

Not New, But Still True: Marketing Ideas That Work

Any way you look at it, the American economy is in a period of readjustment. No matter what business you happen to be in, and whether or not your business has been gently or severely impacted by recent economic fluctuations, there's an element of uncertainty about the coming years. However, one fact has stayed the same: Consumers will purchase things they need or want, and successful companies will be the ones that find a way to trade with these consumers. Now, more than ever, it's vital for suppliers to establish contact with clients and to promote the idea that their products are the best ones for clients to acquire.

A job that's never finished is making horse enthusiasts (another term for potential customers) aware of your company and products. Think about these guidelines for growing your business through advertising.

Establish and promote your brand. If you don't already have a logo, color scheme, or banner that identifies your company, decide on one and use this brand on absolutely everything that your business touches. Vehicles, clothing, buildings, product containers, feed bags, and all communications and letters to customers should carry your brand. Repeatedly seeing this logo tells customers that your company is solid, reliable, and ready to meet their needs, so don't make a habit of changing your brand, colors, or visual image too often.

Make every advertisement count. Keep your message clear and simple. Use strong visuals to catch the reader's attention. Compare costs, as it may be more effective to run a large ad fewer times as opposed to a small ad more frequently. Don't waste money on an ad that is too small to be effective.

Use the Internet. You can't afford not to have a Web site. Although not every current or potential customer will visit your site, a Web site is a great way to share information about your company, its credentials, its products, and its professional staff. Even a simple site adds credibility, just as the lack of a site suggests your company may not be keeping up with the times. Because many visitors won't probe beyond the opening page, put your most important message (what your company does and how it can help the consumer) front and center. Be certain to include complete contact information. It's surprising how many Web sites don't think to mention where the company is located, and for horse feed suppliers, this detail is important.

Collect and use contact information from your customers. Everyone who calls or e-mails your office or looks at your Web site is a potential customer. As these individuals initiate contact with your company, be sure to collect their home or e-mail addresses and ask if they would like to receive information on your products and services. Depending on current regulations, you may be able to add them to direct mail or e-mail recipient lists (be sure to give new e-mail contacts an opportunity to unsubscribe from your mailing list). Keeping your company name and products in front of customers will lead to increased awareness of your brand and more sales of your products.

Keep the message fresh and appealing. Design each mailing to include something of value for the customer: helpful information, notice of upcoming events, the answer to a question the customer may not have known he had. Best of all is to include a coupon, premium, or other money-saving offer such as a "buy three, get one free" deal. Including an expiration date may generate more action than sending an undated offer.

A lot of effort goes into attracting new customers, so it's quite important to find ways of retaining these customers for the long run. Quality products and superior service are equally necessary in this effort. Consider these tips for keeping customers loyal to your brand.

Know the business. This sounds self-evident, but all industries and businesses are in a state of constant change, and what you knew yesterday won't necessarily answer today's questions, let alone those of next week. Read magazines and newsletters, especially ones that feature breeds and disciplines with which you are not completely familiar. Browse the Internet for current equine-related news. Talk to other people in the feed business. Don't think you have time for this? Then don't be surprised when your customers migrate to the store of a competitor who has made time to stay informed on the latest issues and developments.

Watch consumer trends. Who's spending money these days? What issues are pushing the market? Baby boomers, for example, are still buying and riding horses, but they're moving away from high-performance animals and gravitating toward pleasure and trail mounts. They're also becoming grandparents, and this is significant because the annual total spent on clothing and footwear for preschoolers alone is in the seven-billion-dollar range. Translation: The grandma who comes to your store to buy a new water bucket will almost certainly look at the display of cute toddler T-shirts—but only if your store has this display. Teens are also spending lots of money (around \$135 billion annually), and teenage girls outspend teenage boys by about ten dollars a week. Western wear (shirts, hats, boots) is gaining popularity in this population segment, even among teens who don't ride. Did your store advertise a back-to-school sale this year? Brand-new idea...new customers!

Be a good listener. Anything you say is something you already know; you learn new things by listening. When you talk to customers, either on sales calls or in the store, pay attention to what they're saying. This isn't as easy as it sounds; you need to give the customer full attention rather than letting your thoughts drift, answering the phone, handling paperwork, or formulating your answer. Face the customer, maintain eye contact, and wait for a several-second pause in the conversation before starting to speak. Beyond simply being polite, this attention will help you identify the customer's needs and find ways to meet them.

Provide excellent service. Keeping clients is essential to any business, and service is the key. Promise only what you can deliver, and then make every effort to keep the promise. Building and maintaining trust will go a long way toward retaining clients and having them refer their friends to your business. And, of course, be sure to ask every customer, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" Try it; you might be surprised at the answers, and it's a guaranteed way to assure that your customer will finish the transaction with a smile.