

Turn Your Marketing Mix into a Gourmet Meal and Taste the Results

Ever wonder why your competitors' businesses keep expanding? Their growth just seems phenomenal. They're adding salespeople, adding products and constantly picking up new customers. Do you think it's dumb luck? Are they just more skilled than you? Are they better connected than you?

I would bet that it's all of the above and none of the above. More than likely, they have a good marketing mix. You must find the right ingredients to satisfy the appetites of your customers and prospects.

My own 12-year history in the wild, wonderful world of consulting and training has taught me a lot about the marketing mix. Like every other small business owner, I have enjoyed both banner and bust years. Both my successes and failures can be traced back to my marketing efforts, or in some cases, lack thereof. The years I employ systematic, concerted marketing efforts are the years I enjoy the most business growth. The years I take frequent vacations — be it long mental vacations or otherwise — are the years I am scurrying around trying to figure out where all my clients have gone.

Now, this is not a complex concept: when you work at flavoring your marketing mix with many varied offerings, you get results. But when you leave your marketing mix to stew in its own juices, you eat a lot of peanut butter sandwiches. So, knowing that it's easy to tire of sticky mouth, let's talk about mastering the marketing mix.



Working with the System

Marketing, by definition, is the systematic activities used to produce sales and other evidence of business viability. It is the business development work that keeps our products and services in the minds of our prospects. We are responsible for creating ongoing public relations. These efforts make people want to buy from us — not from our competitors.

There are all sorts of marketing approaches, from the fast-talking caricature of the polyester suit-clad used car salesman to the “let's do lunch,” Italian suit-wearing broker. It is a very personal process that we can customize to suit our

personal styles. It is a never-ending process that yields never-ending results.

Make It A Meal

So, what goes into the marketing mix? It's a buffet of sorts. We bring what we have, hopefully related and complimentary entrees, and serve it up to eager diners. So, what exactly do we serve at this buffet? The entrees are endless, so I will highlight a few of my personal favorites.

Starting with my absolute favorite: direct mail. I just love getting cards and letters — always have. I'm old enough to be accustomed to postal products, but it still thrills me. I assume that my markets like mail, too. So, I send 'em plenty. Everyone in my database (including past consulting clients, people who have attended conferences where I have spoken, participants in my training sessions, as well as prospects who really need to hear from me) gets at least one piece of mail from me at least four times a year. We will talk about the types of mail that I send later in this article.

If direct mail is the meat on my buffet, conferences and conventions are the potatoes. I am an avowed, admitted conference junkie.

Social aspects notwithstanding, the information shared at conferences is invaluable. So many new ideas and insights charge the conference air with innovation (a slight overstatement, I know). Conferences and conventions offer many opportunities for introducing new products and services.

Just like you don't serve sour milk or day-old bread to dinner guests, don't offer stale **marketing materials** to prospective customers.

These tools need to be **fresh, current, relevant.**

Well, we have the meat and potatoes covered, so now let's focus on side dishes for the heart smart who fear the affects of red meat. These are the gifts and cards that we use to stay "top of mind" with prospective customers. These little surprises include birthday cards (assuming the other people aren't so old that they forget their own birthday), flowers, and homemade cookies.

Consider sending cards for unusual occasions so they really stand out. The smaller holidays, St. Patrick's Day and Halloween, present great opportunities for reconnecting with clients and prospects.

I will, from time to time and for no apparent reason, bake my famous chocolate chip cookies and send them to valued clients. It's my way of saying that I appreciate their business.

But tread lightly. Gifts are a tricky part of the mix. Just like side dishes can fill you up and keep you from the main dish, an abundance of gifts actually gets in the way, potentially causing conflicts of interest.

What else needs to be on the marketing buffet to make the mix palatable? Salads, of course. Now, some of you are going to take major exception to my including the Internet as a simple salad on the buffet. For some, this may be the main course. However, for many businesses, it is a just a small, dinner salad. Use the Internet to vary your marketing mix. Use e-mails and exciting websites to create an electronic presence that makes your business a contender. A myriad of resources can help you maximize the impact of your web-based advertising.

No buffet is complete without a little bread and butter. This bread and butter comes in the form of enhanced credibility. Get a little ink. Volunteer to write for

industry publications, newsletters and the like. Teach classes at a local college. Continuing education departments always want experienced practitioners to serve on their faculty. This activity makes you look smart and seem like a good citizen. Use celebrations to mark your milestones. Invite every customer you have ever had to celebrate your business anniversary, sales milestones, new product launches and other noteworthy events. These are the little touches that differentiate your marketing mix from that of your competitor.

