

## sales & marketing

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### Market Your Business on a Shoestring Budget

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Try these low-cost, big-impact ideas for making the most of your marketing dollars.

By: MATT ALDERTON

Marketing is a beast that every business must tame. What it is, though, and how best to do it depends on whom you ask. If you look "marketing" up in a business textbook, for instance, you'll likely find the four Ps—product, price, promotion and placement. The [American Marketing Association](#), meanwhile, defines marketing as "an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders."



That's a mouthful. If you ask marketing expert [Lisa Dixon](#), principal of Dallas-based AdWorks, she'll tell you that marketing is much simpler than that. "Marketing is everything a business does that affects and impacts the buying behavior of current—and potential—customers," she says.

A public speaker that conducts marketing seminars especially for mom-and-pop businesses, Dixon says successful businesses don't need to spend a lot of money in order to sell themselves. In her most popular seminar, "Small Budget Marketing for a Big Budget Impact," she shows small business owners how to get the most mileage out of their limited marketing budgets—and it's easier than they think.

#### 'One Size Does Not Fit All'

Whatever your marketing budget, there are infinite ways to spend it. Whether you throw down for print media ads, cable TV spots, direct mail, Internet banners or any of the other myriad vehicles available to you depends on your individual business goals. The important thing is to understand what will work best for you.

"One size does not fit all," Dixon says. "It all comes down to making informed decisions based on a solid understanding of one, your customers; two, your market; three, your competition; and four, your own product or service's strengths and weaknesses."

Before you spend a dime, then, do your homework. Dixon recommends consulting the [Small Business Administration](#) (SBA) or your local [Small Business Development Center](#) (SBDC) in order to connect with veteran business owners who can give you the advice and resources you need in order to make informed marketing decisions.

#### Know Your Message and Your Audience

In order to get the most bang for your marketing buck, Shel Horowitz, author of *Grassroots Marketing: Getting Noticed in a Noisy World* and owner of [FrugalMarketing.com](#), recommends focusing less on media and more on message. "If you reach the right person with the right message at the right time, they're going to [become a customer]," he says, adding that relevant messages often prove more powerful than frequent ones.

Marcia Layton Turner, author of *The Unofficial Guide to Marketing Your Small Business*, agrees and says that one of the biggest marketing missteps companies make is inadequately researching their market. "Corporations can afford to blow tens of thousands of dollars on advertising in the hopes of attracting new customers," she says, "but small businesses really can't. They need to focus on marketing activities that generate results right away." In order to get those results, she says, businesses must know who they're trying to reach and with what messages.

#### It's Not What You Say, It's What You Do

As important as messaging is, perhaps even more important to your marketing mission is customer service. That's because if you treat your customers well, they'll do your marketing for you—free of charge.

"Your current customers are your biggest asset, and they can be your best salespeople," Dixon says. She suggests implementing a customer referral program in order to reward customers who send you new business and developing a product or service guarantee—promoted within all your marketing materials—that will fuel those word-of-mouth referrals.

Of course, exceptional customer service isn't just smart marketing, it's also something small businesses can offer that most of the big guns can't. "True customer service is valued by consumers," Dixon says. "Differentiate your business by 'walking the talk' and practicing this dying art."

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### Show Your Smarts

Another inexpensive marketing strategy, according to Turner, is PR. "When I talk with small business owners, I always, always encourage them to start by pursuing publicity," she says. "Not only is it very inexpensive, but media exposure can catapult a small business from being unknown to being a local darling."

Turner recommends positioning yourself as an expert in your industry by writing press releases, publishing an e-mail newsletter, speaking at local conferences and writing articles for relevant trade publications, all in pursuit of free publicity.

"There's a lot of marketing you can do for just your time," adds Horowitz, who recommends participating in Internet discussion groups and writing a blog.

### Get Creative

The absolute best thing that a business can do for itself in terms of marketing is to be creative. Consider, for instance, these inventive, low-cost marketing ideas:

- **Do your own research.** Fard Johnmar, founder of Envision Solutions, a New York-based healthcare consultancy, recommends doing your own branded research—by surveying customers with free online tools like [Survey Monkey](#)—and sending it to interested prospects as marketing.
- **Brand your office supplies.** Turner suggests purchasing postage stamps emblazoned with your logo and tagline in order to market your business every time you send out mail.
- **Drive Web traffic.** Marketing your Web site is cheap, says Turner, thanks to [Google AdWords](#), which can cost as little as \$20 per month and generate thousands of dollars in business.
- **Host special events.** Dixon suggests organizing unique gatherings for your customers and cites as an example a pet store that holds "Yappy Hours" and dog training classes for its customers.
- **Be trendy.** Michael Frenkel, president of New York-based PR firm MFC PR, recommends capitalizing on timely trends with unique products. He once created a "My Big Fat Greek Hotel" package for a hotel client that wanted to capitalize on the success of 2002's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*; upon check-in, guests received dinner at a local Greek restaurant, a copy of the movie, a pocketbook of Greek lore and a bottle of Windex.

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