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Marketing basics

First, the science bit. It's called the "marketing mix" - but it's basically seven "Ps" you shouldn't ignore. Follow this advice and your business should be on the way to marketing success.

Product - find out how many people will want to buy your product or service.

Price - getting it right is essential to your business success.

Place - how you are going to get your product or service to your customers.

Promotion - advertising, PR and other promotional activities can drive your business forward.

People - good people can be great for your business,

Process - the way you do things will influence the way people look at your business.

Physical evidence - the way you appear, from your offices to your vans, can send signals to existing and potential customers.

Product

Find out how many people will want to buy your product or service.

Conduct market research to find out whether there are enough potential customers out there for your goods or services. This is crucial for someone launching a business - or for a business launching a new product or service.

Market research can help you decide how you're going to find them, how to persuade them to buy from you and how to make them loyal.

Many large companies employ market researchers, but smaller firms can conduct the research themselves. Lots of free information is available from local libraries and online. For instance, try the Major Market Profile (MMP) www.majormarketprofiles.com series, which provides excellent market data coverage for an exceptionally wide range of consumer, industrial and service sectors.

The Chartered Institute of Marketing www.cim.co.uk operates an information service and offer useful tips about market trends and marketing activities. Contact them on 01628 427333.

As well as carrying out general research, you'll need to take a more detailed look at your product, customers and marketplace.

Conducting detailed market research yourself means you'll get a real feel for what your would-be customers think and it avoids the mistake of basing your business solely on your "gut feeling" and some general statistics.

Aim to find a representative sample of potential customers to help you with your research.

Who you approach, how many people you talk to and where you find them will all depend on the nature of your product or service. However, including real material on the market for your business will make your marketing strategy much more realistic. It will also give comfort to potential funders looking for evidence that your business has a future.

Ask your sample group of potential customers the following kinds of questions:

What are they looking for in a product or service like yours?

Do they like the product or service you're going to offer?

What are they prepared to pay?

What improvements would they suggest to what you have to offer?



Price

Successful marketing also relies on getting your price right and it's a delicate balancing act.

Have a look at your competitors' prices and talk to potential customers but, remember, pricing isn't all about what customers want to pay.

Your prices need to generate sales and a decent profit.

Consider introducing special offers, such as bulk discounts or reductions for prompt payers, free trials and money back guarantees.

Competitors and market leaders are good places to find ideas.

Place

The next important consideration in putting together a successful marketing strategy is how you are going to get your product or service to your customers.

The most direct methods are via retail outlets, through one-to-one meetings between sales staff and customers, or by mail order and direct mail and the internet. You can also sell wholesale to other retailers, or via exhibitions and fairs. Which options you pick will depend on the nature and price of your product, and the number and profile of your customers.

Direct methods tend to produce greater profits, as they don't have to be shared with intermediaries in the distribution chain but products can establish credibility more quickly by retailing through well-known outlets.

The key is to strike an appropriate balance between the distribution method most suited to your product or service, the resources you have available and what your competitors do. How you get your product or service to your customer can be your chance to innovate.

Companies that make it big often do so by introducing a new method of selling or delivering a product or service so it will pay to consider this aspect of your marketing strategy carefully

Promotion

The fourth 'P' is promotion and it's all about making potential customers aware of your product in the most effective and cost-efficient manner possible.

Without a big budget, you'll need to work harder and be smarter than your bigger rivals in order to make an impact.

Apply some simple ground rules:

Indirect approaches, such as PR, can be more effective than 'above-the-line' activities like advertising. Coverage in the kinds of publications your customers read is worth its weight in gold, so doesn't be shy about approaching newspapers and magazines. Most journalists are keen to hear good stories, particularly if you make it easy for them by supplying photographs with a press release.

For many new businesses, local coverage may not only be easier, it may also be more effective at generating sales.

Knowing what works is critical. Look at how others in your field do it to see what kinds of promotions have been successful.

