

### Customers – 7 proven ways to attract them to you

A key issue for people setting up a business is how to build a reputation that will attract customers.

When your reputation is good enough, people will ask you to contact them.

Why is reputation so important? Because as owner-managers, we are all really short of time and we really need to make our prospecting time count. What we need is a steady trickle of enquiries and referrals that will allow us to spend time with good prospects and so maximize our selling time. A good strategy is to drive traffic to our website which is set up so as to maximize the amount of exposure we get and convert interest into a live enquiry using effective language that results in an easy to follow call to action.

Reputation is a complex animal. It has something to do with expertise and competence, something to do with likeability and something to do with how many people have been exposed to you, your ideas, your personality, your company's goods and services.

It depends on how many people trust you. Trust is developed by a combination of

- Knowing your subject
- Delivering what you say you will when you say you will
- Being easy to work with

Reputation is based on quality x quantity (leverage). Once you have a reputation you have to roll it out.

The story you have to tell depends on how you think and what your values are, how your team thinks and what their values are and what your customers think and what their values are.

And it's what drives pull marketing. For a small business that's the way to start to build the marketing machinery that will allow you to generate the referrals and warm leads that you need. So we need to become skilled at

pull rather than push in our promotion so we can generate the referrals that we need.

Traditional mechanisms of push marketing don't seem to work – mainly because of overuse by companies who don't understand that free doesn't mean free and that people don't like having their time and attention hijacked in crude and obvious ways.

So telesales, direct sales, and email marketing are all less effective than they once were.

Today's marketing strategies involve attracting attention, developing interest, getting the customer to contact you and getting their permission to follow up.

Identifying and using permission marketing / pull methodologies are the secret of generating a stream of qualified leads. That's why reputation is so important. But fortunately the most effective way of becoming attractive is to be yourself – be who you are – develop a story and tell it.

So what are the 7 things you should do to attract customers to you.

- 1) Really understand how search engines work. Find keywords that people are searching for but not many sites have. Work them into your pages.
- 2) Really understand how people take in information on the internet
  - Concise, bullet pointed information is easily taken in and remembered.
  - good writing and pictures say quality
  - factual information that does what it says on the tin delivers attention in a way that sales puffery does not
  - above all don't waste your prospects' time with slow loading graphics, clever videos, poor site navigation and **LINKS THAT DON'T WORK ANYMORE**

- 3) Drive traffic to your site by judicious use of Google Ad-Words or Overture. This need not be expensive – and in fact it's cheap market research. As well as telling you which phrases are pulling from your ads, the ones that don't convert still tell you what phrases people are searching for – so that you can work these into signatures and content of blogs (see below).

You can change the text of the offer at will and qualify the prospect by making the offer specific and being clear that you are selling rather than giving things away. Do make sure, however, that you have a strong landing page with a clear and easy to execute call to action – otherwise all the good work will be wasted.

- 4) Blog! What does this mean – in English? Basically its short for weblog – it means that if you write an article in a place that's picked up by the search engines, you will boost the attention that's given to your site. Good places to go are sites with high rankings themselves. Places like Ecademy or Silicon.Com. If you have good content, ask questions so that other people respond and work your keywords into the text, you will be surprised at the effect that this will have on the placing for you, your company and your products in a relatively short space of time.
- 5) Give something away free. Write up 10 tips that people who might want to use your service would like to know and have it available as a download on your site. Use the pay per click route to drive people to it
- 6) Use PR – an under-rated tool by small business. If you identify key journalists in your local or trade press and provide them with well-written, easy to sub-edit copy, the chances are good that they'll use it. If they've written it, then it must be true and if there's a link to your site and the site works – more enquiries.

- 7) Network – go and meet people – ask for referrals. Give referrals – connect people. Tell them who you would like to meet and ask them who they want to meet. And have literature with you – it doesn't have to be amazing but it does need to be clear, to the point, have an offer and a call to action and a link to your website.

All of these routes should involve a stage where you explicitly ask for permission to contact them with further information from time to time. Because that will form the basis of Part 2 of this article – how to keep customers. In the meantime if you follow the advice given here – you should greatly boost the number of enquiries you get because all of the suggested approaches will enhance your reputation in one way or another.

### 7 Proven ways to keep them once you've got them

Having successfully gained some customers – how do we keep them?

This is a crucial question - companies lose half their customers in 5 years (according to the Harvard Business Review) and it costs 7-10x as much to get a new customer as to keep an old one

The Cranfield Benchmarking study tells us that the average UK company just keeps pace with the fall-off. So we really need to pay attention to retaining those valuable customers.

