

Marketing strategy: It's all about the customer

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You think you have a great product or service. Now how do you sell it?

Without a marketing strategy, you can't make your business a go. That may sound obvious, but it's one of the areas lacking in many plans submitted in the Business Plan Challenge in recent years.

The good news is with all the social media options, marketing need not be as expensive as in years past. But that doesn't mean it's easy. Being interactive in real time, social media provides the tools — but you have to know how to use them.

"It's still important to understand your customer. It's still important to understand their pain or problem and how your product or service solves that," said John Fleming, technology practice lead at social web agency Biztegra Partners who gave a marketing and social media seminar at Florida International University last week. "But now it's all about the customer. It's about meeting their needs when they need it."

In that way brand awareness and customer retention go hand in hand, he said. So where do you start?

- Conversations are taking place with or without you. Find out where they are — and listen, said Fleming, also one of this year's Business Plan Challenge judges.

Set up Google alerts. Check blogs and industry forums and listen on Twitter to what is being said about you, your market and your product.

Respond to the good and the bad. "It's a transparent world. If you have an issue, you get out front and you solve it," said Fleming, citing the Comcast Cares efforts.

- Speak directly to your customers.

Take, for example, the classic press release. It used to be strictly targeted at media, but now it is fully searchable and all about targeting the customer. Pay attention to key words and embed pictures, videos and links. Include offers that compel consumers to buy. Add social media tags so your releases can be found.

Blogging can help you shape the conversation. If you've never blogged, set up a personal blog first to get the hang of it, Fleming advised. Then once you decide to start a blog for your business, write plenty of short articles before launch and keep a pipeline. The flipcam is your friend.

Another tip: Align your business with what your customers care about. Avon does an especially good job at this with its focus on breast cancer awareness, Fleming said.

- When creating a website, think like a publisher. Who are my readers and how do I reach them? What are their motivations? What problems can I solve for them?

The goal of your website is what your customers need. Make it easy for them to navigate and use.

Along with content creation, be an aggregator and bring user-generated content back to you. H-P does this well, Fleming says, as does Starbucks and Dell.

What percent of your website has changed in the last 90 days? If it's not about 60 percent of it, you may not be updating enough, Fleming said.

- The best ways to get reach are through the big three: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter. Engagement is a daily activity, but make it valuable by addressing the customer's needs, give them something they don't know, and show them how you are different, Fleming said.

For Susie Taylor of Bibbitec, a semifinalist in the 2009 Business Plan Challenge, marketing is a continuing challenge, as her made in the USA eco-friendly, multi-tasking bibs for kids are higher quality — and more expensive — than what has been on the market before. She's found success marketing directly to schools that often use the bibs as art smocks, as well as through mom-to-mom marketing. This includes cross-promoting with other mom-owned businesses.

She has been actively using social media for more than a year — and video is a strong component of her strategy. She is getting ready to launch a "BMessy" campaign, which will include user-submitted videos of kids having fun being creative and being messy, wearing Bibbitec bibs, of course.

"This campaign will celebrate getting out and being with your kids through fun and free-form celebrations," Taylor said.

Live local events will tie in with the video campaign being planned. The arts and crafts events for kids also demonstrate to parents how well the Bibbitec bibs work.

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