

Selecting Right Marketing Tools Vital for Small Businesses

Marketing makes many small-business owners nervous. They aren't sure just how to approach it in terms of an overall focus. Nor do they know what to do when bombarded with a constant stream of articles touting the new "must-do" marketing approaches.

"The typical response of business owners when facing these issues is to go one of two directions," says (Insert name and title) of (Insert county). "The first direction is to run some ads, contribute to local fundraising efforts and join local civic organizations.

"The second approach is to try every new tool that comes along but often with no thought as to how each tool, or if each tool, fits into the marketing plan," continues (Insert last name).

Two issues arise with both of these approaches. First, the business owner has no plan or goal for marketing. Second, without goals, trying to decide what tools to use becomes nearly impossible. The glitter and idea of new tools becomes the deciding factor instead of what each tool offers.

"It's knowing what you want to achieve that should drive your marketing effort," says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service's rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. "This means knowing who your potential customers are, where they are located and how to reach them. It is this information that should guide the selection of the best marketing tools to use."

Some of the traditional marketing tools such as meet and greet, business cards and signage or visual pull, offline and online, still are great tools.

And nothing can replace the brand ambassador, or that customer who shouts out how great a job you are doing. But on the flip side, nothing can hurt like the negative review that a dissatisfied customer offers.

Mentioning brand ambassadors or dissatisfied customers brings in the idea of the global marketplace and some of the shiny, new marketing tools available. Where once the dissatisfied customer told maybe 20 people, today the world is his or her stage through new tools such as online review sites or social media. Similarly, the ambassador is of great help. Today's consumer puts a huge amount of trust in these online comments, even when coming from people they don't know.

E-commerce, mobile, location-based marketing and social media represent just some of the new marketing tools that small-business owners can use. Each tool may have a place in the marketing plan.

So what's right in terms of shiny, new marketing tools or tried-and-true old standbys? It depends. The small-business owner's knowledge of his or her customers, goals and capacity should be the deciding factor on what to use. Business owners shouldn't select marketing tools based on what those tools have done for someone else or the promises made about their effectiveness.

Two final notes: First, even with a careful selection of tools, no results are guaranteed. That is why the owner constantly must evaluate what's working and what's not and make the appropriate adjustments. Second, more new tools always will be coming along and the customer also will change. Thus, what works today may not be the tool for tomorrow.

Effective marketing can pay big dividends. It demands a market understanding and a selection of the best tools to use, whether traditional or new and shiny. Each business owner needs to find his or her best path.

For more help with putting your marketing plan together and deciding what tools to use, check with your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU's small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter. Or check out Facebook at www.facebook.com/NDSUextsmallbiz or Twitter at @gmuske.

Other resources include <http://powerofbusiness.net> and www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship. The Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and SCORE, also can be valuable resources.

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For more information, contact glenn.muske@ndsu.edu or call (701) 328-9718. You also can visit our website, www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness.