Business Tips · Features

Leads are Seeds

These uncommon approaches to lead generation can help you grow your business in uncertain times

BY MATT ALDERTON

Imagine that your real estate business is a garden. You start each day with an empty plot of soil. In order to turn that vacant ground into a bountiful harvest, you must plant crops and continually tend them until they bear fruit. And when your first harvest has been picked bare, you must plant new crops. If you don't plant, you don't eat.

The moral of the story: Leads are seeds, and seeds are sustenance. "Lead generation is everything," says Keller Williams REALTOR® Steve Epstein, CRS, senior partner at The Epstein Partners in Santa Barbara, California. "It's the only thing that matters because if you don't have leads, you don't have commissions. Full stop. End of story."

Lead generation is especially important in times of crisis like the present, according to REALTOR® Marianne McNally, CRS, principal broker at Manor Realty in Salem, Oregon. "With the pool of clients getting smaller, you have to have your face everywhere so you are [buyers' and sellers'] first thought," says McNally, who like so many REALTORS® had to adapt her business this spring to the new reality of "social distancing." "Since I can't be out in the public like I am used to, I need every avenue to leads open to me ... I am still working my sphere and reaching out via phone, email, text and cards. I made it through the last downturn of the market; I can make it through this."

Now more than ever, McNally says, lead generation is an investment from which REALTORS® can't afford to abstain.

"Now is not the time to pull back on your marketing. If anything, ramp it up," she advises. "We will have a fallout of agents. We always do when the market goes down. You want to be there when the other faces are gone. I am getting myself ready to battle."

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary techniques. Instead of traditional tactics like door knocking and cold calling, consider these unorthodox lead-gen approaches—which can keep your business healthy both in good times and in bad:

1. Indulge your hobbies.

If you're a workaholic, the best thing you can do for your business might be to work less and play more, according to Epstein, who combines business with pleasure at every opportunity. Because he enjoys wine, for instance, he belongs to several wine-tasting groups. Because he enjoys music, he plays in a band. Because he's nuts about sailing and motorcycles, he belongs to the local yacht club and rides in motorcycle groups.

"But here's the thing: I don't ever bring up real estate," explains Epstein, who says the secret is building authentic friendships and rapport. If you bond with someone first over wine or motorcycles, he suggests, they'll eventually ask what you do for a living. And when they inevitably have a real estate question or need in their life, they'll think of you.

2. Socialize on social media.

REALTOR® Linda DeVlieg, CRS, an associate broker at Keller Williams Realty in Albuquerque, New Mexico, indulges her interests not only offline, but also online.

A recent experience illustrates her approach: An avid home cook, DeVlieg follows food and beverage brands she loves on social media, and regularly comments on their posts. When she recently acquired a new client who was relocating to Albuquerque from out of state, she discovered that the client had found her because she'd commented on a recipe on Instagram. Because the client worked for the company that posted the recipe, she saw DeVlieg's comment and noticed that she was a real estate broker in Albuquerque.

Clients have similarly found DeVlieg on social media complimenting local businesses and pointing out the fine points of neighborhoods and communities.

"I'm always positive," DeVlieg says. "When you make yourself known as someone who compliments others, people recognize that. That translates to business, because whatever energy you put out into the universe eventually comes back to you."

Social media has become particularly effective in the current moment. When communities began practicing social distancing this spring, for instance, many REALTORS® began marketing themselves to clients and prospects by live streaming on Facebook and Instagram.

McNally has taken a more personal approach. "I have Zoom meetings with clients or I connect with them using FaceTime," she says. "At this point, we need to pull out every trick in our hats."

3. Explore new interests and activities.

If you're not satisfied with your existing hobbies, get new ones, suggests REALTOR® Jodi Sherretts, CRS, broker at First Market Realty in Houston, Texas. Because she was looking for something fun to do, she joined a fantasy football league; although she joined for entertainment, not networking, her new friends nevertheless showered her with business when she bonded with them.

"My football commissioner moved four times and referred many people to me who he worked with," says Sherretts, who just as easily might have joined a book club or another activity. The key was trying something new that allowed her to meet a new group of people. "I got outside of my regular circle of friends, and being the new person in that group really worked in my favor."

4. Establish routines.

Along with hobbies, you can mine leads from habits, according to McNally, who habitually patronizes the same businesses in pursuit of organic relationships with their employees. At the supermarket, for example, she always checks out with the same checker.

"If I've received good service from someone, I go back to that same person so we can get to know one another," McNally says. "I don't immediately ask them if they're looking to buy a house, but eventually the topic of my business comes up."

5. Draw attention to yourself.

A good way to generate leads without being a smarmy salesperson is to make people curious about you. McNally, for example, wears a nametag in public as if she forgot to remove it, which invites strangers to ask her where she works when they see it. Epstein, meanwhile, drives a distinctive car, which likewise induces auto enthusiasts to strike up conversations with him at gas stations and in parking lots.

"You never know when you might meet a buyer or seller," McNally says.

6. Serve your community.

Epstein volunteers on the boards of several charities and nonprofits, including an organization that serves homeless families, a local maritime museum and a government committee whose job is overseeing city spending of sales tax revenue. Although he doesn't actively discuss real estate with fellow volunteers, he replies to board emails from his work account, messages from which include a branded email signature. "Every time there's a group email, I hit 'reply all' and get my business out there," Epstein says.

Community service likewise can breathe new life into traditional lead-gen techniques, according to Sherretts, who has an agent who successfully door knocks not on behalf of her business, but rather on behalf of Dress for Success, a nonprofit that collects donated business attire for economically disadvantaged women to wear on job interviews.

"She doesn't knock on doors to ask people if they want to move. She knocks on doors to ask people if they want to help a fabulous charity—but the only business card she has with her to leave them is her real estate card," Sherretts says.

Whether you tend toward the creative or the conventional, it's important to remember that lead generation takes time—just like gardening.

"Nothing in real estate happens fast," Sherretts concludes. "But if you're patient, things eventually will take off."

If you invest in lead generation now, you'll be ready when they do.

Show Your Leads Some Love

It's not enough to acquire leads. In order to grow your business, you also must nurture them. When you do, prospects become clients, and clients become repeat customers and referrers.

"Why are we always out there looking for somebody new when we could be making the people who already know us work for us?" asks Marianne McNally, CRS, principal broker at Manor Realty in Salem, Oregon.

To ensure future business from past clients, spend time every day or every week staying in touch, advises McNally, who keeps tabs on clients through social media and mutual acquaintances, then either calls or sends handwritten personal notes when they have news to share, such as a child graduating from high school or a new pet. Meeting for the occasional coffee, lunch or dinner seals the deal.

"I've been focusing on this for the last two months and I've already seen an uptick in business," McNally says.

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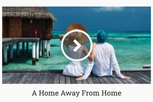

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