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21 Ways to Bring in the Business

Despite your desperate hopes and prayers, business isn't just going to wander into your business. You need to get out there and hustle, and we've got the tips to help you do it.

By Laura Tiffany | February 01, 2006

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We've found the perfect marketing solution for you. First, close your eyes. Now hug your computer monitor. Using top-secret technology developed at the Entrepreneur.com laboratories, we'll instantly transmit lists of bottomless-pocketed customers to your brain and your homebased business.

Well, OK, maybe not. But it's not because we don't have the technology (only one more logarithm to go, we swear)-really, we want to help you help yourself. So we've brought you something even better: 21 chunks of marketing know-how that will help you find the customers you need to fill your business's coffers. Print this out, post it up and integrate it into your marketing plan-and get ready for tons of sales.

The Basics

1. Create quality marketing tools. This doesn't mean you need to allot 75 percent of your budget to printing costs, presentation slides and a Web site. But it does mean you need to put deep thought into the cohesive image you want to present. "Sit down and make a list of everything you're going to need each time you make contact with a prospective customer or client, including a stationery package, brochures and presentation tools," advises marketing expert Kim T. Gordon, president of [National Marketing Federation Inc.](#) and an Entrepreneur.com columnist. "Then, if you can't [afford] to print it all at once, at least work with a designer and a copywriter to create the materials so you have them on disk."

If even this sends shivers down your bank account's spine, find creative ways to deal with it: Hire an art or marketing student from the local university, or barter your services with other homebased entrepreneurs.

2. Greet clients with style. Voice mail may not seem like a component of your marketing plan, but if a potential client calls and your kid answers, that client will be gone before you can even technically call him a client. So get yourself a professional voice-mail system (even the phone company offers options) with several boxes, advises Gordon, so callers can press "1" to hear more about your services, "2" for your web and e-mail addresses, etc.

3. Focus as narrowly as possible. Instead of trying to reach all the people some of the time, narrow your target audience to highly qualified prospects. Instead of going to seven networking groups once every two months, go to the two groups with the best prospects every week. "Instead of marketing to 5,000 companies, [find] several dozen highly qualified companies and make regular contact with them," says Gordon. Call them, mail your marketing materials, and then ask to meet. It'll save you money and time.

4. Make the most of trade shows. Here's a hodgepodge of tips, courtesy of [Rick Crandall](#), a speaker, consultant and author of marketing books:

- If you don't get a booth beforehand, try to find someone who might want to share their space with you. You help them run the booth, and they get a local who can show them the town.
- If you decide not to get a booth, go anyway. You can always do business with the exhibitors--just be sure to respect their time with "real" customers before you approach them as a peer looking for some B2B action.
- After the seminar, be absolutely, positively sure that you follow up on your leads. What's the point of attending if your leads end up in the trash? The [Center for Exhibition Industry Research](#) says 88 percent of exhibition attendees weren't called by salespeople in 2000. Try to improve that stat.

5. Conduct competitive intelligence online. When Joyce L. Bosc started [Boscobel Marketing Communications Inc.](#) in 1978 in her Silver Spring, Maryland, home, she had no clue what the competition was doing. Today, she points out, homebased entrepreneurs have it a lot easier. "As a homebased business [in 1978], how would you even find out what your competition was doing, what they were charging or what kind of clients they had?" says Bosc, whose company now has 18 employees and is no longer homebased. "Today, that information is completely at your fingertips." So find your competitors' sites and

get clicking.

Getting Friendly

6. Offer your help. Want to be known as a good businessperson--and just as an all-around good person? Help others out. One of Ellen Cagnassola's biggest business-getters for her Fanwood, New Jersey, handcrafted soap business, [MaryEllen's Sweet Soaps](#), is word-of-mouth that's generated by not only her good work, but also her good deeds. "I am the first to help another, and I offer ideas freely," says Cagnassola. "I think this *and* my enthusiasm for my business make people want to be a part of my success." Where does she offer help? A New Jersey Women's Business Center and her hometown's Downtown Revitalization Committee are just a few places she lends her expertise.

Another way to help out your community and your business is to align yourself with a nonprofit organization. Patrick Bishop, author of *Money-Tree Marketing*, offers this idea: "Set up a fund-raising program that benefits a school, like a discount card. At the same time the kids [are selling them, they are] promoting your business."

7. Offer work samples. Crandall suggests that if, for example, you're a web designer, you surf the internet, find a potential client and send them a few tips they can use to improve their site. Or you can do as Anne Collins did: "In the beginning, I was willing to just go out and beg for the business," says Collins, whose homebased Laurel, Maryland, graphic design firm, Collins Creative Services Inc., now boasts the U.S. Army as one of its clients. "Sometimes I would offer a small job for free just to show the potential client the quality of my work and to get them used to working with me."

8. Network. If this piece of marketing advice sounds like something you've heard before, there's a good reason: It works. Join your local chamber, leads groups like [LeTip International Inc.](#) or [Leads Club](#), your industry association, or [Rotary Club](#). When you go, ask the people you meet what leads they're looking for--and really listen to what they have to say. They'll repay you in kind.