Don't underestimate the effectiveness of small-scale advertising in local papers, bulletin boards, and directories such as the Yellow Pages. It helps to come up with a catchy slogan that customers can recall easily and there's plenty of value getting involved in community



activities. Also consider direct mail, and telesales and the internet to win new customers. To read more about trading online, visit the e-business section of this website.

Remember: you don't need to have a big budget to promote yourself. A lack of resources can force you to be more creative in getting out messages that catch the customer's eye and generate a response.

Good planning and a clear vision of what you're trying to achieve should help you get the right 'promotional mix' of advertising, direct marketing and public relations. You can learn a lot from looking at how leading players handled promotion in their early days, but don't just copy other people. Being different may be the secret of your success.

People

People are any business's biggest asset. Your staff's attitude to customers and the service they provide has a major impact on the way your business is perceived. Many businesses spend millions on promotional activities, such as public relations and advertising, but fail to get customer service right.

Remember: it costs between three and ten times as much to replace customers who have gone to a competitor than to keep them.

The best way to retain customers is to give them what they want and need, and do so in a way that is better than your competitors. It is easy to make the mistake of lowering your prices to win customers. Most customers value personal and excellent service and are willing to pay for it.

Measuring customer satisfaction levels and conducting research on an ongoing basis will help you to keep in touch with what your customers want from you and how those needs are changing.

Do this can be as simple as sending out regular questionnaires to customers to employing polling organisations and buying sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) software systems.

Welcome complaints - record them and analyse them to see how you can make improvements. A customer making a complaint is telling you that they want to stay with you, but something is wrong. You can act on this information and keep them. Once you have put things right they will tell others about what you have done and become ambassadors for your business.

But don't rely on just being reactive. Be proactive by measuring customer satisfaction and try to give yourself some early warning if things start to go wrong.

You can also invest in training, development and mentoring programmes to get good advice on how to give the very best customer service. Visit the Improve Performance part of this website for more information.

Process

The way you deliver your products and services can have an impact on the way you are perceived.

Smart businesses set out processes and set themselves targets to ensure a high quality of service to customers.

Your processes should do more than make life easier for you - they must be set up to meet the needs of your customers.

Try putting yourself in the shoes of your customers or prospective customers. How would they like you to deal with them?



For instance, what kind of after-sales service have you set up? If someone places an order, do you keep your customer informed of expected delivery times? Do you have procedures in place to deal with any delays? If you, or one of your staff, promises to call a customer, do they always do it? Do you have set timescales for the time taken to respond to inquiries?

And, when things go wrong, are you able to deal with complaints and act on them? Often computer software and outsourcing some of your activities can help you keep on top of things - but its important to set high standards and stick to them.

Physical evidence

The look of a reception area, leaflet, or letterhead can often be the first point of contact a prospective customer has with your business. It can also help shape their overall impression of your organisation. That's why many businesses call in designers to help them.

Some designers cover a range of disciplines, whilst others specialise. But using them effectively can have a big impact on the way your business is perceived - and its future profits.

Design can be divided into three categories:

Graphic design: this covers everything from branding and logos to the type of fonts your firm will use. Graphic designers can also help you develop packaging, stationery, leaflets, promotional brochures, websites, corporate videos and CD and DVD-ROMs.

Product design: teapots to trains to telephones have all been designed with the help of designers. If you are producing a product or new invention, you will probably work with a product designer.

Interior design: developing the right kind of store or office can set you apart from competitors and even help your staff work more effectively.

Directories like Yellow Pages and Thomson Local have lists of design consultancies. You can also speak to other people in your sector to get numbers for recommended designers.

Writing a marketing plan

A marketing plan should form part of your overall business plan. Marketing can also make a large contribution to your business being profitable and successful.

The size of your marketing plan and level of detail that it goes into will usually reflect the goals and aspirations of the business. Every business is different. There are however, a number of basic areas your plan should cover.

First break down the plan into three distinct areas:

Objectives - what are you trying to achieve?

Strategies - how are you going to achieve it?

Tactics - what are the actions you will undertake to do all this?

Objectives

Try to write a succinct statement of intent for your business that you and your business partners agree on. Will your objectives or "goal statement" be a long-term one, or a goal you aim to reach in a year or two? Set a time limit on achieving your goal.

Strategies

What strategies can you develop that will help you to achieve this goal? Before you decide, do some marketing research.



This will involve:

Learning about the business environment - your customers and competitors.
Understanding your own strengths and weaknesses.
Identifying opportunities and threats.

1. Learning about the business environment

Who are your main competitors, how do they position themselves, what is their pricing structure, what are standard terms of business for the industry, how do you compare against your competitors? Be honest!

Where can you go to gather this information? Time taken to make a thorough and accurate assessment of your marketplace will underpin your planning and actions. Often you will find information in the most unexpected sources.

2. Understanding your business strengths and weaknesses

Understanding the marketplace will help you to establish your own strengths and weaknesses. Make a list of your business's top three strengths and weaknesses, these should relate to the business environment.

You may, of course, identify more than three. However, you should try to focus on the main issues - those that will be critical to your security and success. Your strengths should be clearly communicated in your promotional material and in any strategic advertising. Your weaknesses will be things you can correct. You should also identify who can help correct them. It is important that you turn this information into a action plan.

3. Identifying opportunities and threats

Your business will operate in a dynamic, ever-changing environment. External influences, over which you have little or no control can make or break your business. The best you can do is to identify opportunities to exploit and plan to deal with threats. Examples of opportunities or threats:

could be economic ñ e.g. a price rise for raw materials, or a downturn in a particular sector, such as tourism;
might relate to your customers expanding, reducing or going out of business;
could be linked with the political climate and changes in legislation;
changing technologies or distribution methods; and
new competitors or existing ones going out of business;

The external environment (the area and businesses/community) around you is constantly changing. As it evolves, small changes are pushed onto your business. The challenge of the marketing plan is to try to identify these and set in place actions that will both protect you from the worst and profit from the best.

Items two and three are often referred to as a SWOT Analysis (Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats). Try to identify these on a regular basis - at least once a year -and monitor your actions and progress.

From all of the above intelligence you should have at your disposal the information from which to write sound strategies for your business. To follow each of your strategies you will need to implement day-to-day tactics. This is the next stage of your marketing plan.



Tactics

Once you have decided on the strategies that will carry you towards your goal you need to think about the day-to-day tactics (or actions) you will need to implement the strategy.

Examples of how tactics work to fulfil strategies is highlighted below:

Strategy

To develop class-leading distribution

Tactics

Investigate tracking software

Request credentials from leading specialist distribution companies

Run internal training programme to 'sell in' the importance of improved distribution.

As you can see, your strategies may have many tactics, which in turn should have delivery dates and "ownership" details - who does what and when it will be done.

Advertising

"Word of mouth" referrals from satisfied customers is often the best form of advertising - and the least costly.

However, most businesses have to pay for more formal and consistent advertising. You'll also need to think about the best type of advertising to reach your particular customers ñ and how much you're able to spend on a campaign.

For instance you could promote your business through:

- local newspapers and radio;
- television;
- the Yellow Pages and other directories;
- merchandising (such as point of sale, leaflets, packaging, shelf displays and window displays);
- national press and TV;
- posters and leaflets;
- trade journals;
- websites;
- exhibitions and trade shows.

Many small businesses advertise using local press and radio. These media outlets usually have staff who can create ads for you. Ask about special features and "free" editorial for companies placing advertisements. You might also be able to get a place in a special section or feature at a preferential rate.

You can also call in a advertising agency or design agency specialising in advertising to help you create a suitable advertisement. Some agencies have in-house media buying departments. These can help you place ads in the right media (newspapers, TV, radio, etc.) at reasonable rates. They can also offer advice on the best outlets to reach your preferred customer groups. Alternatively, you can go to an independent media buying agency ñ or book space by talking to media outlets directly.

For anything bigger than a small, local campaign, it's usually advisable to take professional advice.



Remember, that as well as advertising, there are ways to promote your business, including direct mail and telephone selling and public relations.

Using an advertising agency

So you want to launch an advertising campaign. Normally, you'll have to use an advertising or design agency to create the ad - and that means drawing up guidelines for what you want to say and the audience you want to reach.

