

Is Marketing Your Start Up a Non-Starter?

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Have everything for your new business but clients?

You've decided to open a business. Congratulations. You probably thought a lot about it before you got going—what you have to offer, how you're going to offer it, who you're going to offer it to. And, like most new small businesspeople, you probably didn't think too much about sales and marketing. After all, how could clients fail to respond to your irresistible proposition? So now you're sitting there, with a lot more time than money on your hands, wondering if you're really going to be able to make this dream fly.

Marketing really isn't mysterious.

Most small business people approach marketing as a holy mystery—one in which they're not initiated. It doesn't have to be that way at all. You started your business because you saw an intersection between your talents and a need in the marketplace, right? All you have to do is package that equation so that it's attractive to clients. Marketing is an art more than a science. I like to think of it as making an invitation to conversation. And the sale itself is the conversation. If you can think of it in these terms, you've already given up a big chunk of the anxiety you were feeling, and are on your way to getting clients.

Most start-ups follow tired approaches that don't work.

I cannot count the number of times I've had a call with someone who has started a business, bought a list, and started cold-calling. Or sent out a direct mail piece that simply advertised their presence. We all get too many phone calls—and too much mail—to pay complete attention to even those we want. So it's no surprise that we respond coolly to those from complete strangers. However, it really is possible to get the attention of people you need to know, but don't yet. And to keep their attention once you get it.

A handful of core strategies will get you going.

You don't need an MBA in marketing to craft an effective marketing program for your start-up. You also don't need to spend a lot of money on fancy materials. But you do need a strategic approach that will make clients want to call you. Here are just three things that I've found to work, time and again:

- **Re-frame your services as solutions to problems your clients face.**

Make the problem urgent. Clients don't care what you can do unless it resolves a burning issue. But you don't have to sound like the latest lettuce scare on Fox News; it's okay to have fun with it.

Example: One of my clients launched a “knowledge management” consulting service that just wasn't getting any traction. What the heck is “knowledge management”? My client's prospects didn't know either—and that was the problem. So I talked to the executive in charge of the offering about what issues he hoped to help them resolve. We came up with a list of four. I then boiled them down into silly scenarios involving real people and hired an illustrator to “cartoon” them. We put those illustrations on the front of a direct mail piece and sent it out. The prospects got it—and the phone started to ring.

- **Let them hear your voice in your materials.**

In any service business—from mowing a lawn to providing a college education—the client is buying a relationship as much as—if not more than—the service on offer. People don't—can't—build relationships with those they don't know. You've got to let 'em get to know you even before they meet you.





Example: A favorite client is an executive coach who has successfully started many businesses. This guy has great experience, is a terrific coach and has a tremendous amount to offer clients. But his reach wasn't extending as far as he thought it should, and he wasn't getting the number of clients he wanted. So I had him give me his spiel, and I took a look at his marketing stuff. I was shocked. He was intelligible and articulate, as I knew he would be, but everything I knew as him was stripped away or hidden under a veneer of generic professionalism. As he describes himself in unguarded moments, he's "tough as shoe leather with a sentimental streak a mile wide." And that's his beauty. I invited him to remember that in all of his presentations and to recast his materials with that in mind. He has, and they've started beating down his door.

- **Package your services so that you can build each sale into a relationship.**

Every time you have to go and look for a new client, you lose time and money. It's much cheaper to deepen the client relationships you already have. So, make it very attractive for clients to buy more. We're not talking about "super size fries"; you want to sell them something that will benefit you both. A prime example of this is the shortened degree programs many universities offer, allowing students to get an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree in 5 years—1 less than in traditional consecutive programs.

Example: A client with a consulting firm specializing in start ups found that he was attracting two groups of clients: those who stayed for six months or more, and those who dropped out after a month. The latter really frustrated him—not just because of the continual need to go prospecting—but because he wanted to do a good job for his clients and felt that his process do much good under three months. (I should say that he offered a money-back guarantee and hardly ever got taken up on it.) But he hadn't made clear to his clients the tangible benefits of working with him for three months. We revised his offerings with more attractive promises for longer engagements and instituted a new pricing structure that exponentially rewards longer commitments. This set-up is still too new to judge conclusively, but so far, more of his new clients are accepting the long-term offer.

These three strategies will help you make an invitation that clients will find hard to resist. The next step is the conversation—the actual sale. But if you've adopted this approach, that shouldn't be hard at all, because you will already have shown that you're ready to give clients what they need.

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