

Can You Really Market Your Business on a Shoestring?

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A long time ago, I attended a workshop entitled, “Marketing Your Business on a Shoestring.” That was back in the 1980s and I was just a young, impressionable account executive trying to make her mark on the advertising world by learning everything I possibly could to help clients with their businesses. My thinking was that this seminar topic was important; that business owners must really have a need to save money on their marketing budgets – naively unaware of how a business could possibly budget for such a high “expense.”

Today I’m older and somewhat less impressionable, but still very interested in helping clients to achieve their marketing and business goals cost-effectively. I also have learned that marketing is not an expense, it’s an investment with a return that can be measured.

Having weathered the vagaries of the economy over the decades, I’m rather jaded when it comes to blaming the recession, inflation or other financial ups-and-downs as to why business is scarce and there’s no money to be had for “wasting on marketing expenses.” This is because I’ve seen everything from large, highly profitable companies with triple digit million dollar revenues slashing their outsourced advertising program, to small, struggling companies miraculously finding the budget to finance a rather costly Web site project.

Bottom line is: businesses will find the money when they want to spend it. Like any expenditure, if a person is in need or really wants something, they will find the means to obtain it. Having the proper mindset that marketing demands an investment (time, personnel, money) will make a difference in how deep the pockets will reach.

The question begs to be answered, “Can a business market itself on a shoestring?” My answer is “Yes, but only if strategic thinking is applied.” For example, I have a client whose marketing and sales time is best spent taking prospects and referral sources to lunch. It’s the most cost-effective \$25 he can spend because his return on investment is 2,000% or more when he turns a prospect into a customer as a result of the face time. I didn’t come up with this strategy off the top of my head. Rather, it was the result of in-depth strategic marketing planning and analysis.

Don’t find yourself caught up in the trap of not having a plan, and being desperate for results. This is when you could over-spend on marketing activities,

winging it out of desperation. Investing time and funds in strategy is the smartest money you'll ever spend for your business.

Marketing on a shoestring budget doesn't have to mean that you are cheap. Think "strategic" and "creative" instead. For example, why settle for inferior graphic design because you think you can't pay for good talent? If you could tap into the talents of our local design community, perhaps at the college student level or by finding a seasoned, retired artist who just wants to work to keep busy at a lower rate, you could hit pay dirt.

Applying strategy to your shoestring budget may make you realize that "more" is not necessarily better. Sometimes "less" is more effective, targeted and cost-effective. Consider if you are mailing a marketing postcard to 10,000 new prospect contacts: would more prospects result in more responses, or would 1,000 *qualified* prospects be a better choice?

You don't have to settle for the lowest cost option for services or barter for everything to save money. Remember that it takes cash to run a business and your vendors need cash, too. Marketing will continue to help your business grow and profit. Re-assess every activity in your marketing toolbox from the "investment" perspective and be sure to measure your return on investment to do what's best for your business.

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