

The Secret to Successful Marketing: The Art of Thinking Backwards

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The key to a successful advertising program is to start at the end and plan your campaign step-by-step in reverse. You must exercise the Art of Thinking Backwards.

It is the same planning process used by engineers, painters, architects, inventors and creative minds throughout history. They envisioned the end result and then calculated the steps in reverse until they reached step one. Once they found their beginning, they reversed the process until they accomplished their goal.

It's no different with sales and marketing. You must start at your final destination by answering this question: What does success look like? Once you know where you want to end up, you plan your actions, one step at a time, working backward through the process, making sure you cover all the bases, until you arrive at Step 1. At that moment, you will be ready to start advertising your products and services.

Can your business survive without marketing? No. The myth of "build it and they will come" is just that: a myth. You have to go out and FIND customers. They are NOT lining up outside your door. They are hiding. Where are they? Who are they? What will you say to them once you find them? What will convince them to take action? Do you know?

The cost of advertising is high. The importance to the success of your business is critical. You can't screw this up. You have to do it right. You've got to start at the end and find your beginning. Once you do, you have to commit the future of your business to your marketing plan — it's all or nothing, sink or swim, pass or fail.

THE LAST STEP: Define Ultimate Success

How will you know if your marketing efforts have succeeded? What does success look like?

I think the following is a reasonable benchmark for almost any business:

"My advertising campaign is a success when NEW customers buy my products and services, when they CONTINUE to buy, and when they TELL their friends to do the same."

It's not good enough to get people to buy. You want them to become loyal customers - *repeat customers*. Moreover, you want them to be so impressed by your products and services that they become vocal advocates - walking advertisements. What could be better than getting people to enthusiastically advertise your company for free?

For example, I am one of the original Apple customers. I bought my first Mac back in 1985. I have been a loyal buyer ever since; if it has an Apple logo on it, I want it. But I'm also a devoted salesperson. I seize every opportunity to convince people to get rid of their inferior PC product and buy a "real" computer.

I am a perfect example of the ultimate goal of advertising: *Transforming a non-customer into a lifetime advocate.*

That should be your ultimate goal, too.

STEP 10: Understand your Target Customer

Not everyone will buy your product, that's a fact. You only need to reach those who are most likely to buy what you are selling. Your sales pitch – your call to action – only needs to resonate with your target customer.

Do you know who that is?

You may consider hiring a professional marketing company to conduct a consumer survey. They might form focus groups and pre-test your product or service using a cross-section of the buying public to determine the best advertising approach needed to penetrate that market. It can be expensive; but it can also save you lots of time and money over the long run. Advertising that is tailored to reach a specific demographic is more effective than the shotgun approach.

Nonetheless, you could conduct your own informal survey, approaching as many potential customers as you can manage, asking them about your product, recording the feedback, and evaluating the results. It's the same process the professionals use, less expensive, not as strategic, but it *can* provide you with valuable information that you can use to refine your marketing plan.

The goal is to answer as many of these questions as you can: Who is my ideal customer? Young or old? Male or female? Economic level? Buying habits? Conservative or liberal? Do they read? Are they suspicious of technology? What are they afraid of? What turns them off? What turns them on? What language/vocabulary will stimulate a response? Etc., etc.

Once you've done your homework, you should be able to answer this question:

You walk into a room filled with a hundred different people. You can only talk to three of them. You can only speak to them using 20 words or less. What will you say to those three people to get at least one of them to ask you for more information about your product?

Can you do it? If you can't, you might not understand your customers. You might not understand your own product. If *you* don't get it, how will they?

Step 9: Prepare your Products and Services for Sale

I don't know how many times I bought a product that never should have been sold in the first place. Nothing will destroy your company faster than selling something that isn't ready to use.

A disappointed customer is a public relations tsunami. They will get on Facebook and with the push of a button, they will blast your failure around the globe. Nothing spreads faster than a bad testimonial. Nothing is harder to fix.

