

Ask SCORE

I've operated a successful one-man handyman business for seven years, working in people's houses doing everything from fixing a stair tread to building small additions. All my jobs have come from word of mouth referrals and I've never lacked for work. Since the economy has slowed down, however, for the first time I'm experiencing holes in my schedule, so I want to do some marketing. Where do I start?

People often equate “marketing” with sales and advertising. These are, of course, important elements of a marketing strategy. But there are a host of tools and tactics that can increase both the visibility and attractiveness of your business to potential customers. And as with your overall business structure and strategy, successful marketing also requires careful research, planning and a wise use of resources.

The key is to think of marketing not as a single action but rather a combination of steps designed to identify, attract and retain profitable customers, and to differentiate your business from the competition. It encompasses everything from your company name, logo and service lines to advertisements, public relations, presence at trade shows and community involvement.

While it's helpful to use comparable businesses as a guide, what works for them may not be appropriate for you. Marketing strategies need to be tailored to your business and target customer base. To prepare yourself for marketing, create a detailed profile of your ideal prospect. As you create your marketing message, aim it at them and list the benefits they will receive. Be certain your marketing message highlights the special knowledge and expertise you offer.

Look for ways to make the buying process easier for your customers. What roadblocks can you remove? Simplify everything; eliminate potential interruptions in the sales process and make decision-making as painless as possible for your customers.

Put your marketing budget in proper perspective. You might, for example, think of marketing as an investment rather than merely a “cost.” Try to set a budget and a pace that lets you market continuously. Customer memories are short, and they are bombarded with thousands of marketing messages and images daily. Your effort must be ongoing or people will quickly forget.

Match your marketing to your primary market. If it's a local market, then that's where your marketing focus should be. Broadly focused newspaper or radio advertising, for example, might be the wrong choice. Instead, consider marketing neighborhood-by-neighborhood.

A good place to find marketing help is the American Marketing Association's website, MarketingPower.com. The site's Best Practices section contains valuable guidance for small businesses in the areas of research, Internet marketing, advertising, public relations, customer service tips and many others.

This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with more than 50 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area businesses.

Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on counseling, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score199.mv.com, with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.