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17 Costly Marketing Mistakes by Steven Howard

I once heard a speaker compare those who engage in marketing as “*feeling happy like a dog with its head outside the car window, ears flapping, eyes glazed, and no idea of where he’s going.*”

While I am undoubtedly as proud of my profession as you are of yours, there is one significant difference between marketing professionals and most other professionals –very many of you and other small business owners think it is easy to do what marketing professionals do.

Now I will be the first to admit that marketing is not rocket science. But I will also be the first to tell you that marketing is an art that uses some scientific disciplines (such as market research and statistical analysis) and not a science in and of itself. Not understanding the art of marketing is often the difference between failure and success.

Over the years I have coached and worked with numerous small and medium size business owners and entrepreneurs on how to market their businesses better. In doing so, I have compiled a list of 17 of the most common and costly marketing mistakes made by SMEs and professional service providers.

Avoiding these mistakes will not only help you know where your business is going, it will also enable you to attract the right set of core customers; thus helping to ensure the long-term sustainable growth of your business. Here’s my list of 17 Costly Marketing Mistakes:

1. Messages do not speak to your prospects – customers have problems for which they seek solutions. Your marketing messages need to be concise and clear about what you can do for them and what benefits they will gain from doing business with you. If your messages are all about you, then it is hard for prospects to understand the WIIFT (what’s in it for them).

2. Messages do not speak with your customers – successful marketing is a two-way dialogue with your customers, not a one-way barrage of messages from you to them. Your marketing should aim to solicit feedback and input from customers, particularly about other problems they currently have or are likely to face in the future. By understanding and anticipating customer needs you can develop new products and

services, or form new partnerships, that provide the solutions your customers will purchase.

3. Marketing materials are not professional looking – your marketing materials need to project your professionalism. Photocopied flyers and brochures are for amateurs. It is simple to design and print quality flyers, information sheets, and promotional materials using basic software such as Microsoft Publisher. If you do not have the time to do this yourself, hire a high school or college student. Students today are well versed in computer graphics and the cost of printing a few hundred flyers in colour is next to nothing.

4. Advertising in the wrong media – find out which media your customers are using and put your presence there. Where do your customers turn for information? That's where your advertisements should be.

5. Promoting features over benefits – customers do not buy services, they buy solutions. Tell them what you can do for them and what benefits they will gain. A feature is your 10-year career. A benefit is that you will relieve the pain in my back. A better benefit is that you'll teach me how to prevent or minimise back pain in the future.

6. Assuming your audience understands what you offer – your customers are not likely to understand the intricacies of one treatment over another. They seek advice from you and the practitioner who does a better job of explaining each treatment and the options available is the one most likely to have repeat customers.

7. Communicating too many messages – you have a lot to communicate about your services. However, too many scattered messages cause confusion. Don't try to tell everything in each brochure or advertisement. Focus on one or two key points each time and then point your prospects and customers to a place where they can get more information (like your web site).

8. Failure to cover rational and emotional buying criteria – customers use both rational and emotional criteria when making any critical purchase decision. Your messages need to appeal to both these aspects, and this is particularly true when they are in your clinic seeking treatment.

9. A business that is not properly positioned – there's a huge difference between a Physiotherapy Wellness Centre and a Physiotherapy Clinic. I am sure in your mind's eye your own business is different than the other competitors in your market. Understanding this difference and being able to communicate it is at the heart of positioning. How you position your business will have a direct impact on the types of customers you attract.

10. Offering non-differentiated services -- if you offer the exact same services as your competitors, with similar operating hours, then the only thing you can compete on is price. There is no such thing as a commodity practice, only practices that are marketed like commodities. The key to growing any business is having the ability to differentiate your products and services from competitive offerings. Also, offering

differentiated services often enables a business to increase margins or create additional revenue streams outside consulting fees.

11. Failure to continually market the business -- business owners often make two major mistakes when it comes to marketing: a) reducing marketing expenditures during soft economic times and b) failing to invest in marketing when business is good. Marketing is not a tool that can be turned on and off like a tap. A sustained marketing effort is needed in both good and bad times.

