

17 Cheap or Free Marketing Ideas

How can you get your business noticed? And, what's more important in these tough economic times, how can you get noticed without breaking your budget?

by Kathy Yakal, Buzz up! on Yahoo!

In this economy, you need all the help you can get to ensure that your business is noticed amid all the noise. Marketing is the key, but which approach to take? The first thing that may pop into your mind is to send out e-mail blasts or hire a consultant. While these are good ideas, everyone's already doing the first, and the latter can be pricey. Besides, there are lots of things you can do on your own that are cheap or free.

Increase visibility in your community.

Join local organizations that provide business networking opportunities, or start your own. Do volunteer work for a large charity. You'd be surprised at the marketing support such activities can bring.

Participate in online marketing groups.

Search Twitter and other social-networking sites for groups meeting to discuss marketing. For example, Understanding Marketing holds a chat and Q&A session on Twitter that focuses on small-business marketing. It's live each Tuesday from 8 to 9 p.m. eastern time. Search #smbiz on Tweetgrid.com.

Submit information to blogs.

Blog writers are always looking for content for their sites. Target appropriate ones and send them press releases or descriptive e-mails.

Reward existing customers.

Offer an exclusive incentive to your regular customers-only your regular customers. Notify them via e-mail or other contact methods, and direct them to an otherwise inaccessible page on your Web site where the offer appears.

Get your customers to bring in new customers.

Offer an incentive like a discount to customers who get a new customer to make a transaction with your business.

Spruce up your Web site.

Stale sites don't attract business. Fresh, frequently updated Web sites show your customers you're a vibrant and active business. Let users subscribe to get update notices, then update frequently.

Provide free, helpful information to your customers.

Such content should be related to your type of business and can include tips, hints, reviews, and other information that can help drive sales. For example, a business selling paint can provide a guide to selecting the best paint for different uses. Such informative content is often available from suppliers. Use it. Offer your non-competing business customers a link exchange.

A link exchange is much like a bulletin board at your business that holds your customers' business cards. The more links your business has to their Web sites, the better your search engine placement, and the greater the number of people who see your business's links, the more will visit you.

Use downtime for marketing.

When times are slow, keep employees busy contacting customers. Create e-mail marketing documents your employees can send to individual customers. Personal contact with customers gets results. Mass e-mails are less effective and, given today's e-mail spam filters, may not be seen by many. Go for quality contacts rather than quantity.

Visit your own Web site frequently.

Look for ways it can be improved. Too often, small business Web sites load slowly, are poorly organized, and are difficult to navigate. Fix bottlenecks that impede customers and look for ways to get customers to act. Make sure all links work and lead to up-to-date content. Test campaigns with printable coupons and other incentives. For more tips, see our story "Build a better Web site" (www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2193395,00.asp),

Get active in the online community.

Encourage employees to do the same. Don't spam discussion forums or other social sites, but don't be afraid to use signature lines containing links to your Web site. Establish common-sense rules for yourself and your employees regarding these social-networking and discussion sites, and always strive to be positive and helpful on them.

Check out your suppliers' Web sites thoroughly.

Add links on your site to informative and helpful content on those sites. Many corporate sites offer instructional videos and other material that can inform your customers and lead them back to you, ready to do business.

Get a toll-free phone number.

It makes you look more professional and encourages business-and the fees aren't as high as you might think.

Launch a blog on your site and update it daily.

Nothing reads "I don't care" like a blog whose most recent entry is days old. Assign this task to employees who can write and spell-an illiterate blog is worse than no blog at all. Introduce people to your company and its staff. Highlight products. Run contests and give away company swag. Announce specials and upcoming product-line changes. Establish a "customer-of-the-month" tradition and do regular write-ups. Surely there's something you can say to your customers daily.

Yes, use Facebook and Twitter.

Having a Facebook page may not earn you any new business, but not having one may cause customers to ask why you don't. Take some good pictures of your offices and your employees (unless you'd rather leave those details to your customers' imaginations), or, in some fashion, put a more human face on your company identity. Twitter is a young technology, and everyone's scrambling to figure out useful applications. In the meantime, let your customers at least follow you, and implement a strategy similar to what you're using in your blog. In 140 characters, that is.

Visit online marketing sites.

Good Marketing Ideas is an excellent site, with plenty of useful tips. The suggestions here cost little or nothing to implement and will likely lead you to resources you might never have thought of on your own.

Never surrender.

Getting new and potential customers to notice you is an ongoing-and sometimes uphill-battle, and one you can't ever stop fighting. Pick a new idea every week or two and implement it, no matter how small it is. Call a meeting of employees, order a pizza for lunch, and brainstorm; offer an incentive for ideas you implement. Before long, your marketing might just pay off in new sales-and happier, more involved customers.

If you would like FREE business counseling, please contact the Lynn Area Chamber of Commerce staff at 781-592-2900 or info@LynnAreaChamber.com