

Getting Out the Word  
Small Business Edition  
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At this very moment there are AT LEAST 9 other companies competing for YOUR customers. How will you convince them to buy from you?

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers - ever wonder what did he do with them once he'd picked them all? Marketing is the process of picking, preparing, and pricing a product (or service) to promote for purchase. Peter may very well have gone into the salsa business, opened a produce stand, or a restaurant. But how did he draw customers in and get them to buy his spicy product?

The success of any business depends upon its ability to attract, and retain, customers. When you started your company you decided many of the marketing strategies needed to bring a product or service to market. These strategies include how your business solves a problem or fills a need, and who your target market is, then you open the store. Now it's time to drive traffic to your front door.

Promotion is the process and the product of "getting out the word". Rarely does a product or service arise that does not require some type of promotion to generate sales.

There are three major strategies to connect with customers. Although each method can be effective independently, utilize a combination for a well-rounded marketing plan. A multi-channel approach utilizes Advertising (the production and placement of ads) with the personal interaction of Sales, and the least expensive - yet least controllable channel, Public Relations. Armed with all three, savvy business owners construct an arsenal of promotion tools. You must determine which form of which method to use when and with whom - then evaluate cost effectiveness by a cost per response ratio.

Advertising is, in its most simple form, the practice of informing the public about your goods or services - and compelling them to make a purchase. You control the message - which should be consistent with your identity, the placement - which should be targeted, and the frequency and timing - which should be often enough to remind your customers of who you are and what you do. Many believe that the average person must be exposed to an ad piece seven times to be motivated by it. The message should produce awareness and effectively maintain a positive image of your company, goods and services - while persuading the public that your goods or services outperform competitors.

#### Getting the 411

When it comes to deciding where to spend advertising dollars, start with the basic Yellow Pages ad. All directory ads have one thing in common - they supply information to a consumer who is ready to buy a product or service. Therefore, directory ads represent the one time when you need not convince the consumer to buy - you just need to convince them to buy FROM YOU. Your ad will be surrounded by competitors' ads for the same or similar goods and services.

So, how do you convince the customer to hire you? First, your ad has to be seen. Second, your ad has to scream experience and reliability. Getting noticed is priority, so make sure your ad is under the heading that is most commonly sought after for your product or service. You don't want an Air Conditioning business listed under Retirement Homes. Often there will be multiple

categories for an ad under, so look through the book before you place the call. Multiple listings should also yield a discounted rate.

Size matters! The bigger the ad, the more noticeable it will be, and the more information you can include. Look at competitors, look at your budget and then purchase the largest space you can afford. Content must-haves include products/services offered, years in business, licensing, any seals or other reliability sellers, logo, location, phone number, hours and website address.

As with all your advertising monies spent, keep a record of which promotions return the best - so make it a point to ask new customers how they heard about your business - track and repeat the winners, dump the losers. The directory ad is just the beginning.

What's black, and white, and read all over?

That old riddle is not far off the mark. Truth is, newspaper ads are location driven, and reach a broad audience. The broader the audience, the more difficult it becomes to target your specific customer. Difficult, however is not impossible and newspapers are often a fine tool for getting out the word.

Carefully select the title, section, size, frequency, content and design of your ad - and the offer is crucial, so test a few different ones.

Remember that dailies are short lived - today's news is tomorrow's recyclable. Frequency is often the solution to this challenge. Repeat ads build recognition and credibility. As the number one media for local advertising, competition in the newspaper arena is nearly as fierce as in the case of directory ads, so consult a marketing expert for help with the intricacies of newspaper advertising. A professional advertising agency will design and place ads for you. Leaving the important design decisions to your newspaper sales rep is NEVER a good idea.

Local Yocals

Local magazines, co-op mailers, and freebies are usually mailed or made available on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis. They target convenience by hitting small segments of households or businesses within a limited radius - and they're usually more affordable than daily papers. If your product or service is location reliant, this type of ad should be in the mix. Include an incentive coupon or such to drive initial sales. If you live close to your business, watch what comes in the mail daily - examine each piece and think like a buyer...is it something you normally open and read? What prompts you to buy? If you're not interested in a publication, others may feel the same. Be critical and be selective. Most mailers of this type are printed on a higher quality paper stock than newsprint, and color reproduction is often improved to give you more options for creating an attention grabbing ad. On the downside of these publications, they're often unsolicited and therefore readership numbers are harder to gauge than subscription publications.