This is called a creative brief.

A well-written creative brief will give:

- background information ñ why you need advertising;
- your objectives and the response you're looking for;
- what you're prepared to spend ñ your budget;
- information about your target audience, usually your customers;
- opinions on style and tone ñ what's acceptable to you;
- the content or information you want in your advertisement;
- details who will supply information to your designer or agency, and who will approve the creative work; and
- the deadline ñ when the work must be completed.

You should also list any other factors that might have an impact on your designer or agency.

Background

It's always helpful to give background information on the product or service you want to advertise. You might offer research or views from opinion formers. This can give the agency a useful insight into the issues facing you ñ and how to address them through advertising.

What you're trying to achieve

Clearly state what the objectives of the advertising will be. Is there a requirement for a campaign or a one-off advertisement? Then set out what are you trying to achieve.

For example, it could simply be to:

- create awareness of a service or product; or
- increase turnover from new customers by 10%; or
- increase sales from existing customers by 35%.

Each advertisement should have one objective. You might also cover several objectives over the course of a campaign. But the overall campaign should offer a single, clear corporate idea. This is usually achieved through a consistent strapline or sign-off to your advertising that stays constant.

An example of this would be the long-running British Airways campaign. Individual advertisements portray specific customer benefits, that when viewed over a period of time, provide the supporting evidence for the claim ñ "The World's Favourite Airline". This brand-building approach only works when applied consistently over time, so consider the exposure of your campaign and available budget before setting out along this route.

A common mistake, particularly among small advertisers, is that due to budgetary restrictions, there is a misguided belief that the brand or positioning message must change each year or even season. Try to work consistently and apply brand values to your advertising so that even the most specific of advertisements in some way goes toward building and consolidating your image.



What you're able to spend

Whenever possible, provide a clear indication of your available budget. This will help your agency or media buyer to plan the best mix. Many organisations are tempted to adopt the "you tell us how much we need to spend" approach as this negates the need to make a commitment. The usual outcome of this is that your agency will almost certainly come back with proposals you cannot afford or justify.

Because your expenditure must make a justifiable return, you can only really use this approach if giving a very clear and specific response target. Always ask your agency or media buyer to build into the campaign plan an evaluation mechanism, but be prepared to participate in this process.

Target audience for your campaign

There are various ways of describing the people you are trying to reach. The most helpful approach, especially to assist designers and media planners is to imagine your ideal target person and simply describe them. Try to avoid being too general in your description, as this will not help your agency. Build a picture of them; how much do they earn, where would they be likely to holiday, what part of the country do they live in? Obviously, few will fall into this exact category, but it will help your agency to set the right tone and choose appropriate media. You can then indicate the wider audience if this is appropriate.

Style and tone

This follows on from agreeing the target audience. Clearly your advertisement needs only to appeal to those you are trying to communicate to. Set clear guidelines as to visual style and the written tone you believe is most appropriate. Your agency will no doubt have an opinion, and indeed should guide you to some degree on this, but it is worth putting forward your own views on the matter, it will save time later.

Content

Provide full details of what you want the ads to say. Your agency's writer is there to transform the information you provide into compelling copy, which is well structured, grammatically correct and elicits the desired response.

Try to avoid putting forward suggestions for headlines and concepts as this will limit the creative process and is unlikely to lead to the most effective advertisement. Be precise about the mandatory information the advertisement(s) must carry. Long addresses and multiple phone numbers and logos will reduce the available space. Be particularly careful not to clutter your advertisements with unnecessary information: this reduces impact and lessens the communication potential of the advertisement.

If you do expect your agency to research a particular area, prior to writing copy, then advise of this at the earliest stage. Be clear about your requirements and be specific about the order of priority that the copy must give to certain points.

"Selling off the page" as most advertisements are required to do should follow the principles of AIDA or (as it is sometimes referred to AIDCA). They should prompt:

- attention;
- interest;
- desire;
- conviction; and
- action.



It is the order in which the selling argument is best laid out to the customer and is based upon researched findings into this area.