12. Not looking for new channels of business – there are numerous ways to grow a practice without increasing the number of therapists and the number of treatment rooms you have. Quite frankly, there is a larger market for helping customers prevent injuries than there is for treating injuries and problems. People pay for gym instructors, nutritionists, holistic therapies, spa treatments, and a wide variety of other services in order to improve their health. Why aren't more of them also paying you for similar advice and services?

13. Not collecting and capturing information on your customers – your customer base is one of the most strategic assets in your business, yet very few business owners understand how to leverage this asset. Your customers often have rich and exciting lives that you could tap into, if only you knew more about them. This impacts not only your ability to create new products and services for them, but also your ability to leverage customers for referral business.

14. Not using satisfied customers for referrals – a great number of your new clients come to you as referrals from friends and family, yet very few small businesses take a structured approach to using satisfied customers as a channel for new business. Many professionals are reluctant to ask for referrals or even to provide an easy method for customers to recommend them. That's a shame as there are many subtle and soft approaches that work equally as well as bluntly asking customers to give referrals. But like most other marketing tactics, this requires a structured approach.

15. Not understanding why customers leave – very few businesses survey lost customers to find out why they have taken their business somewhere else. This is a major mistake. Surveying lost customers can identify problems in your practice that you are unaware of, as well as new services offered by others that are taking your clientele away. It is best to use an outside resource to survey lost customers and it is a practice that should be conducted at least annually.

16. Putting your operational needs before those of your customers – there are a wide range of choices and options available to customers today. One of the key things customers value is flexibility, and if your operational procedures cannot provide the flexibility to meet changing customer needs, then their business will go elsewhere. Remember, customers are the reason you are in business, and hence your policies and procedures should be designed with customer needs in mind, not just the needs of your staff.

17. Not having a Web presence – the Internet has become the number one place where people seek out information, even for local providers and services. Not having your own web site results in lost business and a missed opportunity to provide in-

depth information about your products and services on a 24/7 basis. Also, an electronic newsletter is an inexpensive way to keep your name in front of your customers and prospects on a regular basis, while also enabling the effects of viral marketing to take place when your readers pass on your newsletter to friends and family.

My personal marketing philosophy is quite simple: *if it touches the customer, it's a marketing issue*[™]. Everything you and your colleagues do touches your customers, in more ways than one. This includes the way you communicate with customers and the methods you use in trying to attract new customers.

Marketing is one of the strategic throttles of any successful business. You cannot have a successful business without engaging in successful marketing. Likewise, engaging in successful marketing increases the odds of creating a successful and sustainable business.

The mistakes listed above are tactical in nature. The most common strategic marketing mistake made by many small (and large) businesses is putting a greater focus on attracting new customers than in retaining current good customers.

There are only three ways to grow any business:

- increase the number of customers
- persuade your current customers to buy more (larger volumes)
- encourage your current customers to buy more often (from you)

Two of the three ways to grow a business, therefore, are reliant on building relationships and increased purchases from existing customers. And, quite frankly, in terms of increasing the number of total customers, this is often dependent on how you treat your current customers since a large percentage of new customers will come through referrals by existing customers.

In today's world, with so many choices and options available to customers, if you do not take care of your customers, someone else will. The best way to take care of your customers is to create true value for them. This is best done by ensuring everyone in your organisation has a passion for customers and by developing a better understanding of customers and their unique needs.

You will probably have noticed that I use the word "customers" throughout this article. While you may think of your clientele as "patients," I would encourage you to also start thinking of them as *customers*. For that's what they truly are – customers who are exercising their decisions on what to buy and with which organisation they will do business.

Each of you knows how you like to be treated as a customer when you are the ones buying a product or service. When you think of your patients as customers, your mindset will change and you will have a better inkling on how your customers want to be treated.

After all, the great businesses of tomorrow will be grown exactly the way great businesses have always been built – by doing marvellous things that meet the needs, wants, and desires of customers.

Which is why one of my key pieces of advice to my own customers is always **don't have a commitment to customer service – have a commitment to your customers.**

When you do this, not only will your eyes be glazed and your ears flapping, you'll also know where you are headed – as the owner of a sustainable and growing business.

The Author

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