Hitting the Big Time

Regional and national consumer magazines and trade journals have a longer shelf life than newspapers. Major magazines have extensive reader demographics, and allowing extremely targeting placement. If you're a local business, most nationals have small target ranges, and if you have a website, in many cases you don't even need to remain local only! Keep in mind that the audience size you select will impact the ad cost just as much as the size and type of ad you place. One drawback to monthly publications - lead time. Often you may wait months to see your ad in print. Research a few publications, compare rates and readership, then decide if your

budget allows for magazines - the caviar of publication ads.

### Get To the Point, Please

Targeted, response rate driven, and design unlimited, direct mail is often the most attractive form of print advertising for any size business. Costs are controllable and response rates measurable, and repeatable. Choosing your mailing list is the first step. If you've developed a list of prospects, and repeat customers, start there. If not, renting a list is as easy and affordable.

Most direct mail packages include an envelope, sales letter, flier and a response card. The complete package cost will depend on quantity, paper, ink colors, and level of personalization. Professional design is a great way to ensure a consistent look, effective copy, and a better deal with the printer. Most design firms will have a relationship with a local printer. Advertising pros can help ensure your mail pieces are cost-effective and achieve results. Direct mail doesn't have to cost a small fortune. Numerous formats of direct mail pieces offer low cost without sacrificing creative options. Postcards are the most inexpensive form of single mailing, offering a multitude of paper and design options.

Self mailers also offer significant savings over the four piece mailer package. Three or four panel fold outs can be designed to include a letter, response card, flier and envelope all in one. While economical in production and printing costs, one drawback to self mailers is their uncanny ability to resemble junk mail. Make sure the outside copy compels the prospect to open the mailer. In this arena especially, it's highly recommended that you test a small portion of your list, no more than 10% of your names, with any one content. Changing your outside copy can be as inexpensive as a black plate change. Code your tests and mail several at once to different random samples, then record the response rates, analyze the results and go with the most effective. You'll want to see response rates in the 3-5% range to judge any direct mailing a success.

Before responses start coming in, make sure you're prepared to follow up leads quickly. Fulfillment, whether it's information, a sales call, shipping a product, or performing a service, will indicate your company's level of customer service. Don't create a fantastic piece, mail an expensive list and then, fail to follow through. Scale your mailings to fit your company's capabilities.

When creating a brochure or catalog, professional photography and copy writing are critical. Once you gain the interest of a prospective customer, you now have the responsibility to wow them with a fast following of a great piece. Brochures can be bi, tri or quad folded, printed on paper that looks and feels good, and must be designed to close a sale. Testimonials, examples, locations, service guarantees, everything that's good about your company product or service is here on the brochure.

Catalog page counts, paper quality, overall piece size, image quality, four color vs. black and white, photos vs. illustrations must be decided prior to design. It's an extension of your brand, so be consistent.

### New Tool of the Trade

The Internet is the most required form of advertising in the new economy. The internet affords even the smallest company the opportunity to compete with the big boys by increasing access to otherwise unreachable markets.

When you're really ready to get out the word about your business, there's no better tool for advertising across town, or around the world, than a website. You cannot grow your business exponentially without a web presence.

It doesn't really matter what type of business you're in, a website will work for you. Your competition is or will be there, so decide now - will it be your place or mine that customers visit for information, service and convenience - and ultimately, to spend their dollars. The capabilities of the web for instant gratification, visual stimulation, and information make innovation achievable for even the smallest of businesses and tightest of budgets. Whether you operate a restaurant, retail store, wholesale company, a hotel, or any product or service oriented company, there is an effective, online marketing plan for you. Look at your goals for the next year, next two years, or next five years. If they include opening new markets, improving customer and vendor communication, or reducing overhead, while increasing sales, then you have no choice but to include the internet in your plan and budget. A professionally designed website will help you achieve your business goals.

Setting goals will help ensure your web development dollars are well spent. You can expect increased revenues to recoup the cost of developing and maintaining your site if you plan wisely. A dynamic, up-to-date site will receive more traffic, and achieve its marketing goals faster, than a minimalist or non-existent web presence. The value added by an internet presence is unmistakable. Many firms stimulate in-store sales via their website, or encourage a completed sale via the site or by Email, fax or phone. Plus you'll increase your customer base via exposure to new markets and via viral marketing. Your site will enable you to respond faster to market trends, new products, customer requests, vendor confirmations, and keep your company on the cutting edge. In today's new marketplace - customers demand this level of response. The possibilities are endless, and the technology is constantly changing, as are the preferences and tastes of the market you serve. Call on a professional to tie together your goals with the latest technology and trends. A professional advertising agency will take the time to discuss your goals, business model, customer base, and budget with you - and develop a complete plan that is consistent with your brand identity, in line to meet your future expectations.

### Back IN the Box

Once you're online presence is established, the natural progression is to incorporate Email marketing. Now deemed as one of the fastest growing and best performing advertising forms, Emails can accomplish a multitude of tasks. As a customer service tool, it provides many of the functions of a traditional call center: order summaries, confirmations, shipping updates, billing info, past due and backorder notifications. Customer inquiries can be handled via incoming Email. As a marketing tool, they should coordinate with your marketing mix.

First, keep it all in the family. Don't prospect for customers with Emails and run the risk of blacklisting yourself. Develop your own permission based list of addresses.

ALWAYS have a Reason for the Campaign - while it's important to be in the spotlight with customers, be careful you're not wasting their time. Consumers want information that is useful. So whether you're sending a Newsletter, Coupon, New Product Announcement, or an Order Confirmation - make sure it's news they can use. And try to sweeten the offer - keep Emails specialized and offer deals, info and specials not readily available through other means. Offer "Secret Sales", "Limited Editions" and "First to See" promos. Always offer your best products or your top selling services.

When designing and writing your Emails, mix it up. Keep graphics and layouts ever changing to add interest. Be sure to keep the images small so they're quick to open and draw on the screen. Pay special attention to your subject line. Avoid SPAM trigger words, and write a subject line that's broad and clever. Personalize your messages: use buying habits or preferences to target

your efforts. Or, at least use their name. Be clear with your call to action by providing "Click Here" links. Test - Test - Test different ideas and keep track of responses. A professionally Email is critical, employ the services of a writer and graphic designer. Emails greet your customers just as a salesperson would. So, put your best face forward.

### Taking Up Cyberspace?

Just like opening a retail store on a busy highway or in a crowded mall is important for traffic and sales, optimizing your website and advertising it on busy, crowded search engines is important too. You pay top dollar rent for prime commercial real estate, and search engine marketing may cost you some coin as well. But if you design and host your site with a professional team, you can bank on high level marketing tactics for drawing traffic to your site. The use of keyword optimization within your site, and externally via pay-per-click ads, viral marketing techniques, and a full-service, well-rounded, marketing plan will ensure your site is not just taking up cyber-space.

SEO (search engine optimization) is cost-effective when handled correctly. The challenge is to find prospects who are thinking about your product/service at the exact time that you're there to sell. Search engines make it possible to target prospects at that very moment. Develop your website with keywords, meta tags, titles and descriptions that coincide with your content, and then submitting to search engines and directories is important to get you noticed.

Add content that's useful and specific to your industry. Search engine spiders will read through all the content and other data to index your site for display when a person types in a search term or phrase. Selecting the top terms is part of the challenge, placement is important and relevance is a must.

Purchasing Pay-Per-Click or Search Words on an engine can be as complicated as brokering stocks, but your professional ad team will weed through the mix and prepare a plan for your business and budget.

### Ride the Wave of Air

Any discussion on marketing is not complete without the queen and king of advertising mediums: radio and television. While these venues have long been out of reach for small business owners, the growth of cable TV stations, and satellite radio have opened up more market possibilities and makes these venues more affordable than you might think. Before exploring each medium individually, let's point out two golden rules for the success of radio or television campaigns. First, place ads when people are listening or watching. Second, keep ads placed tightly together for the best results. Repetition is important as it's so easy to switch the station or leave the room during the commercials. Plus, if the audience misses the address, phone number, or web address, they just can't replay the ad. Make sure commercials run close together in a time slot that has an audience in your target demographic.

Radio often allows negotiable rates for ads. You may be able to barter airtime by offering your products or services as contest prizes. Radio listeners are often quite loyal to their favorite DJs, making endorsements very effective - having the personality read your commercial is equal to an implied endorsement and often as effective. Use your radio campaign to support your print campaigns. For example, announcing your coupon in the newspaper or watch your mailbox for our offer. Since radio is not very effective with in-depth, complicated ads, it does boost other marketing techniques quite well. Placement is key, so be sure you know who you want to reach with your ads. Radio sales people will try to sell you a package plan that splits your ads up -

BEWARE! Just as placement is key, frequency is super important as well, so although you may be tempted to go with their package since you seemingly get a lot of ad space for the dollar, look very closely to be sure your ad will be heard by the same audience four, five or six times . Concentrating your ads around the same run times on the same station within a short time span will not only get your message heard, it will also make your company look bigger than it is since the audience assumes you're running ads even when they're not listening. Once you've decided on a frequency plan, get your commercial written. Simple, creative, conversational ads with clearly defined benefits and a crystal clear call-to-action are a must for an ad. Stand out commercials get your message across and get the audience motivated.