Contacts and your procedures

At the briefing stage, set out how information will be provided and how you expect your agency or media buyer to relay information back.

If you are in the position of co-ordinating the campaign and require approval from other people, tell your agency this ñ allowing them to prepare for a longer approvals process.

Remember: agencies charge for their time, including meetings, so try to keep things brief, to the point and heading in a positive direction. Good preparation and advance planning should overcome problems in the briefing and development of your ad campaign.

Deadline

Be clear about when you want your campaign to start. Remember, some types of publication have long lead-in times, well before they appear in print. You also need to build in time to design the ads and book space.

As a general guideline, colour advertisements require further advance planning than black and white; while monthly publications require more notice than newspapers, which generally work to tighter schedules.

As a rough guide, you should have an advert ready:

3 to 5 days before publication, for use in a black and white press ad;

5 to 7 days for a colour press ad;

3 to 5 days before running on the radio;

5 to 10 days before appearing on TV;

1 to 2 weeks before a monthly magazine goes to pres; and

3 to 6 months before a yearbook is issued.

REMEMBER: Deadlines vary greatly from publication to publication. Always check with the publication or broadcaster in advance if booking and placing the advertisement directly. If using an agency expect them to take care of this production/traffic process. The above information does not relate to booking the advertising space.

Other issues

Remember, too, to let your agency know about anything else which could affect them. They might, for instance, have to design an ad to meet strict corporate identity guidelines, i.e. they might have to use certain colours, logos, etc. Also let them know if you want to use logos from third parties, and if images or text are available on disc. You also make them aware of any restrictions put in place by publications or broadcasters on the types or content of advertisements they will accept.

Finally

Time spent preparing a good brief is time well spent. It will save time and money later and help build a better relationship and gain respect from your professional advisers. Sometimes however, less can be more. For instance, don't clutter the brief with unnecessary background information or statistics that are irrelevant, or try to lead your agency or media buyers into a media route which isn't based on hard evidence of success.



Above all keep you target audience uppermost in your mind.

Advertising checklist

When you're presented with proposals or finished ideas for an advertisement or campaign, always check the suggested ads will "work for you". Remember: all advertising is not created equally. Some advertising can be highly successful, other ads will make no impact and some can even damage your business or reduce your market share.

Here's things you should ask yourself:

Does the advertising speak directly and clearly to your target audience?

Does it offer a main idea?

Will it stand out on the page or on screen? (If it's a newspaper ad cut it out and place it in position. How does it stand out?)

Is it distinct from your competitors? Many people wrongly see similarity as a benefit. Do everything in your power to make your ads stand out and be different; at the same time retaining your brand identity.

Is the typography or the fonts used - well-balanced? Is the layout clean and logical? Is it easy to read? Does the headline draw you into the copy? Does the copy keep you reading on?

Will the advertisement reproduce well, or translate well onto the screen? Are the production methods being recommended appropriate? Especially on television and radio, professional production is vital if your advertisement is to have credibility. A cheaply produced advertisement may reflect badly on your corporate image. How will your TV ad, for instance, stand up when viewed after a high profile consumer brand ad?

If using TV or radio, be sure that your idea is incredibly strong and keep it simple. A good idea is a good idea, no matter how much it costs to produce - flashy production techniques cannot mask a poor idea. Don't be tempted to shoot live-action footage on a low budget and always get a good indication of the quality you might expect when completed.

White space is good. Don't be tempted to create ads that uses every square inch of space for printed ad. One small word in the middle of a large white space will have far greater impact than a over-full, retail style advertisement with every square inch covered.

Is the "call to action" or the bit encouraging a customer to do something - easy to read? Are the contact numbers correct, are any forms easy to complete and return? Is the ad making it easy for the customer to respond? Freephone numbers and freepost addresses get better response levels.

Public relations

Public Relations, or PR, is about managing reputations or shaping perceptions about your business.

The term is often associated with media relations or getting stories in newspapers and magazines as well as on TV, radio and the internet.

But PR also covers:

sponsorship activities,
media/trade briefings;
creating promotional publications;
websites and online PR; as well as
conferences and events.

