

Sales Getting a Little Thin?

Update Your Marketing System Now

WHEN TIMES ARE good, it's easy to get lax with your sales and marketing. Sales reps become order takers, and marketing deficiencies can be overlooked. But what happens when the leads dry up? Today the buyers in our industry are fewer, more cautious, and less willing to let go of a dollar. Whether you're in service, retail or construction, every lead is precious. Capturing, keeping, and converting those prospects is crucial.

BY BRETT ABBOTT

It's time to take a closer look at your marketing system. Reinforce these six critical elements to make sure you can handle the challenges ahead.

1. Redefine Your Niche

Can you clearly state what your company offers the buying public? Can you tell your prospects in no uncertain terms why they'd be a fool to buy from anyone else but you? If you say something along the lines of "We've got the best selection" or "lower prices" or the pathetically ho-hum "because we care," then it's time to re-write your story.

People today aren't interested in a phony, plastic "sunshine story." They want cold, hard, honest facts. Want to increase your believability and credibility? Focus on a niche. People trust specialists more than generalists, precisely because they're specific. The tighter your focus, the more believable your story. "We specialize in infinity-edge vinyl-liner swimming pools." That's a tight niche, indeed. And it makes you not only believable, but interesting, too. "We service all makes, all models." Hmmm, now I'm

not so impressed. Who else can say that? Just about anybody. Who else does say that? Just about everybody.

Am I suggesting you abandon your current product lines or area of focus? Absolutely not. I'm saying it's time to change what you're saying about your expertise. You can still serve everyone. But get specific in your description of what you do. Your credibility will go up.

2. Implement New Scripts

Once you've redefined your niche, you should infuse that message throughout your organization. It starts with your employees – from the receptionist to the store clerks to the sales reps to the people servicing the pools. Often referred to as an "elevator pitch," it defines in clear and unmistakable terms what's so special about your company. So when anyone on your team is asked "Why should I buy from you?" the answer should be the same from everyone.

This message also belongs on your on-hold system, instead of on-hold music or "Thank you for continuing to hold." Tell the listener how you innovated that vinyl-liner vanishing edge,

or about your special training programs, or about your unique product line. Done right, it's not only interesting for the person on hold, but it may actually help you sell something.

3. Update Your Website

While your employees are practicing their new elevator pitch, it's time to get that message worked into your website as well. Let your company's essence and personality shine through. And while you're at it, make sure these other aspects of your website are up to snuff:

Retail – an easy-to-use shopping cart. On-line purchases are only going to increase, so if you're not offering e-commerce, get started! There are plenty of good companies that offer turn-key e-commerce solutions for a very reasonable cost. Interview several to find one that's right for you.

Service – share your knowledge. Offer plenty of useful tips and instructions for repairing, maintaining and trouble-shooting. When your website proves that you're an expert who can be trusted, potential customers will have no problem giving their money to you.

Construction – photos, photos, photos. The homeowner dreaming of a swimming pool needs photos to help visualize the dream. The buyer who's worried about your abilities wants proof of your capabilities. Show them what you've built. Photos of happy clients standing next to your creations are a great idea, too.

4. Fine-Tune Your Marketing Tools

Infusing your message into a new DVD or a stack of new brochures can get expensive. Fortunately, in this industry we have some smart-minded suppliers who recognize the benefits of helping builders and distributors sell more product. "Co-op funding" is the magic phrase to share with your supply reps. You won't get a mountain of money (times are tough for them, too), but you may get enough to help with a simple flyer or brochure insert.

5. Use Cost-Effective Advertising

Return on Investment (ROI) is the name of the game. Compare the ROI of your different lead sources and divert your ad money over to the better performing investments. Not sure of your ROI? Consider these often-overlooked sources of low-cost leads:

- Business Cards – Do they mention your niche?
- Yard Signs – Low cost, effective, and they last for years.
- Facility Signage – Good ROI if you're in a high-traffic area.
- Networking Meetings – For fresh leads, visit all of them, but join none of them.
- Internet Pay-per-Click – You don't pay except when someone actually wants what you sell.
- Home Shows – Very effective if you have a strategy and if everyone's trained in advance.
- Referrals – You should proactively cultivate these rather than wait and hope for them.
- Joint Ventures – A powerful source of new leads, but choose your partner wisely.
- Lead Referral Services – The "pool-specific" services tend to be more effective.

6. Systemize Your Follow-Up

This is often the richest area of opportunity for any business, and it's usually the most neglected. The cost of selling to someone who

already knows you is much lower than the cost of finding a brand new customer. You should reach out on a regular basis to all customers and prospects who have identified themselves to you. The specific strategy varies depending on what type of business you're in.

Retail – Implement a "preferred customer" membership program. They give you their email address, and you give them an automatic 5 percent "preferred customer" discount. Now you can send them regular notices of seasonal items, new products, and upcoming sales. With enough names in your database, you can cut back or eliminate your newspaper advertising altogether.

Service – Send a monthly newsletter with helpful pool advice. This reinforces your expertise and helps to reduce attrition. You can also offer a "referral bonus" such as one month free service to gain new customers without advertising.

Construction – Set up an automatic campaign of postcards and emails. The decision to buy a pool normally takes months or years. The homeowner has many considerations – not only which style and which builder, but also "Do I really want a pool, or is it just going to be a headache?" This is your opportunity to hit your prospects with a series of different messages that compellingly extol the benefits, dispel the objections, and point out the advantages of doing business with you.

With challenging times upon us, it's more important than ever to have a clear and compelling message. Prospects form and shape their opinions of you and your company every time they're exposed to your message. With sales dwindling and leads getting scarce, this is no time to leave your marketing to chance. Focus on the critical elements of your marketing system and you'll be better prepared to weather the storm. **AQ**

Brett Abbott is the president of MYM Austin Inc., a marketing and advertising agency that works exclusively with pool builders in the U.S. and Canada. MYM Austin helps businesses separate themselves from their competition and make them the obvious choice to do business with.