### All Hail the King

TV - the great American pastime is certainly the golden child for advertising campaigns. More people spend more time watching television than pay attention to any other medium. TV offers proven persuasive power - it simply works. But with most golden opportunities, there's a cost involved. And with TV, it's a big cost! Let's summarize what you should expect for your money:

1. Instant validation
2. Target audience reach
3. Diverse audience reach
4. Creative opportunities

Now about the cost...a 30 second commercial during prime time may cost 10 to 30 times more than a comparable radio spot. That's just the cost of the spot, that does not include writing, talent, set design or location, filming, and editing services. Cable TV may offer some bargains as compared to broadcast television. Often you can target a specific niche even better in the cable arena. When you advertise on television, you open up a world of creative possibilities. You're competing with other stations, the refrigerator, the rest room, and umpteen other distractions during the commercials of any show, so it pays to create an ad that grabs attention instantly and remains in the mind of the audience. Don't settle for the TV station's in house production, get a professional agency to help you create the best ad for your money, one that not only captivates, but is in line with all your other marketing.

Like radio, TV ads are fleeting, and you have to repeatedly hit your target market. Count on five to seven exposures for it to stick. Make sure to buy spots during times and programs that suit your product or service. Most stations offer packages, "fringe" time spots, and adjacencies for less than pick and choose times - these may work for you.

If your budget allows the addition of television advertising, by all means, contact a professional. Properly executed, your TV ads can and will be the crowning achiever in your marketing arsenal.

### Get Directly to the Point

One tried and true method for growing a business is to employ a sales force. Of course, as the business owner, you are constantly employed in direct sales for your business. You talk to family and friends, people who enter your storefront, or call you on the phone, you pass out business cards to anyone who will take one. What you do every day is a combination of sales and networking: the practice of connecting. Let's say your brother needs his house painted and one of your customers is a painter. Your painter's wife wants a new puppy, and you uncle owns a pet store. These types of personal connections are the backbone of the small business.

## Make the Connection

Formal networking starts with joining a club, association, or business group. Some groups are designed specifically for networking, others for business to consumer relationship building, and still, some others are service oriented, so choose with care. When you consider the groups in which to invest time and money, consider who your target market is and whether you will reach that market via that group.

Once you join, explore every opportunity to make connections. When attending events, focus on the quality of relationships rather than the quantity of contacts. Grow relationships since the better contacts know you, the more apt they are to recommend you. A good first impression - firm handshake, good eye contact, active listening - is as important as fast follow up. Show an active interest in the contact whether they're a potential customer, or a potential referral source. Build your network of connections this way and as you do, continue to connect via a newsletter, Ezine or postcard mailing. Send connections timely and business appropriate clippings, or news stories. Build your network well and you'll have an ever increasing sales force at work.

## The Host-ess with the Most-ess Business

Hosting events is a fantastic way of keeping in touch with existing contacts and for making new ones. When you look at the cost of hosting an open house, seminar, sporting event, or party, and the buzz it can create in the marketplace, it's a surefire advertising method that's sadly too often overlooked. Seek out co-sponsors and donations of goods or services from contacts. This will not only cut your costs, but it strengthens relationships. When planning an event, keep track of costs and be ready with a follow-up campaign for converting the leads into sales.

## There's No Business Like Trade Show Business...

Trade shows are another good way to make sales happen. If you plan to exhibit, you must plan well, execute well, and finish well. Pick the right show, set clear goals, create a dynamic display, and man your space with people who are aware of your goals and can engage the show visitors. Draw a crowd to your booth with demonstrations, contests, and giveaways. Have plenty of attractive, accurate printed materials on hand, and be ready to do business. An advertising agency can help you create the right display, promotional pieces, and printed collateral to make your company shine at the show. As with all forms of networking to build sales, follow-up is key to your success. Make sure you're getting the names and numbers of the prospects at the show, and contact them immediately after the show concludes, whether by email, phone or mail. The better you follow through, the more successful your trade show marketing investment will be.

