

Build Your Small-business Marketing Tool Kit

If you are a small-business owner, your marketing effort typically takes one of two paths: You do what you always have done or you try a variety of things but question what, if anything, is making a difference.

“Understanding what makes an effective marketing plan is not easy,” says (insert name and title) of (insert county). “And then the development and implementation of the plan is just as hard.”

Today, part of the struggle of putting together a good marketing plan for a small business is knowing where and how to include online marketing. No matter where you turn for information, everything seems to be focused on social media and content marketing. Little attention is given to the traditional marketing tools of the past.

“First, it is important to understand that online marketing is not just one tool,” says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. “Just as print media is not one tool but can include newspapers, fliers, brochures and even business cards, online marketing offers many separate tools under that one broad category.

“Effective marketing means picking the right tool for the job,” Muske continues. “You have the tool chest but you select specific tools to meet your needs.”

The selection of the right tool is an area that often perplexes the business owner. Yet the choice can be greatly aided if you know on whom you are focusing. Depending on your business, you may have a key demographic or geographical area from which you draw your top customers. With that information, you can select the tools that your target audience uses.

“And while little is said about the local papers or local radio stations in the marketing literature, these tools may be exactly what reaches your target audience,” says (insert last name). “A sidewalk sale clearance event for a rural business is a perfect example. While people are interested in deals, most of the market will be local. So use the tools that attract local customers.”

Some examples might be:

- In-store signage
- Fliers
- Local newspaper, radio and television ads
- Focused email to your customer base

You want to let others know about a specific event your business is holding, such as a sale, so perhaps a Facebook notice might work because it you don’t have to pay for it and it is easy to create.

“Yet even these tools are somewhat broad in nature and you are still somewhat mystified about what brings the customers to your event,” says Muske. “The savvy business owner will use this event to learn more about what brought people in the door.”

One way to learn more might be a prize drawing. Make sure you ask those who sign up to provide an email address and indicate how they heard about the sale. You are starting to use your marketing to do a better job in the future. You see what works in general, you form a database of people interested in your business and/or product or service, and, to a degree, you can see who is buying versus the browsers. A tool that brings in the browsers is not nearly as helpful as one that brings in those who spend money.

Effective marketing occurs when you know as much as possible about your customer base. Use one event to learn more for the next time. Build your tool chest to include all of the tools, traditional and new, such as online and social media. Finally, pick the best tools for the job.

For more help on these issues, 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. More information can be found on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NDSUextsmallbiz and Twitter at @gmuske. Another resource is www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship.

Additional good resources are other business owners and your local chamber of commerce. You also can contact the Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and Service Corps of Retired Executives, for more information. State and federal agencies are ready to help in this area as well.

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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.