

Marketing on a Shoestring – How to Build your Brand without Blowing your Budget

Introduction

Setting out on your own be it as a sole trader or as a business partnership which aims to employ staff, is for many a daunting yet liberating experience. You may well have specialist skills, which up until now have only been utilised within a corporate environment but learning how to apply these skills 'on the outside' say as a consultant, is a learning curve which you must quickly scale. Building a presence in the marketplace is one of the first objectives of any business, no matter how big it aims to become.

This short paper identifies the author's Top 10 tips for businesses whose aim is to build a brand and achieve a market presence on a shoestring budget. The advice is aimed at businesses that are starting out, such as small consultancy practices and other professional service organisations. There is much that can be done in terms of marketing and brand development which is low cost and, in many cases - other than the cost of your time – is free.

Tip 1 – Spend time honing your value proposition

Honing your value proposition (i.e. the story that describes why people should buy from you and what differentiates you from your competitors) is arguably the most important piece of work you can do. It will define what you are as a business and perhaps more importantly, what you are not. You will find spending time getting your value proposition right will go on to influence just about every other aspect of how you market your business. Describe what you have set your business up to deliver and hone that description of your services and products down to a few short paragraphs. This should become your 'elevator pitch' which you can recite by heart whenever someone asks: "...and what is it that your business provides?"

Tip 2 – Write your marketing plan

Even if is written on just one page, your marketing plan is your route map and guide which will ensure that you are clear about the benefits of your value proposition, your target market, pricing and how you will promote your business. Besides your value proposition (which describes '*what*' you do; what differentiates you and gives you stand out in the marketplace) your marketing plan should include details of your target market – i.e. the '*where*' and '*who with*' you plan to transact your business. Marketers often talk about marketing's 4 Ps (product, price, place and positioning). A good marketing plan should explain how your business will approach each of the marketing 4Ps.

Tip 3 - Keep it simple!

Looking professional doesn't mean your marketing has to be expensive. You'll need to find someone who can help you create a visual identity or brand identity which must be used in a consistent way across all your marketing materials if you want to create early recognition and a professional looking business. For a small business the cost of this work needn't be expensive and you can always refresh your brand identity, printed and online materials after you are established. When it comes to creating your brand look and feel, look for a designer who is prepared to provide you with the basics – you'll quickly find someone who will produce something that works for you and it shouldn't cost you more than a couple of days of design time.

Marketing Tips & Advice from Admotus Marketing

Tip 4 - Buy your printed stationery on-line

These days buying printed stationery on line is simple, quick and cheap. Most on-line providers allow you to do a small amount of tailoring of your requirements on-line. For example, add your logo to a business card or letterhead to create something which looks professional and of good quality. Don't fall into the trap of buying large quantities as invariably you will want to change some aspect of your content as the business becomes established. If you are buying online, adopt a 'just in time' approach to stock management as most providers can turn around an order in just a few days.

Tip 5 - A website is an essential purchase

A website is a 'must have' as buyers will check out your website before they decide to talk to you as a serious potential supplier. Therefore an on-line presence gives you credibility. Again, the 'golden rule' is to keep things simple! Complicated design with clever animation is something you can aspire to once your business is established. If cost is an immediate concern, agree on a design which clearly explains your value proposition, identifies your credentials and gives examples of the work you have done and the services you offer. If you have written case studies make sure that these can be included on your site and are available for download in a PDF format. Remember that you will need to allow for hosting charges – i.e. space you rent from a company who will make your website viewable to the outside world. There are plenty of companies who offer this service at a reasonable cost which will invariably also include a package that includes the ability to set up company email addresses for multiple users. Shop around and you will find some very good offers.

Remember to also ask your website designer to include web tracking software such as Google Analytics to your site as this will enable you to track visits to your site and which pages are regularly accessed. A good website designer will also ensure that your site is fully 'optimised' with 'metatags' and 'keywords' – which will help your business gain a higher Google search ranking. So be sure to ask the question before deciding on your website design company.

Tip 6 - Networking is the cheapest form of marketing

Don't underestimate the power of networking as it really is the cheapest form of marketing. For all businesses, particularly consultancy practices and other kinds of professional service providers, you can't do too much of it! So sweat your address book! Reconnect with people you may have lost contact with over the years as, a referral or recommendation from someone in a position of influence who knows you and your business capabilities, is arguably the most certain way to build your business.

Tip 7 - Get a virtual office address if you don't have commercial premises

Perceptions count for much and often first impressions are the most important. So if you work from home; are out and about a lot and don't have the secretarial support or the budget to rent commercial premises, think about investing in a 'virtual office'. Typically, a virtual office supplier will give you a telephone answering service, a business address - where postal correspondence can be sent - and the perception that you have an office close to where your clients are located. The service should also include post forwarding to an address of your choosing. Overall, a virtual office can give you extra credibility, particularly if where you are located is an important consideration for the type of businesses you are aiming to attract.

Tip 8 - Find a 'professional place' to hold your important business meetings

Think about where you hold your important business meetings, particularly if you don't have your own premises. If you are meeting a prospective client for the first time on your turf, find somewhere which is reflective of your business and the brand image you wish to convey. A coffee shop may be fine for someone you know well but might not work so well for a new contact you are keen to impress. Think about joining a business club that gives you access to meeting facilities and refreshments. If you belong to a professional body you may find that it has such facilities for its members which is included as part of the annual subscription.

Tip 9- Write and publish articles on your area of expertise

For consultants and those who want to hold themselves up as experts within a chosen field of specialism, finding ways to build your 'personal brand' will help to enhance your credibility and open doors to new business opportunities. These days with the proliferation of on-line content, the opportunity to publish papers, thought pieces, opinion and advice has never been easier. Indeed, well researched, well-written content - which is not overly self-promoting - is very likely to win favour with editors who are on the constant lookout for good material. Therefore, if you can write well and have something interesting to say, get it down and get it out to those who publish in your sector. Don't forget to add your published materials to your website to further boost your brand recognition.

Tip 10 - Embrace the social media revolution!

Social media is becoming an increasingly important marketing channel for business to business markets. It's another useful way of building your brand and of course it's free! Your business really does need to embrace social media to some extent whether it's regularly blogging or communicating to your target audience through channels such as LinkedIn, Twitter, You Tube or Face Book. With all social media channels, there are certain protocols that should be observed. Social media is about sharing ideas, content, useful information for free. It's an investment which may not yield an immediate return on the time you spend or the information you give away. You should avoid the overt or hard sell and too much 'corporate speak'. The rules of engagement are indeed quite different from what one might see as conventional communication. However, without doubt, companies - many of whom operate in traditional business sectors - are waking up to the power of social media and its ability to reach target audiences and influence behaviour.

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