9. Cross-promote with other businesses. Whom do you share customers with? Find them and figure out how you can promote one another. If you're a PR person, hook up with a copywriter or graphic designer for client referrals. Or you could take note of the collective that Crandall knows: The Wedding Mafia, a group of several wedding professionals (a caterer, DJ, dressmaker, photographer, etc.) who work together through referrals. Another option is to add a brief note at the bottom of invoices referring your accounting clients to "an excellent computer consultant," and have that consultant do the same for you.

Getting Online

10. Chat online. Find newsgroups that cater to your audience, and join the fray. "I didn't start [participating in online discussion groups] to generate business, but as a way to find information for myself on various subjects," says Shel Horowitz, owner of Northampton, Massachusetts-based Accurate Writing & More and author of several marketing books, including *Grassroots Marketing*. "But it turned out to be the single best marketing tool I use. It costs only my time. [One] list alone has gotten me around 60 clients in the past five years."

11. Offer an e-newsletter. Again, this establishes you as an expert, but it also provides another very important marketing tool: e-mail addresses of potential clients. You've opened up the gates to creating a relationship with these folks by offering free information. Now they may approach you to do business, or you can use these "opt-in" addresses to offer your services.

12. Don't wait for customers to find you online. Rather than purchasing an e-mail list for mass, impersonal advertising, spend some time trolling the Web, looking for businesses that have some sort of connection to your own business. Then write them a personalized e-mail telling them why you think they should build a business relationship with you. "Those letters have a high tendency to get answered because they are personal," says Crandall. "And if there is something we could do business about, I've opened the door. I've done thousands of dollars of business once that door was opened with people who were total strangers [before I e-mailed them]."

Spreading the Word

13. Go where your best prospects are. This is called play-space marketing. If you have a pet-sitting business, ask your local vet office and groomer if you can display brochures. Are you a landscape artist? Offer to do a display for the local nursery. Do you throw children's birthday parties? Buy a slide at the local movie theater to be shown before their family films. "Just be sure the environment is appropriate," cautions Gordon. "If you're a business consultant, you're not going to run ads on the movie screen. [Advertise somewhere] where people are [likely] to be thinking about what you're selling."

14. Become an expert. Cagnassola has developed her business know-how into a marketing tool by writing online articles. "Write articles to show your talents and give them as filler to any Web site owner that you feel is fitting," says Cagnassola. "Not only does it bring you more traffic and potential customers, but it provides you with an international business portfolio to demonstrate your business sense [and your] product or service."

Other ways to establish yourself as an expert: Answer questions in online forums; get yourself listed in a directory like [Experts.com](#), [Profnet.com](#) or [The Yearbook of Experts](#); send tip sheets to local media outlets; write a book or pamphlet; or do the next tip on our list.

15. Host a seminar. It's cheap. It's easy. And it's a darn good way to get over your public-speaking fear. Crandall offers the story of a business broker who conducts free weekly seminars. People selling businesses don't want to attend, as they

aren't new to the business brokering process, but they do notice his ad and call for his services. Business buyers attend, and the broker now has "pre-qualified" prospects. "You're getting free publicity, you're getting prospects to call you, and you're building your level of expertise," says Crandall, who hosts his own seminars on marketing.

16. Get local news coverage. Play up your locale as much as possible with personalized news releases. Because which sounds better to your local press: A successful homebased caterer with a national contract, or a caterer from Hometown, Ohio, with a national contract? Heck, even if you used to live someplace, write them a letter. Crandall recently promoted his mother's children's book by sending letters to the newspapers both where she currently lives and where she previously lived, and both picked up the story.

17. Get ready for your close-up. Does TV sound out-of-reach for a homebased business owner on a budget? Not so. Get yourself a cable access show. "You can't blatantly advertise a product or service, but it's a good way to become better-known," says Bishop. "For example, if you sell crafts, you might start an [instructional] craft show. You could give away something for free or have a contest. When people call or write in, you can start a mailing list and then contact them about your business." Some other boons: It adds to your expertise and gives you a great hook for your publicity efforts.

Customer Service

18. Gracias, merci, thank you. Shower the top 20 percent of your clients who yield you the most sales (either in volume or dollars) with thank-yous, whether it's gifts, personalized notes or lunch. "It doesn't cost a lot of money," says Gordon, "but it's a great way to let your best customers know they're special."

19. Offer a guarantee. More people will be willing to try out your business and recommend your business if you offer "satisfaction guaranteed." End of story.

20. Get them talking about you. Word-of-mouth marketing is just about the cheapest thing you can do to boost your business. The main way to attract referrals is to just do a great job: Impress your clients, and they'll tell everyone they know. But there are more aggressive tactics you can use as well. Ask everyone you know to evangelize your business. Hand out several business cards to people rather than just one so they're more likely to pass them on. Even go through your favorite client's Rolodex (with his or her permission, of course) to find potential leads.

Spreading the Word

21. When in doubt, pick up the phone. Instead of lamenting your lack of business, drumming your fingers on your desk and forming new worry lines on your face, call a customer. Touch base, see how they're doing, visit their office when you're running an errand, see if there's anything you can do for them, even if it's not a paid piece of work. It'll improve your relationship, and you may jar their memory. After all, you'll never hear "I've been meaning to call you!" if you don't pick up the phone.

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