

Marketing Insights #1

Marketing, that BIG , NEBULOUS and UNKNOWABLE discipline that you need to spend "gozillions" on to get right! BALONEY! (bologna for those spelling mavens reading this). Every business markets itself every day, the major questions are however are What are you marketing; Who are you marketing to; and What message is your marketplace getting (or not getting) from you? Is what or how you are marketing actually helping you or hurting you?

I have worked with hundreds of companies on these problems and developed comprehensive marketing plans as part of overall business plans. I can tell you that SOME type of plan, at least where you as the business owner takes the time to consider who is buying your product, who you want to sell to, who your competition is and what your strengths and weaknesses are, is absolutely critical to any business, even the proverbial "corner store", if you intend growing and achieving anywhere potential. Surveys may or may not be of value sometimes, but one very important thing they show us is that 98% of all business is SMALL BUSINESS! And the figures also show that over 97% of them (all types) fail within the first 2 years (over 80 percent don't get that far). If you haven't or don't do at least some basic planning, including taking a cold hard look at your business to see what it's "buyer's value proposition" is, and then align your efforts to selling, advertising and marketing to that value, (including skewing that activity to your strengths and away from your weaknesses) you fit the profile of almost all businesses who fail! And a lot of businesses who have been around for years also fail because they don't pay and/or stop paying proper and careful attention to this "law" of the business universe!

So what am I talking about here, and how can just a little and/or new company address this in short order and make use of it in your business now! Since you never have enough time, how can you do this (considering if you don't you are on the path to ruin ... it's just a matter of time)? Well there are a few basic items you need to address and can do easily in a short period of time, and then regularly come back to and update, revise, etc. as needed.

First, sit down with paper and pencil (pen) and start to put your thoughts down on paper. YES, you have to write it down. If you don't write it down, it is just a quick thought passing through your brain in the jumble of everything else screaming for your time and attention as a business owner. It will get lost and forgotten, and you're back on that path to ruin I spoke of! Now simply draw a vertical line down the center of the page so you have two (2) columns. Head one column STRENGTHS and the other WEAKNESSES. Now, nobody is around or looking over your shoulder, so TELL THE TRUTH! List in each column everything you can think of that is a "valid" strength of your business, by that I mean SPECIFICALLY, what makes your business "Better" than your competition! And I don't mean that you hope it does, or you like to think it does, but in your "heart of hearts" you KNOW it is a strength particular to your firm. It can be processes, staff, and/or product. It could be your location, your building/premises. It could be that buyers like you/your product better than others when they get the chance to see it, use it, touch it, learn about it, etc. The point is, list everything you can think of that a CUSTOMER (not you) would look for (at) as a strength; versus any and all of your competition! You may find none (though that is unlikely because the business has YOU and you're more tenacious than anyone else, right?). When you are through that column, go over to the weaknesses. Be hard on yourself here! You can bet the real world and your competition will be! This is first about survival, so make darn sure you bring that attitude to the task. Now list everything that you can think of that is a weakness of your business, and include everything that your competitors can or do perform/provide better than you do (or can). Take your time; don't be in a hurry here! Remember your business life is on the line so give this the attention and time it deserves! Need help? Ask your spouse, friends, employees? Want the real truth ask your customers, and particularly the ones you've lost or didn't get!

Okay, now take a break and relax awhile. If you did this simple exercise right, the way I've told you to, you are probably feeling pretty beaten up right now and a lot of negative thoughts may be coming in, so give your mind a rest. When you come back to the listing, look at it again. Revise it based on standing back and making cold hard AND FAIR judgments of every item. Revise your list based on that critical view. Now you have a SWOT study (Strength and Weaknesses Analysis, don't worry about the "OT" part). From this point you have information you can now use to actually not only improve your business, but begin to see clearly what directions you need to (or can) take it in. AND YOU WILL BE DOING IT INTENTIONALLY, BASED ON REAL INFORMATION, versus by accident, as most small business does!

Where do you go from here? Well there is a great deal that can be done and probably should be done, but I prefaced this article with “simple and easy”, so let's cut that down to what you NEED to do. Review again the list you made. Look at the strengths column. Are there any items there ALL your fellow competitors do as well, or at least some, one do as well? Tell the truth, because you are the one who'll pay the tab for your errors! If so, draw a line through it because it is not a REAL strength of your business. Do this with every item in that column. Now do the same with the weaknesses column. Looking at each item, is it really a weakness! By that I mean first, is it something you cannot easily change and/or improve to make it NOT a weaknesses, versus your competitors (if you can change it, DO SO NOW). Keep in mind here. We are measuring these all as comparisons against your competition. If you don't know your competition, get out there and go learn about them, see their operations, talk to their customers and get the feedback to KNOW! Your business life depends on it! Is the weakness one that will cause you to lose business to your competitor(s)? Is it something you cannot change or do anything about at the moment? If the latter, then keep it in mind for the future to intentionally move your business toward rectifying it. But wait, I am getting ahead here. Just get the columns winnowed down to those items that are really strengths or weaknesses!

Now, prioritize each list by the importance of them to your business health, that is, how pivotal is each item to you surviving, selling product/services, cash flow, gaining market share against competitors, etc. Prioritize from the most important to the least. Then reprioritize the list from the most urgent to the least (the order may not be the same). When you are through you have the basis of a great deal for planning and building your business, but for now, you have a clear list of what you need to address and how soon to grow your firm and build your income! We'll talk about the “other” important things another time. For now, this simple exercise has gotten you “on the path” to where you want to be. AND, it's given you the key items to focus your marketing, advertising, production budgets on, no matter how meager!

Another VERY IMPORTANT observation is this: if you have done this exercise, you have learned several extremely important lessons that ALL good and continually healthy firms practice. First and most important of these is that the very process of writing it down and thinking about items in your operations has made you think A LOT MORE about your company. AND it's probably opened your eyes to not a few things you knew but never considered; and a few more you didn't know or think about! You are doing PLANNING! Knowledge is power, and in business it is worth a lot of money! You have just made one of the major first steps toward business planning and one which will invariably give you at least a good basic guide to what you really need to do, when and where you probably need to focus your assets. Remember, the “squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Often the most pressing issues for a business ARE NOT the most important! Learning what you are about, what your marketplace really is, not what you think it is or would like it to be, is central to you still being in business tomorrow. Working hard is great and important. However, I've run into a lot of firms whose owners and staff can barely keep up with their workloads as they are on the edge of bankruptcy! Working smart, working on what is in the best interests of your business and particularly in the best interests of the marketplace you are in will be a much better use of your time. If you work that way, you will succeed; and have something to show for all your efforts!

So take the time to just sit down and “Write it Down”. Do a simple SWOT analysis of your business AND do it again at least once a year, or any time there is a change in your marketplace, products, services, etc. It will go along way to helping you focus your assets to your best benefit. As well, it will get you in the habit of planning and assessing your business and positions. A very good habit indeed for any business to not only succeed, but STAY successful! Good Luck and Good Business!

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