So apart from giving them that really good service that will build your reputation, deliver you referrals and make a friend for life – what else should you be doing?

Well the fancy name for it is customer relationship management (CRM) but for most of us this is going to mean having a customer database and a communication strategy that is going to keep reminding them of who we are and what we do. The first thing you must do is to have permission to contact them but that's easily achieved.

Then you must recognise the stages that companies go through in their relationship with us. Basically there are 3 phases.

**Acquisition of customer** - This is essentially sales activity that moves the customer into forming a business relationship with us. This is likely to use various marketing channels as suggested in article 1

**Consolidation of Customer** – Here we make sure that the initial delivery or implementation goes smoothly and that the customers appreciate the excellent performance of the organisation. We may need to identify some key after sales points and make sure that we draw the customer's attention to these. This is generally part of the transaction but additional selling opportunities can be built into the interactions

**Developing the relationship** - This means systematically developing a process to give the customer more buying opportunities. These could be additional services, loyalty programs or chances to cross sell and up sell. If yours is a product that involves an ongoing maintenance programme, then try and ensure that the information in your sales and service systems inter-relate. This can help you

- a) Allow your service people to act as sales people and feed back to the company about expected sales
- b) Feed back to the sales force if there are problems that need attending
- c) Get the sales force to look good by calling out the cavalry

Many of us miss a trick here because we are too busy looking for new business and delivering the business that we've got to plan our on going communication. We also don't look at our customer base in the way that more sophisticated database orientated marketers do.

So let me share a few of their secrets with you.

1. They will know who their top customers are. This could be the top 50 if it's a specialised business to business company or it could be tens of thousands if they are a retailer. More than that they will know what business or consumer segments they represent. Small businesses often don't organise their accounts to follow the profit profiles of their product or customer types – but it's an exercise that we should all undertake. The more sophisticated will identify the key characteristics of their top customers and actively go looking for more of them.
2. They will work out what the lifetime value of a customer is. This means multiplying what their top customers spend by a number of years (usually between 2 and 5) that depends on the type of business.
3. Then they might rank their customers by multiplying together size of spend, recency of purchase and frequency of purchase. This will identify different categories of customers who will need to be communicated with in different ways and maybe with different stories. For instance a company selling marketing services would emphasize different issues to a business services start-up than to a 50 employee food manufacturer.

So having analysed their customer base they will come up with a different set of relevant pieces of information, offers and education experiences that can be communicated to their customers to tie them in and get them to come back.

So here are 7 things that a small business can practically do.

1. Offer an e-zine that can be emailed every couple of months or so. It doesn't have to be long – 500 words are enough but it should contain

information that will be useful to your customers. No-one objects to you making concrete business offers but they need to be relevant to the target group and embedded in some content that genuinely adds value.

2. If you can build some kind of maintenance or support contract that is paid for monthly or quarterly with an automatic renewal on direct debit – this is the best way of ensuring an ongoing relationship with the customer.
3. For key accounts make sure they are telephoned regularly. And don't always leave it to the salesperson – do it yourself – just say that you are keen to make sure they get the best service possible and that as the owner you are doing a bit of informal market research. As long as you mean it – it will work wonders.
4. Run workshops and seminars on relevant topics. If you can add enough value you can charge for them. You might be bringing them up to date, providing a guest speaker or just helping them to work through some issues.
5. Don't forget to use your website as a key resource for keeping customers up to date – if you can regularly refresh the content with fact sheets, Frequently Asked Question Sheets or other valuable content, it will give them a reason to get back in contact with you.
6. Involve your customers in surveys from time to time. Email surveys are very easy and inexpensive to organise using services like Zoomerang.com which allows you to invite your customers to feedback to you. Again it should be part of a structured communication strategy and not used too frequently - but used intelligently it can be a powerful tool
7. Source other complementary products that can be sold via your

website or by telephone that enhance the value of your whole product. Most companies don't do this. A recent survey from Pannell Kerr Foster showed that 3 times as many companies try to find new customers for their existing products as new products for their existing customer. Even though the costs of getting new customers are so much higher. So look around for other things that are useful and offer them. The customer will appreciate it and keep coming back.

Responsiveness to clients is one of today's key differentiators but most companies are not very good at it. The opportunities for companies who can come up with simple robust solutions that are useful to their customers are very good. Just make sure that you use the database to keep track of what you've done. And don't over do it. Good luck.

Dr Alan Rae is Managing Partner of Ai Consultants which focuses on helping small businesses grow.

If you want to do some further work on these issues consider our Sharpen your Pitch Sales and Marketing course for the owner manager or Refocus your business if its time for a radical re-think.

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