a plan. If you’ve been up and running for some time, but know you need more customers, then you need a plan. If you’re just starting up, but have no idea how to start getting customers, then you definitely need a plan.

The plan you need, however, is a practical tool that will give you a framework in which to make decisions and that you will use day in, day out to steer your business. You need a marketing plan that works for you.

So, let’s think of your marketing plan for a moment as a well-oiled machine. Now it doesn’t matter what machine you are thinking of here. It could be a beautiful, hand crafted, antique clock, or a sleek Harley Davidson, or even one of those fairground hurdy-gurdies. The thing is, it’s made up of various bits, all interlinked, each with a definite purpose. Whoever designed it, put all the bits together in a certain order, to achieve the required outcome – telling the time, the ride of your life, or churning out endless repetitions of Old MacDonald Had a Farm. To keep it running in perfect time, you have to lovingly maintain it and sometimes tinker with it a bit. But if you do this, then you know it will keep giving you just what you need when you need it.

The good news is that there are only really four steps to putting together a marketing plan that works like this.

1. Work out what you need to achieve in financial terms and what you need to sell in order to get there. You’ll need to do your homework here on pricing and building your cashflow.
2. Focus on what you do and who you do it for. This is the part where textbooks talk about defining your market. The process should be continuous. You probably started off with something you wanted to do – a skill or a passion. Then you thought about who might want it. Well, OK. Once you’ve got to that point however, it is vital that you close the loop by developing a crystal clear understanding of the type of customer you want to target – and the specific things they need from you and your offering. Then, go back to “what you do” and refine your offering to match those needs as closely as possible. And keep on doing that – by entering into a dialogue with actual customers once you’ve actually got some.

It’s better to focus on a very specific group of people, or a “niche”. You’ll be concentrating your efforts with a greater chance of success. There’s nothing stopping you having more than one niche, but you’ll need to have enough resources (time and money) to nurture and market to each one.

At this stage you need to think about your competitors, what makes you stand out from the crowd, and what's happening in the wider world that will help or hinder you.

3. Once you have worked out exactly who you are targeting and what you are offering them, you then need to work out how you are going to convert complete strangers into paying customers. Now this is the point where many people simply miss out the detail. This bit is about building a logical, robust marketing process, often called a "pipeline" process. It's not enough to think that if you just make people aware of what you do, they will somehow magically end up buying from you. Leave it like this and you'll have a yawning chasm the size of the Grand Canyon in your pipeline into which many potential customers will fall, never to be seen again. What you need to do here is to write down exactly how you will move people from

Having no idea that you even exist
to
Being aware of you and what you do
to
Being interested in what you have to offer and telling you so
to
Actually experiencing a little bit of what you have to offer
to
Parting with their hard earned cash for what you have to offer.
And then buying from you again
and telling all their friends how fantastic you are.

When you have worked out exactly how you are going to move people through each of those stages, you have your marketing strategy.

4. Now, and only now, can you decide what marketing activities you will use to persuade your prospects / customers do what you want them to at each stage of your pipeline process. How much will each marketing activity cost you in terms of time and money? How will you measure the success of each marketing activity that you have selected? What, therefore, will be your return on your marketing investment? This is your tactical action plan.

The key thing here is that you are not thinking about specific marketing activities until step 4. Do I need a leaflet, a web site? What should they say? What should they look like? Should I be doing PR, taking out an advert? If so, in which newspapers or magazines? Should I be going to networking events? If so where, which ones? What should I be saying about myself?

Having done steps 1 to 3, you'll be much better placed to answer these and many other questions. You will be selecting marketing activities based on the role they will play in your pipeline process. If you are going for funding, you will be able to explain and justify your marketing budget.

So, there you have it. Four steps to building a marketing plan that will really work for you. And because it will work for you, you'll naturally find that you are putting time aside to keep on developing it to make it work even better, using feedback from your own experiences and contact with customers.

Jane Heaton is a freelance marketing professional who works with owners of small businesses to help them get the results they want from their marketing. She can help you work out what to do and how to get it done. However, Jane also knows that having the inspiration and confidence to take action is an important key to success. That's why her blend of consultancy, mentoring and practical help focuses on keeping both you and your business in good shape.

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