



Start with a marketing strategy



By Mary Ann Sircely

If you truly want to improve the marketing of your business or nonprofit, and you still haven't developed a marketing strategy, stop right now and develop one.

Regardless of industry or trade, no matter how big or small, your organization needs a strategy to guide the ever-growing myriad of marketing decisions that confront you every day.

You wouldn't sail off on a cruise without some idea of where you are going. Once you have a plan in place, your marketing strategy essentially charts your course for strategic outreach to grow your business.

"Wait," you say, "I don't have time!"

In actuality, a marketing strategy doesn't need to consume a lot of your time, it just requires some honest thinking to develop a working plan. A marketing strategy is an internal working document. It does not need to be formal, it just needs to be done.

Once your marketing strategy is in place, you can concentrate your resources, no matter how large or small, on opportunities most likely to increase sales and maximize profitability for sustainable growth.

A series of steps

I recommend developing a well-crafted marketing strategy through a series of steps, taking into consideration the unique qualities that distinguish your company from the rest of the pack.

Your strategy becomes the foundation of all your communications, content and messaging – on your

website, on social media platforms, and in brochures, advertisements, letters and proposals.

Are you ready? Follow these eight simple steps to develop your marketing strategy:

Gather materials

Assemble materials you have on hand: a mission statement, an elevator speech, a company profile and your biographical statement. If you don't have a mission statement or short description about your business, you'll find these important elements will emerge as you continue to develop your marketing strategy.

Define your prospective customer base

Exactly who is your target customer? Who wants to purchase your products and services? Jot down your primary customer's features such as age, lifestyle and disposable income. If you're selling to businesses, define the size and industry, as well as the end user, and identify the actual decision-maker you'll need to convince to make the sale.

Often, it's easiest to visualize your target customer base if you create simulated personas for your primary prospects. You then can hold these images in your mind as you create your marketing materials and write your content.

Identify your ideal client

You'll find some types of clients are more attractive than others. Perhaps they have the potential to become repeat customers, bringing you sustained business over long periods of time. Others are simply a joy to work with. Who is *your* most desirable client?

For example, the owner of an interior decorating company might define her ideal

client as an upscale, affluent homeowner with impeccable taste and sophistication who:

- appreciates the finer things in life;
- views interior design as an art form, not just window treatments;
- recognizes that interior design needs to flow and carry through connected spaces within the home;
- is not afraid to make decisions;
- trusts the designer and values her services;
- interacts positively and pays gratefully for services rendered.

As you define your ideal client, you may come up with secondary personas for your prospective customers. In the case of the interior designer, a secondary prospect would have the same ideal qualities, but would seek services for a commercial space or upscale office.

Describe your offerings

Detail your products and professional services. How do you interact with customers when delivering these products/services?

Put yourself in the shoes of the potential client. What would your customer want to know about the buying process? If the purchase involves more than just an online shopping cart, what are the steps? Are there designs, drafts or customizations? Is there a logical sequence to the delivery of your services? Do they need to prepare for a consulting session, and if so, how?

Define your limitations

Limitations might affect your service area or product availability. Do you sell worldwide or are your products and/or services limited to a certain geographical region? Perhaps your clientele is regional, such as a computer repair service, or even hyper-local, such as an auto repair center or an ice cream store. In addition, there may be limitations on the products you create; an artist might complete only a certain number of paintings each year.

Detail your skills

List your qualifications, then dig more deeply to identify your special qualities, skills and talents.

Develop your narrative

What's your story? Every business or nonprofit has a compelling background story to tell. Often, it's this narrative that identifies the unique qualities of your business, and differentiates you from your competitors.

Apply your findings

Considering your offerings, your prospective customer personas and other findings, decide how to implement your marketing strategy in a permission-based manner that reaches customers on their own terms.

Look for the perfect balance of tactics to reach the largest numbers of your target market in the most efficient ways. Consider a mix of marketing vehicles such as your website, content creation, website landing pages, email marketing campaigns, online and print advertising, social media and public relations. Even direct mail can be appropriate under certain circumstances.

Once you have charted a course and solidified your strategy, you will be amazed at how structured your marketing becomes, how easy it is to have all the right words at your fingertips, and – instead of dithering over decisions – how relieved you will be to say to an ad rep who calls out of the blue that you're sorry you can't advertise in his publication because it doesn't fit with your marketing strategy.

Do you have a marketing strategy in place? If you do, don't hesitate to share your experiences. If you have questions about how to develop your strategy, please feel free to send me an email.