## Use the Force...

Every business needs to gain an edge over the competition. The statement "there's enough business to go around for everyone" is often made by a soon to be out-of-business owner. Sales don't happen by accident. Good salesmanship is critical for the small business owner, since in many cases, he or she cannot compete with big business on selection, price, or delivery. Training a sales team to represent who and what the business represents is critical. Every person who represents your company is a salesperson for you. They must know the company mission, philosophy, rules, policies, merchandise, services, pricing, delivery standards, and target customer. Businesses should employ creative techniques when training for sales. Stepping away from the traditional, expected method of "May I help you?", and into a new, out of the box method of customer contact is crucial to getting the edge. Become memorable, go beyond

expectations, adapt the message, use showmanship. The best part of a sales force is that they're people. And people are flowing and adaptable. Once you print a business card, produce a commercial, host an event, it's done. But with person to person contact, each situation can be customized to fit the customer - right at that moment - making your sales team a force that can make your business stand out above and apart from the competition.

### Stop the Presses!

While direct, personal sales may very well be the most controllable of all marketing techniques, Public Relations is likely the least controllable, but arguably one of the cheapest ways to get out the word you want people to hear. That's because public relations, by definition, is all about influencing opinions. As a business owner, the opinion you want your buying public to have is that what they need, you have, and you have it faster, better, cheaper than anyone else. Relating to your buying public is part of what you do everyday, but there are some important tools that a PR firm will use to create positive buzz.

### Just the Facts

Probably the most basic tool in your marketing arsenal is a press kit. Think of it as a company introduction and overview. Use it to introduce your business to the media and to potential investors and employees. Post a copy on your website. Your kit should be current, accurate, and should include: company statistics (years in business, number of employees, locations, sales figures, client list), history, owners/shareholders bios and photographs, a press release, contact list, and a cover letter. You may want to use your kit to introduce your executives as experts in a particular field, and therefore make them available to the press as a source.

### Extra Extra Read All About It

More than just a part of your press kit, press releases are good ways to keep media contacts current on what's happening at your business, and to announce important, timely and newsworthy events. It's important that press releases are written properly. Your subject should be newsworthy, meet the needs of the target paper or reporter, and remain somewhat neutral in tone. Being pushy or self-serving will not get your news published. Keep your information basic, accurate and on one page. Once you have your press release completed, send it to newspapers, magazines, trade publications, TV and radio news sources, and to the publishers of newsletters that cover your industry. Used effectively, press releases are a powerful public relations tool for marketing your business.

### It's in the Air

Public relations involves many different ways to promote a positive spin on a product, service or company. Yet one thing these methods have in common is their cost. For the most part, gaining a positive public image can be one of the least expensive ways to market. Attaining news coverage by supplying information is one way, but actually creating the news is a great way to get the word out about your business. Companies and individuals create news every day by using publicity stunts, authoring books, appearing on talk shows, making public appearances, performing community service, and sponsoring events and teams. Most of these methods are free, or inexpensive ways to get publicity.

### Tying it All Together

Linda Lullie is co-owner of Inspired 2 Design, LLC, a full-service Advertising and Creative Services agency located near Atlanta. With over 20 years in the field, I2D puts their experience to work for small businesses across the U.S. Visit their website at [www.inspired2designllc.com](http://www.inspired2designllc.com).

The success of a business depends upon its ability to attract, and retain, customers. We've covered the three major strategies Peter (and you) should be using to connect with customers. However, before you start throwing time and money into advertising, direct sales, and public relations efforts, you have a little more work to do.

Your company, products and services are identified by your brand. Your brand identity includes your logo, your color scheme, your packaging, your trucks, invoices, your store or office environment, and all of the elements that the public sees. It's your image. And in keeping with your brand image, consistency across each and every marketing effort you put forth is vital. Your customer must see your company as a cohesive, well oiled machine that has its act together. Everything from employee uniforms to advertisements, to labels, must portray a consistent look and feel. A consistent marketing strategy across all channels boosts confidence, and revenues. That's exactly what a full service creative advertising agency offers clients -- consistency of brand identity across all marketing efforts.

When a company picks, preps, prices, and promotes products and services using cohesive, targeted advertising, a trained, creative sales force, and grasps every opportunity to encourage positive public opinion, that company has constructed a well-rounded arsenal of promotion to get out the word. Get the customer in the door, deliver what you promise, do it better, faster and more memorably than your competitors, and customer retention levels will soar, as will sales, and profits. A happy customer is a repeat customer. And a loyal customer will tell others about you... and now...you're getting out the word.

Peter, with all his peppers, would be proud.