Of course, what buffet is complete without dessert? I simply cannot end a meal without a little something sweet. So, be sure to add a few components of your mix that aren't vital, but sure to make the meal pleasing. That includes telemarketing. Not those annoying calls in the middle of dinner, but very skillful calls that prompt more orders and gather referrals. This can also include follow-up calls to say thanks for the order and strengthen the relationship with your customer.

Yep, I mentioned referrals. They are the whipped cream on your dessert. Be sure that you make a concerted effort to ask customers who else could benefit from your products and services. Then, call those referrals. It won't be a cold call because they already know your products are great.

Another of the components is what I call "biz viz." Build business visibility by being a good corporate citizen. Buy candy bars from the church groups, get a case of Girl Scout cookies, or sponsor the local little league. Do whatever you can to build the positive image of your business. This biz viz goes a long way to creating a positive image for you and your company.

Materials Matter

If the marketing mix is a buffet, the materials are the actual ingredients in your recipes. Just like you use fresh ingredients in your kitchen, use fresh ingredients in your marketing mix. They need to be high quality — you wouldn't use generic margarine if the recipe called for butter. They need to be relevant — you wouldn't serve merlot with trout. And they need to be fresh — you don't drink milk that's three weeks past the expiration date, do you?

The marketing materials that you use should convey a consistent brand image. That image should bespeak whatever you want people to believe about your business. Is your image fun and friendly or is it more high tech and cutting edge? Whatever image you are creating, it needs to be conveyed consistently in all of your marketing materials. That means your print materials, your website, and your physical location should all suggest a central, discernable theme. The colors, typefaces and fonts should all be coordinated. This will help you develop both name recognition and a brand image that separates you from the rest of the imaging supplies dealers targeting your market.

Because materials really do matter, it is important to get help developing really sharp marketing supports. I have limited abilities when it comes to graphics and design. So, I use the services of a very reasonable design firm for outstanding layout and desktop publishing. You can also use talented students to assist you with revamping your company's image. They bring fresh ideas, the latest and the greatest market intelligence, and they're cheap.

Once you have handled the design tasks, get more help writing copy. If you

write well and can create your own copy, get someone else to edit your work.

Be sure that all your written materials send a consistent message. Take extra care to ensure proper grammar, correct spelling and good sentence structure. That's where having an editor comes in handy. I have been writing for a long time, and I still use an editor to polish my work. It is worth the investment.

Remember the stale milk? Well, just like you don't serve stale milk or moldy bread, don't use stale marketing materials. These tools need to be fresh, current, relevant. The colors need to be today's colors, not a '70s avocado green. The fonts used need to be today's fonts, not that old courier or pica that looks like a 1960s typewriter. The text needs to be sharp and crisp, reflecting today's lingo.

The same applies to your website. Update it regularly so that prospects aren't looking at last year's specials and promotions. Be sure that the staff lists on the site reflect your current staff, not the bozo you let go last quarter. And, be sure that your website offers easy access to contact information. Anything less sends prospects into the arms of your competitors.

There are a few more things that you

can do to keep your marketing materials fresh. Remember, you are a walking advertisement. Just like your materials need to be fresh, so do you. Burn that suit with the small brown checks. Wear the orange print tie on Halloween, and only on Halloween. And if your skirt feels a little tight, it is. So, leave it in the closet until you have trimmed down.

Remember that everything about you needs to resonate the same image that you are creating for your business. I have to get back to the food imagery. There's a difference between the \$6.95 breakfast buffet and the \$24.95 champagne brunch. Which would you rather have?

Now, you have all of your materials together, and they are sharp, crisp, and contemporary. They convey just the right image for your company, so what else could you possibly need? That's easy. You need products, samples, giveaways, and demos. Yes, we are all ultimately in the business of sales, but part of marketing needs to be giving something away for free.

Think about what ancillary products you can give away. Since I write, I give away articles and books. I have struck a deal with the company that publishes many of my books. They give me free

books, both mine and those of other authors. The books cannot be resold, but can be given away. It's a great deal for both of us. My clients and prospects think I'm one of Santa's elves while the publishing company thinks I'm a great commission-free sales rep. Orders for books usually follow the freebies.

Consider giving your customers small business books (gotta plug that publishing company), gadgets and samples. Any of these items can be personalized, and they wholesale for next to nothing. Some of your giveaways can eventually be used to supplement your core product line. This adds another dimension to your product line and sales efforts.

Once you find a line of ancillary products, be sure to let your customers know that you have them. These products will represent another revenue stream, a potentially lucrative stream, and another reason to fire up your marketing mix.

My next article will focus on the more personal side of the mix; that is, the skills and training that *you* must acquire to be an asset to the marketing mix. **□**

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