Some businesses do DIY PR or they handle publicity issues in-house, or employ a full-time communications person. But others outsource the activity to consultancies and individual PR consultants.



If you'd like to handle things yourself, read our guide to writing an effective press release.

Whichever route you take, take time to plan your PR carefully. Set out your goals and how you want to achieve them.

Look at all the options open to you. You could publish a leaflet, get coverage in a trade magazine, or organise an event to woo customers.

Whatever you do, you'll need to grab customers' attention. For this reason, many businesses employ specialists to help them put together a PR campaign.

Look at research – even informal feedback from customers – to establish the extent of the gap between how your organisation is seen and how it wants to be perceived. For instance, a firm seen as "high-brow" and "stuffy" might want to reposition themselves as fun and interesting. It could opt to sponsor fun events or launch a wacky website to change perceptions.

It's also important that PR is seen as just one part of the marketing mix. It's no use changing public perceptions in the press and elsewhere, then customers getting a very different impression when they contact the company and speaking to staff.

Finally, whatever you do, monitor its effectiveness. Do people think differently about your organisation? For instance, have sales increased? Has your position in the market changed for the better?

One simple tracking method is to look at media coverage generated by your PR activities. What kind of messages have been picked up by the media? Are they positive or negative? And how much space have you generated? How much would it have cost to buy the same space as advertising?

Finally, remember that any PR activity should complement other marketing, such as advertising and direct mail. The messages you send should also be consistent with these other channels.

Using PR consultants

Many companies turn to external PR consultants to help them manage their corporate reputations.

Dealing with the media, handling crises, or organising events can be time consuming and not for the faint-hearted.

Some organisations opt to use independents – or freelance consultants – to help them. Others opt for consultancies with a range of staff.

The positive thing about using external experts is that they often have good contacts in the media, publishing and design industries. Hiring them allows you to call on years of experience and tap into a wide marketing network.

The downside is that consultants cost – and fees vary.

To find out more about PR – and what to look for in a consultant – visit the Institute of Public Relations website.

Similar advice is available from the Public Relation Consultants Association.

How to write a press release

Issuing press releases to the media can be a good way of generating publicity for your business.

Some companies opt for public relations professionals or former journalists to help them write and issue the releases. The downside is that outside experts will also charge fees.



The cheaper option is to do the work in-house.

Here's some tips to help you make the news

Make sure your story is newsworthy. What is "news" varies from publication to publication, but here are a few things that are worth promoting:

- launching a new business and creating jobs;
- regenerating a rundown area;
- launching an innovative product or service;
- new services to help the public ñ or change or save lives;
- interesting customer surveys;
- floating on the stock market;
- a massive rise in profits or a jump in your company's share price;
- human interest stories, for instance on people who have overcome the odds/illness, etc. to succeed;
- quirky ñ strange but true ñ stories.

The acid test is to write your article and then take the "so what" test? Would this be of interest to the average reader of the intended publication? Or would they say, "So what?"

Remember: this isn't advertising. The story has to be sufficiently interesting to people outside your organisation to merit anyone using it. And different news outlets will have different news values. For instance, a local paper might run a piece on a new shop being launched; but the national press won't be interested . . . Unless, of course, the shop is truly unique, strange or unusual ñ and is being opened by a celebrity, perhaps.

For this reason, many companies bring in marketing and PR professionals to help them. They can bring years of experience and media knowledge to your organisation ñ and can also take time-consuming work off your hands.

But if you want to go it alone, here's a few basic rules.

Basics

Any press release should have a strong title. Focus on "firsts", large sums of money or anything else in your story that has headline potential. Avoid jargon.

Then get straight into your story.

In the first few paragraphs, sum up:

- who's involved;
- what's happening/happened;
- where the action/opening/news is taking or took place ñ and when;
- how events unfolded; and establish
- why this is important.

Your first few paragraphs should give a basic summary. Then follow up by filling in the details.

Give interesting quotes from the people involved.

Keep the sentence structure simple. Don't use jargon ñ and explain complicated terms. Avoid hype or self-praise, and never make a claim you can't back up.



