

A Dirty Big Secret: Get with the Program!

A basic strategic marketing plan is paramount as a small business owner, no matter how good you are at what you do, says *Niki Tudge*

For many small business owners, taking the time to develop a marketing strategy can seem so overwhelming that it never even makes it onto their to-do list. In fact, one's marketing strategy may never even emerge from being a thought or a remote possibility. But let me share a dirty big secret with you.

Planning, launching and/or operating a successful pet care business may not directly result from how good you are as a practitioner. In fact, if you are really good at what you do and therefore spend all your time doing it, your business may be adversely affected. Why? Because if you spend 100 percent of your time working in your business you'll have nothing left to work on your business.

Over the last 20 years I have not only studied business but have also helped many people launch successful pet care and training business operations. Their success can be directly attributed to several things but there is no one magic bullet. However, one thing I do know, I have not seen anyone who implements a basic strategic marketing plan fail to launch their small business, or fail to become a full-time business owner within eight months of operation.

It saddens me beyond belief when I see competent, force-free pet industry business owners close shop or fail to launch a business successfully. With each failure we lose opportunities, and each lost opportunity may result in a pet's life being negatively impacted.

So, what I am not going to do here is try to convince you to develop a structured marketing plan. This will



take time and will require an emotional investment. I am also not asking you to reach out to a business coach because I think that leaves an opportunity for you to convince yourself that you cannot afford one, or that it will not yield the right results. Instead I am going to suggest to you some succinct management activities that will help you carve out your position in your market place and gain new clients, while further strengthening the relationship you have with your existing clients.

Key Strategies

I recommend that, at the very least, you implement some of the activities from these key strategies:

Products and Services

Create differentiation from your competition by developing your unique selling points. Consider these options:

- Launch a new product. Be creative, if your business is not moving forwards, it is moving backwards. Nothing stands still!
- Promote a product or service you currently sell but focus on a new market segment. Think about subsets of your customers who have common needs and priorities.



- Enhance your brand. Do you have a logo, a website, a Facebook page, an email signature? Are they clean, professional and branded consistently? If not, then make this a priority. Your brand image screams to your clients who you are.

- Develop product packages for shoulder seasons so you can maintain a level of business during the normal slow periods. Think about the months in the year where certain services are not in demand. Counterbalance that with an attractive package offering.

- Add value to your services rather than discounting them. Don't be fooled into grabbing the low-hanging fruit while your competition increases its yield using premium pricing. You will work twice as hard for less profit. Do not undervalue what you do!

- Make it easier for your clients to book your services by removing any barriers to the purchasing process. Develop online booking processes and systems. Think about how easy it is for your client to book and pay for one of your services. The easier it is the more you will receive. Think about 'one click shopping,' the Amazon model.

Price

Penetrate deeper into your existing market segments by positioning your company as 'value for money.' Think about increasing your clients' average spend, as well as driving more volume in terms of appointments.

- Develop pricing that encourages longer service periods, more lessons, more overnight stays, and more dog walking sessions. Don't just offer single-priced services.

- Drive a premium rate on a specific premium service. You can increase your clients' average spend by developing one premium service or product.

- Develop a group and package pricing structure. Think about creative packaging. Pre-paid discounts are a great way to offer value and a strategic way to increase your cash flow.

- Initiate price increases annually and

consider cost pricing, as well as competition pricing, when deciding what you will charge. Don't just bump prices without looking at your micro market and what your competition is charging.

Promotions

Create brand awareness and leverage your brand. Develop promotions that not only increase short-term demand but also increase long-term market share for you.

- Develop promotional incentives for your referral network, employees, friends and family. Don't have a referral network? Then get to work developing one!

- Attend key events and promote your services using direct sales techniques. Events are one of the few opportunities you have for non-threatening direct selling. Choose wisely and here's a hint - they do not have to be pet industry related. More than 65 percent of people have pets and they attend lots of different types of events.

- Develop a couple of key pieces of professional collateral that can help you promote your business. Professional is the operative word here. If you cannot do it correctly then do not do it. Poor branding is worse than no branding.

Place

Enhance your relationship with other small businesses that can help highlight your business.

- Build strong relationships with veterinarians, groomers and other trade partners. They do not necessarily have to be in your industry. Any in-home service partners are going to be an asset to your marketing plan. Exchange business cards and cross refer services.

- Develop incentives for your referral partners.
- Cross-sell and upsell your products and services.

People

Attract and retain valuable assets to your team. Enhance your revenue generation using the upselling skills of your key people, in particular over the telephone or in any personal interaction. As a business owner, every conversation you have can influence people to use or recommend your business.

- Train administrative staff to sell and promote your business.

- Develop a training culture so everyone is consistently operating at the same level and interfacing with

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your clients to the same standard.

- Prevent erosion of key business referrals by dedicating resources to them.
- Increase your sales force by building local networking and referral partners.
- Develop team sales goals for all your staff and review them each month, being sure to reinforce all actions and retrain where necessary.

Processes

Drive a business culture of relationship marketing to support sales efforts and long-term growth.

- Develop an internal culture of customer service and service recovery. Not making mistakes is an unrealistic expectation. What is important is how you resolve them. Be honest, be realistic and show empathy for your clients when things do not go according to plan.
- Create loyal partnerships with your industry partners. Nurture all professional business relationships.
- Implement feedback sessions and systems so you get realistic feedback in real-time from all your stakeholders. Employees and contractors can be a great resource for you.

They hear, see and experience much more than you do. Ask questions, listen and value their feedback.

- Develop key service non-negotiables for your business. Set high expectations when it comes to your core services and train and empower your staff to do the same.

- Establish yourself as a prominent community contributor by partnering and supporting a local rescue or non-profit group. It

only takes a couple of hours each month if you are helping to solve one of their key problems.

It has been said many times that consistency in marketing is critical to your business success. Choose a few things you enjoy doing and do them well.

Marketing over the years has shifted its orientation from tricking customers, to blaming customers to satisfying customers. Put customer service first. It is a huge part of your marketing plan and will contribute greatly to your overall success. Recruiting prospects and converting them into customers for life should be your key goal. ■

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