

Marketing Secrets

Effectively promoting your business can fatten up these lean times

By Jim Lakely Business was so good for the pool industry just a few years ago that builders were literally throwing leads away.

But today, every lead counts. In lean times, it's vital for management to craft an effective marketing plan. Subtle tweaks to your company's public image can keep the phone ringing, whereas common mistakes can make the office a quiet place.

The first step is to not confuse common sense with good marketing, according to Brett Abbott, president of MYM Austin Inc., a consulting firm based in Austin, Texas.

Think your logo is an important feature of marketing

materials and print ads? Think again, Abbott said.

"A logo is like a haircut," he explained. "It's a lot more important to you than it is to everyone else. As a customer, I'm either interested in your company, or I'm not. The logo doesn't really play into the decision."

And the logo just takes up ad space that's better used telling potential customers why they should pick you over other companies. But beware of falling into the platitude trap.

Your company is one of quality. You always go the extra mile. No one can match your integrity, your reliability or dedication to customer

service. Ugh. A potential customer reading that rightly thinks, "I should hope so!"

Such common phrases are so trite, they are all but meaningless. And claiming to "set the standard for the industry," comes off as empty bragging — a boast the public isn't likely to believe anyway, Abbott said.

To test your marketing materials, try doing the "cross-out" exercise. If you can replace your company's name on your ad with another one and still be accurate, it's probably a mistake, Abbott said.

Avoid those pitfalls, and bring greater focus to the nuts and bolts of your marketing

plan. The following three secrets will set you on the right path.

Secret #1: Have something good to say.

What makes your company better than your competition? What unique benefit do you offer to the public? Think about it carefully. If you can't answer those questions well, you're going to be stuck in the land of platitudes.

"If you don't have something good to say about your company, then the marketplace will figure it out," Abbott said. "The public will

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pre-empt all your marketing efforts, and you'll forever be fighting off your bad reputation."

Secret #2: Say it well.

Selling your business to the public is like going to court, and potential buyers are the judge and jury. You have to

construct a case that says you are the best builder in town. That means backing up that claim with real evidence: testimonials, a list of awards, photos, references. The more the better.

Do it right and the customer ends up believing he'd be crazy to do business with anyone else.

But many companies try to sell their competence by talking about the three grades of rebar, coping, water chemistry and the like. Such talk may register as expertise in your ears, but all the customer hears is white noise. Besides, all she really wants to talk about is the waterfall.

Ironically, the industry's technical aspects can make company owners uniquely unqualified in marketing. In short, they're too close to the business and can't see it from a customer's perspective.

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"This is where companies struggle the most," Abbott said. "When you're inside the bottle, it's hard to read the label."

Secret #3: Say it often.

Establishing a large inventory of marketing materials — which should include a free, informational DVD — may be costly. But these items can pay for themselves rather quickly. Spending \$50 to \$150 per lead, or \$500 to \$1,000 per sale, is a reasonable gauge.

Follow up with e-mails that are sincere. Send that DVD by priority mail and the customer can't help but open it. Include a checklist so the prospect can compare your pools with those of your competition. Mail postcards sporting a nice photo, reminding hesitant buyers that today's pools basically take care of themselves.

The key is to make sure you're reaching out to not only the "now" buyers, but those who are still only in the "thinking about it" stage.

"When those people progress to the point of being ready to buy, they've already decided that you're the guy to go with," Abbott said. ■

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