

The Business Monthly

THE BUSINESS NEWSPAPER OF HOWARD COUNTY, COLUMBIA & LAUREL

A new business owner asks...

by Carolyn West Price

In a recent meeting with the owner of a new business, he asked questions that I've answered thousands of times over the years. Given that these are on the minds of many new and existing businesses, I thought this column would be a perfect venue to answer them for those who may not have the opportunity to ask in person.



Carolyn Price, president of IMPACT Marketing & PR

Q: How do you identify and cost-effectively reach prospective customers?

A: Of course, each business will have a different definition of the ideal prospect, depending upon whether the business is business-to-business, retail, mail order, web-based, non-profit or something else. The exercise in identifying what a prospect looks like in terms of demographics, psychographics, and buying habits is the same, however. Once these characteristics are identified, the next task is to evaluate your options for getting a list of the prospects.

You'll need to decide: Do you buy a mailing list by giving the criteria to a list company? Do you go through the phone book or a directory and make your own list? Do you buy a database from another company?

Also, you'll want to consider other "categories" of people who need to hear about your business. Call these influencers—people who can refer business to you by virtue of the relationship they have with their clients. The media, employees, friends and family, and the general community (to create aware-

ness and goodwill) should be included in your communications plans.

Q: How much contact do you make with prospects? existing customers?

A: Again, this answer depends upon several variables: How competitive is your market? How much do you need to educate the market about your concept before you can even worry about educating them about your specific organization? And, what do you offer that others do not?

Once you answer these questions, knowing that consumer-oriented marketing will take a lot more money than business-to-business marketing, you need to devise a plan to reach your markets cost-effectively, but most importantly—consistently. Remember, it takes between seven and 13 "touches" before a customer is called to action. And, for those with whom you have an existing relationship, stay in their faces or your competition. And, make them feel appreciated.

Q: When you're calling on commercial accounts, how do you handle the "we already have someone" rejection?

A: First, consider every "no" as putting you that much closer to a "yes" statistically. Second, you can ask if you can leave cards and periodically call on them, encouraging them to try you in the event that their current vendor can't make it or is poor on follow-up (happens a lot!).

Remember, in this day of job-hopping, the decision maker at that account may be here today and gone tomorrow, too, so don't hesitate to stop back periodically to express your professionalism and enthusiasm or meet the new decision maker.

Also, consider other ways to stay in touch with these prospects so you earn and retain name awareness. Consider sending postcards, "FYI" copies of arti-

cles you may get published, and even inviting the contact to a mutually beneficial networking event so you can get to know him or her better. Also, attend a sales training seminar; they're the experts in sales techniques for handling objections; I just know what works for me and some of my clients.

Q: What can you expect during your first year?

A: This is nearly impossible to answer on a global level, but it is fair to say that there is a direct relationship between the effort and resources you put into a company (not necessarily only dollars) and what you get out of it. If you are truly committed, even with a small budget (enough to do professional collateral materials, including uniforms, if appropriate, as it was in the case of this owner who asked the question), and if you state clear objectives with a plan of action to reach them, and stick to it, you will get where you want to go. Or at least you'll be in an educated position to revise those objectives (assuming you were overly optimistic or something in the market changed over the year).

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