If you are going to advertise your company, make absolutely, positively sure that what you are selling is completely ready to use. Does your product actually do what it claims to do? Does it have a warranty? Do you have a service department? Are your people ready to answer EVERY question? Can your customers find help on your website?

Make sure your buyers won't be disappointed; don't release your product until it has been fully tested and proven. Even so, things happen. If they have a problem, make sure they can EASILY find the help and support they need.

If you can't guarantee it – DON'T SELL IT.

Step 8: Listen, Analyze, Reevaluate and Make Corrections

There is no such thing as a perfect plan. The only way to know if your advertising program is working is to stop, look and listen. Are you getting the expected returns/sales/calls you were hoping for? If not, why not? Have you checked the statistics on your website? Facebook? YouTube? Phone calls? Return mailers? Coupon/offers? Are you even tracking that information?

As you interact with your new customers, ask them: How did you find out about us? What made you want to call/buy? Was anything you heard confusing? Misleading? Did you have any problems on our website? How is our customer service? Do you want to be on our mailing list? Do you have any friends who might be interested in our service?

This is your opportunity to collect testimonials – or to identify any problems. If your message is unclear, if something is missing in your publicity materials, if there is a breakdown or disconnect on your website or elsewhere– fix it now.

One more note: who is in charge of checking your website and other social media sources for accuracy? How often is it being checked? Who is supposed to update it? Who will respond to comments/complaints on your blog/Facebook/Twitter, etc.?

Incomplete or inaccurate information can kill your sales. Stay on top of it.

Step 7: Follow a Marketing Calendar

A basic principal of marketing is this: you cannot tell people about your product once and only once and expect results; you have to tell them about it over and over again, often using several different methods, until you finally get people to respond to your message.

Your target audience is like a huge rock. Your marketing program is a small hammer. You need to hit the rock again and again, tap, tap, tap, until the rock breaks. The temptation is to use a huge hammer and try to break into the market with one massive strike. You may end up scaring away your customers, or miss them altogether. It's more effective to hit them several times in succession, firmly, repeatedly, with your logo identity, your message, your product, your benefits, your value-adds, your calls to action. Someday, you will crack the market.

But you need to do it strategically. Not all on the same day, but over a period of time. It also helps to craft your message so that it evolves, starting with the basics and providing more detail as you go. Your first advertisement might be as simple as a photo and a single sentence. By the end of your campaign, you've built up the product in the consumer's mind, enough to hold their attention so you can feed them the full-on pitch.

You need a CALENDAR, not only to plan the release dates of your advertisements, but in order to plan the time it will take to PREPARE those advertisements. Writing, editing, design, printing, videos, websites, mailing, etc.

– these things don't fall out of the sky. There are physical time constraints and unanticipated delays associated with whatever tool you use.

Develop a calendar that shows start dates, production time, completion dates and release dates. This will also help you plan and manage your advertising budget.

The goal is to strategically present your message to your target audience, using the communication methods you've selected, using vocabulary and images that will create the greatest visceral impact.

Step 6: Close the Advertising Loop

If the postcard that you mailed out encourages people to go to your website for more information, will they be able to find it? If you offer a coupon or discount, will they be able to cash it in easily? Does your e-newsletter promise one thing, while your advertising mailer promises something different?

Are you planning to frustrate your new customer by making them push buttons, fill out applications, jump through hoops, encounter hidden restrictions, or make them call your uninformed staff for more information? If you do, they may abandon your company and never come back. *They WILL tell others about their bad experience.*

My point? Make sure that absolutely every piece of advertising, including your employees and any retail/resale agency, is complete, consistent, and in total agreement. Your advertising campaign must invite people to come through the front door. They must find what you said they would find. Otherwise, they will run out the back door and never come back.

Step 5: Compose your Message and Commit Yourself to it

Keep your message simple. Use as few words as possible. Use powerful, emotional images to capture people's attention. This is a good basic formula to follow when composing ads.

