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Marketing: The Sum of Your Parts

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Marketing means more than coming up with clever, eye-catching ads. If you don't also ensure that your target market sees and remembers your ads and if you don't deliver on what those ads promise, you'll find yourself investing large amounts of money trying — and failing — to attract and retain customers.

Because marketing encompasses everything you do as an entrepreneur, a marketing plan — and a budget to support it — is essential to your success. This is especially true when economic times are tough for you and your customers: The less money your customers have to spend, the more they insist on value, not pretty words.

But where and how does such a plan begin?

Marketing is defining business goals. Before you start getting quotes for “branding,” marketing campaigns, Web sites and brochures, clear your mind and desk and write down the three most important goals you need to accomplish in the next 30, 60, 90 and 365 days. Keep the list simple but specific. “Get more customers” is too broad: What kind of customers? Where will you find them? For what products or services? How will you keep them? How will you know if you've reached your goals? Once you've determined your goals and how to measure whether you've reached them — X number of new customers for X product in X location by X date — you can think about how to budget for all that marketing “stuff.”

Marketing is your people. In determining your goals, consider investing in your employees, the people who keep your customers coming back to you every day — or send them running off to more responsive or more knowledgeable competitors. You may need to invest more in employee training or implement a merit-raise system for your front-line workers (backed by that training) based on customer retention or individual customer revenue growth.

Marketing is your customers — new and existing. Too many marketing campaigns focus only on getting new customers at the expense of existing ones. (Doesn't it make *you* nuts when your phone or cable company, for example, offers a great program for “new customers only”?) If you keep in touch with existing customers even when you're not selling them something, you'll be on their minds and they'll tell others about you. You've got their names and know what they bought

from you. Show your appreciation by spending some money on an event, game tickets or flowers on a birthday, and you'll stand out.

Marketing is your phone system. One of the most common complaints about businesses of all sizes is that they don't answer their phones or return phone calls. (One vendor actually told one of Mary's suppliers, "I'm too busy to give you a quote.") Being responsive to customers doesn't require an expensive telecom system or call-tracking software, but it does require self-discipline and commitment. Nobody should ever be too important to answer the phone. And *everyone* in your company should know about special offers, company news and how to address customers' concerns and problems. If you answer a call within three rings, you're a marketing standout. Track calls using a form next to each employee's phone: Who called? When? Why? Where did they hear about your company? Tracking calls is particularly important if you're investing in PR or advertising and want to evaluate whether your efforts are bearing fruit.

Marketing is your production process. Let's say you sell a lot of your product. Are you prepared to effectively and consistently deliver quality? Do you know how you're going to ship products and how much it costs you? How will you handle returns? All the advertising in the world won't compensate for delayed orders, shoddy products and sloppy customer service.

Marketing is everything you do. And your customers will tell you how well you're doing it.

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