

# Power Marketing on a Shoestring Budget

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February brings snow, sleet, and icy roads to wonderful Wisconsin, so destination businesses like ours have to find, develop, and implement ways to keep our customers happily coming back. Most companies in our industry don't have huge budgets earmarked for advertising and promotion. We have to depend on creative ways to remind our existing customers when it's time to repeat their orders and to attract the attention of our prospects so they'll know who we are, and where to find us.

Added to the challenge is this economy, when every business in every industry is our competition—and they're all out prospecting for our customers. It used to be that customers would shop around...and around...and around before placing an order. They are now being romanced by companies that want them to think that an overnight hotel stay or a restaurant dinner or big-box store gift card are the perfect kind of award. We've got our work cut out for us!

I was recently discussing cost-effective ways to keep an eye on marketing results with David Matney, from Net Soft Studios, ([www.NetSoftStudio.com](http://www.NetSoftStudio.com)), developers of BizWizard and ShopKart. We've been using David's BizWizard program for a couple of years now. It allows us to track our customers buying habits, stay on top of anniversary buying dates, and even keeps track of where new business comes from. Using this last component, we discovered that our customers weren't using the phone book to find us anymore. This information was instrumental in our decision to drop the thousands we were spending on directory advertising. We now spend next to nothing just to be listed.

Matney, who's been watching trends for the past 8 years, says his findings show that awards customers are now spending more dollars with online stores.

Niels Norby of San Dieguito Trophy in Carlsbad, CA, had an ecommerce Web site for 10 years before moving to ShopKart. He says his business has experienced a dramatic increase in online sales due to the product's search engine optimization.

While there's a price to be paid for such information, it sounds like it can be used for marketing to customers in the way they now expect. Even though our business had its own Web site before doing so was fashionable, we decided to try a ShopKart presence. We're still in our early days with this venture so I can't give you a complete progress report, but I can tell you that Matney is making the process easy and painless.

In terms of marketing importance, we all know that customer service is at the top of the list for any business. Being able to provide customer service comes only after we get the

customers interested in buying from us. My goal as a marketer is to get our name, brand, and message out to prospects and clients alike in a powerfully effective way—without spending too much and building the image of being a customer friendly place to shop. While this may sound too good to be true, it's not. Marketing experts find lots of ways to go public without spending much money. Some ways we can stay in front of our clients and prospects are as follows:

- **Writing articles for local organization newsletters.** Many of my industry peers could write about their family business, or the importance of recognition and appreciation, or many other aspects about our industry for which we have knowledge and experience.
- **Make presentations at local community clubs and organizations.** Wouldn't your local Rotary, Optimist, or Kiwanis club appreciate a 20-minute talk about the origin of famous awards and how they're given today? Most if not all of them are eager for such presentations at their weekly luncheon meetings.
- **Use the "Fourmula" for Success,** which involves sending four thank-you notes, making four phone calls, sending four e-mails, and following up with four recent customers every single day.
- **Big-time marketers know that first-time buyers are very likely to spread the word about a great business experience.** The enthusiasm and excitement that a happy customer will share with others becomes excellent (and free) word-of-mouth advertising. It's better than a very expensive paid advertising campaign and worth its weight in gold. Excellent customer service and follow up are great ways to get customers to be missionaries for your company.
- **Barter.** There are several barter exchanges where you can trade award products and services for different media advertising. Many radio and TV stations prefer to deal through a barter agency to get both awards and promotional products.
- **Go after referrals—this is a good as word of mouth.** Ask satisfied customers for names of others they know who use our kinds of products and services. The best time to ask for referrals is immediately after customers show their delight with your product. When a referral leads to a sale, show your appreciation to the person who did the referring.
- **Use your own vehicle to get your company's name out there,** using personalized license plates, magnetic signs or a total car wrap. (If our delivery van wasn't leased, it would be totally wrapped with our marketing message.) My husband, Dave, drives a van with license plates that read "Awards." He also

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2010 ARA International Award Market in Las Vegas, Tuesday, February 23, 8–9:30 am. Donna Gray will share her business experience with tips on how to promote your business without breaking the bank. Learn how to reach new customers utilizing savvy marketing tactics within a limited budget. Promote your company with practical cost-cutting techniques and winning marketing strategies. The seminar is free for ARA membes and \$49 for nonmembers. Those enrolled in ARA Certification Program can earn .15 Marketing/Sales CEUs for attending.



Donna M. Gray, CRM, and her husband, David L. Gray, CRM, are owners of Awards Mall/Total Awards, Promotions and Gifts, a full-service awards and personalization business in Madison, WI. Donna Gray directs sales and marketing for all company products, such as awards, donor walls, custom pins and medallions, and promotional products.

sublimated a license-plate holder that features our Web site. At first I was surprised when this brought anyone to our Web site; today it's one more weapon in our marketing arsenal.

One of my favorite "marketing gurus" is Cliff Quicksell ([www.quick-sellconsulting.com](http://www.quick-sellconsulting.com)). Quicksell has walked the walk in his own successful business, so when he says that we have to keep finding new ways to put ourselves out in front of our prospects and clients, I trust that he's right. Cliff says, "I don't care if there's a downturn in the economy or not. We are always in the mode of re-inventing." Marketing plans are only a roadmap, constantly changing. Right now, many companies are using "shoestring" marketing, finding ways, on the cheap, to get their message to buyers. Marketing pros say that shoestring marketing includes:

- using your phone, e-mail, and company Web site as tools
- asking clients what they want and need
- listening to them
- showing them you understand their needs.

My favorite shoestring marketing tactic is joining and getting involved in community organizations. The secret is that the benefits are so positive (it makes one feel so good to help) that the connections you can make are the icing on the cake.

In today's world, every company has a mission to market, market, and market again, whether its a new and exciting Web presence or through hand-written notes to customers. Our new and exciting way to market is with an online presence. I hope you'll look into some new and exciting ways to get your company on the world map of selling products. ▲



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