Remember, the local press want a local angle. How does the story affect local people? A trade title will want to know how your business/product is important or affects the industry it covers. And the tabloid press will probably want a human or celebrity angle.

Good photography breathes life into a story. Just like press releases, publications receive lots of photographs. It's therefore crucial that picture submitted with press releases stand out from the crowd and conform to the publication's own style. For maximum impact, spend some money on employing a photographer with media experience.

Then there's the layout of the release itself. Many people opt for 1.5 to 2 line spacing, but you can get away with single line spacing. Releases should also be typed on one side and should be between one or two pages long. A font size of 10 to 12 is best, and avoid fancy fonts. Stick to something simple, like Arial.

Always provide full names and job titles. And explain what the person does, if it's not apparent. Don't start sentences with numerals and spell out 1-9. Also spell out signs such as degrees and per cent.

When quoting someone, use the style:

He/she said: "Ö ." Avoid lofty terms like "he commented".

Use capitals sparingly. And the end of each page, use the term "more" - and "ends" at the end of the article.

Finally, remember to include the date on the first page and your contact details (name, address, daytime telephone number, e-mail). Also offer background information, and web addresses for journalists to carry out further research. And be around to answer media calls. If you can, include a mobile number where you or a spokesperson can be contacted day or night.

Study the style of your intended publications and write to suit them.

Then it's time to send of your press release. Fax, post or e-mail it.

Then wait to see your story is picked up. Remember, PR isn't advertising. You're not guaranteed anyone using your press release. It also depends on what other news is happening at the time. But, sometimes, good releases can generate thousands of pounds worth of publicity for very little cost and enhance your corporate reputation.

Tips to help you succeed.

Ensure your release grabs the attention of journalists in the first few paragraphs.

Make sure your release arrives on the right person's desk. Read your selected newspapers and magazines and see which writers cover which types of stories.

Make sure your release arrives in good time. Daily newspapers like releases first thing in the morning. If you are targeting a particular publication, call to ask them what is the best time to send in material. You could even offer your release as an "exclusive".

Finally, make sure your release is relevant to the newspaper, magazine or TV/radio station you are sending it to.

Direct marketing FAQ

How do I get a list of names of prospective customers?

There are a number of list brokers that can supply lists to match your criteria. Dun & Bradstreet are perhaps the best known, although other companies, such as Experian can provide the same type of service.



Always ask the broker how recently the data was updated and checked - you need to be sure that you are buying a quality list. You will also want to check that the supplied format is acceptable to whoever is building your mailing list database. Make sure they have experience of your marketplace. Lists are normally bought on a cost-per-thousand basis.

What response rate can I expect from my direct mail campaign?

It depends on the campaign. There are so many things that contribute to the success or failure of a mailing. And lots of other things affect the uptake of your product or service. Ask yourself: is the product right? Is it priced competitively? Is there sufficient demand? Is the timing right? How persuasive is the "creative" (the flyer or mailshot)? All these factors affect uptake and so you cannot be certain of a given response rate. You can however, look at industry standards and statistics as guidance.

Examples of different response rates for different industries might be:

- Financial company introducing a new credit card - up to 2.5%
- A publisher promoting books at a discounted rate - up to 4%
- A free drinks voucher mass-mailed to households with teenagers - 55%

As a rule, door-to-door selling gets a lower response rate than direct mail - often less than 0.5%.

The most important thing is to measure the success ñ or failure ñ of different marketing methods and bear this in mind when you embark on future campaigns.

How do I build a database?

A database can be a simple list, or a complex computerised system running across a Intranet. As such, there is no single, step-by-step approach to building a database. There are many packages on the market that enable you to create a database quite easily. The most common of these in Microsoft Access and for many applications this system is perfectly acceptable. Larger organisations with multi-tasking and relational requirements may need more sophisticated solutions, such as Oracle multi-user systems. Take time to assess the needs of your business as a whole and then invite specialists to advise on how best to move forward. A database can be a powerful marketing tool if used effectively. If you are building a database, be aware of the Data Protection Act ñ and the rules affecting you. Visit www.dataprotection.gov.uk for advice.