Try this exercise: Using 20 words or less, can you describe why someone should buy your product or service?

Or try this approach: People are essentially motivated by two very powerful forces: *Pain* and *Pleasure*. Your advertising pitch should address one or both of those instinctual needs.

1. Are your customers in pain or discomfort? Show them that you understand their pain and that you offer the best solution.
2. What gives them pleasure? Show them that you understand their desire and that you have the best way to fulfill it.

The outline for writing your message looks like this:

PAIN: Problem > Solution > Value Add > Call to Action

or

PLEASURE: Identify Desire > Promise Fulfillment > Value Add > Call to Action

Your message will *sound* something like this:

"Do you suffer from migraine headaches? We've discovered a simple medical procedure that may eliminate your headaches permanently. If you're one of the first 100 people to sign up, you'll receive a 20% discount. Stop the pain. Call now!"

or

"Do you remember the sweet taste of a root beer float on a hot summer day? We've captured that memory and wrapped it in vanilla goodness. We're doubling the offer if you order from our website. Go to www.rootbeerfloat.com and enter the product code YUMMY."

Once you've defined your approach, keep it simple and be consistent. Say the same thing, over and over again, using similar words, similar colors and images, hammering away at your message until it reaches their wallets.

Step 4: Choose your Marketing Methods

By studying your target customer, you should have some idea about the best way to reach them and what to say to them once you do.

But what tools of communication will you use? There are literally hundreds to choose from: TV commercials, radio commercials, billboards, postcards, websites, e-marketing, social media, point of purchase displays, conventions, brochures, newsletters, catalogs, newspaper and magazine ads, telemarketing, door-to-door, signage, flyers, video, blogs, etc. There seem to be new advertising methods every day. Keep your eye out for the latest trends.

Whichever you decide to use, the most important factors in choosing your methods will be:

1. Where are my target customers hiding?
2. What advertising methods will most likely reach them?
3. What is my budget?
4. Who will do the work?

Step 3: Form your Marketing Team

The first question you must answer when forming the team of people who will be responsible for advertising your products and services is this: *Should I be on the team?*

Be honest. If your contribution will be more of a hindrance than a help, then get out of the way. Just because you are the owner doesn't mean that you know how to sell your own product. If you don't have anyone in your company with the necessary skills and training, then hire someone outside of your company that does.

If you choose to hire a design/advertising/marketing company, then you must trust them. It doesn't mean handing over the keys to the castle; but it *does* mean that you must trust them to do what you hired them to do. They have the skills and experience to help you succeed. If they don't, find someone who does – even if that means firing yourself.

Once you form your team, assign responsibilities to each team member and decide who will ultimately make the final decisions. Committees don't get things

done; delegate authority to the team leader and let that person call the final shot.

Step 2: Establish an Advertising Budget

Often, by the time a company has invested in their products and services, they don't have any money left over for advertising. But, if nobody knows about what you have to sell, how will they know to buy it? Make sure that when you are writing your Business Plan, that you include a healthy budget for marketing and sales. A general rule: the smaller your advertising budget, the smaller the result.

The point is to use your time and money efficiently by following a strategic marketing plan, as described in this article. You can go a lot farther with less money if you travel smart. Don't just stumble along and hope for the best. Make a plan. Fund the plan. Follow the plan.

Step 1: Start with the Last Step

As I mentioned in the introduction to this short article: start at the end and work your way backward. Know your marketing plan from start to finish. The old adage is true: If you fail to plan, then you are planning to fail.

It's true that companies can collapse due to the vagaries of the economy. Trends come and go; consumer tastes change. Natural disasters happen. Nobody can control those things.

But you CAN control your message and the manner in which you deliver it to your target customers. The key to marketing is to know WHAT you are selling, WHO you are selling it to, HOW to find them, *and what to say to them once you do.*

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