How often should we send out our mailings?

This is simply down to requirements and budget. There is no fixed timescale that guarantees the best results. A hotel, for instance, might mail to its guests on a seasonal basis; a college or school, in advance of each term or intake. How often is always set by the needs of your chosen market.

How do I test and evaluate my campaign?

Testing ensures that you spend your budget cost-effectively. You should aim to identify a range of information to establish how cost-effective your direct mailing activities are and the cost of winning each inquiry or sale.

- Compare the results from one mailing list or selection with another.
- Test offers against each other to see what works and what doesn't.
- Try mailing the same offer at different times of the year.
- Try changing the headline, layout or the visual to see what impact this has on response levels.
- Look at the way people respond to you, i.e. by phone, fax, e-mail, freepost, or through your website. Over time you will see how your target audience wants to respond to you.



Is direct marketing more effective than 'normal' advertising?

People often ask if direct marketing is more effective than mass media advertising – that is advertising on TV, radio and newspapers. Mass advertising seeks to build awareness, encourage people to try products and stimulate demand among a very large audience. It also aims to reinforce other mediums, such as direct mail, by adding brand credibility, prestige and confidence.

Mass media therefore supports more targeted media and vice-versa; in simple terms the two must work together. Direct marketing techniques do enable you to more easily test, quantify and refine your approach. For many smaller advertisers this is the most important factor.

What works – and what doesn't?

There is no magic formula for laying out and writing the "perfect ad" or direct mail leaflet. There are, however, things you should consider when looking over the quality of a piece of direct mail.

Copy length: There is no evidence to suggest short copy is any better than long copy. The important consideration when looking at copy length is the existing knowledge of your potential customers and the type of product/service you are "selling". The copy can be longer if it is interesting and well laid out and your potential customer has little knowledge about your product or service. Use bullet points, major selling points and use sub-headings to break up long copy.

Organise the selling message - AIDCA: Write your sales message in this tried and tested manner. Remember

- A**ttention (usually the headline or envelope message);
- I**nterest (tell them something that is relevant and beneficial);
- D**esire (the prospect now needs to desire your service or product);
- C**onviction (the reassurance - who else can testify for the benefits? What evidence can you provide?);
- A**ction (don't forget to tell your prospect what to do next - and make it simple!).

Mailing pack essentials: Make sure you have all the essentials in place. Direct mail normally uses a pre-printed envelope, with message; a personalised letter to the customer and background leaflet.

The job of the envelope message is to help the prospect to see an immediate benefit, the letter's job is to sell the proposition and the leaflet's role is to describe the service/product in greater detail. You must also make sure it is easy for someone to respond to all this.

Use Freephone and Freepost to help people reply as much as possible and pre-complete name and address details if you already hold these on a database. It will help you to fulfil responses later.

Typestyle: The use of serif type was in some cases up to five times as effective as sans faces (Univers, Helvetica, Arial etc.). Type should also be laid out on a light background in a strong colour.

Use demonstration and involvement: Try to find ways to involve prospective customers. This could be a free gift that is relevant to the sales message or it could be a testimonial by a trusted third party.

Use a 'PS': This always adds more interest and intrigue. In many instances the PS can act as the headline! There are a number of theories as to why a PS works on a sales letter, but perhaps it's because people tend to read it first.

Use captions wisely: The caption is there to clarify the benefit of the picture. Why is the picture there? What does it mean to the prospective or existing customer? Try to avoid corporate statements to support pictures that add little value to the sales message.



In direct mail, unusual shapes and materials bring a higher return: try to avoid the predictable. If your mailing looks plain and boring, then you could forgive the recipient for thinking that your offer will be ordinary too. Textured papers, unusually shaped envelopes and a number of mailings sent out in a sequence all improve uptake. This type of approach will not be the cheapest to implement, but you should get a better return.

Remember, all these ideas can work for you. However, your mailing list has to be good; the offer has to be attractive; and the timing has to be right for your campaign to be a true success.