



10 steps towards an effective small business marketing plan

by Erik Wolf - President, Zero-G Creative

1 Get to know as much about your targets as possible: Who are your customers, really? And “mid-sized technology firms in the greater Atlanta metro area” is not an acceptable answer. Neither are “small business owners looking to expand through venture capital” or “college seniors.” When you make a sale, it isn’t to a business or to a group... It’s always to an individual person. Even if the check comes from a business account, it’s still a single person that shook your hand, signed your contract and either authorized the payment or lobbied on your behalf to the decision-maker who did.

Now obviously, all people are different, but there are many commonalities that connect individuals who buy similar goods or services. For example, your customers may be predominantly male or female. Are they likely to be college educated? How old are they? How much money do they make? What kind of car do they drive? Suddenly your generic, faceless demographic profile starts to look like a real person... The more you know about what makes your customers tick, the more well-positioned you will be to sell to them.

2 Don’t jump the gun: Or, “don’t try to run before you can walk.” Don’t spend money on an advertising campaign if you don’t have sales and marketing processes or the right tools

in place to help you close any potential business that comes as a result.

Build your marketing plan and toolkit strategically starting with the items that are most likely to help you CLOSE business and then build out to the items most likely to help you get prospects.

3 Your marketing toolkit is important; build it right: This includes all your basic marketing tools and assets: your logo, your business cards, your company web site, your PowerPoint presentation, your brochure and other basic marketing collateral.

The quality of these materials is absolutely essential. When you meet with a potential client, these are the materials that they are going to use to judge your quality as a vendor. Poorly made business cards or a template web site will not get the right message across and will not impress anyone. Unless you have a background in graphic design and marketing communications, do NOT try to put these materials together yourself with DIY tools. Similarly, don’t try teaching yourself Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop and Dreamweaver and don’t hire a cousin/neighbor’s kid/college student, etc. to work on your critical marketing materials.

Hire a reputable firm to work on your these materials and be sure that you look hard for the right fit before making a commitment.

4 Commit your plans and objectives to paper and keep them handy: Planning sessions are terrific. But their results don't ever really qualify as "a plan" until they are written down. But beyond showing the resolve to develop a strategy and commit it to paper, keeping a written plan serves other important purposes: reference and decision-making.

Entrepreneurs constantly find themselves bombarded with new opportunities for advertising and promotion. So how do you decide which opportunities make sense and which do not? Consult your plan and see how these initiatives fit within your stated marketing objectives. A plan gives you an easy litmus test to use in your decision-making process.

5 Don't let your competitors make your business decisions for you: Over time, industries tend to become like gated communities... People become focused on what their neighbors are doing and tend not to care what's happening in other neighborhoods. How often have you looked at one of your competitors and thought,

"They are offering a free trial... Maybe we should too." Or,

"They have a new packaged deal, we should do one like that." Or,

"They're offering their entry-level service at a new low price, should we follow?"

No one told you to seek out your competitors and borrow their business strategies but a lot of small business owners feel compelled nonetheless. At Zero-G Creative, we call this type of self-inflicted peer pressure "parroting." One competitor takes an action and, out

of instinct, another repeats. And then another and another until everyone starts saying the exact same thing. A little later, someone will start saying something slightly different, but it never takes long for the rest of the parrots to catch on. So as long as we focus our attention exclusively on our own industry, it becomes very difficult for anyone to differentiate in any meaningful way.

And remember... Just because your competition is doing something, it doesn't mean it's successful. Unlike public companies, small businesses don't have regular SEC filings and financial press releases. We can't just open up their balance sheets and income statements and see how they're doing. Don't assume that all of your competition's new products/services are doing well just because they sound good on the web site. "Me too" can be a disastrous strategy for a small business. But unfortunately, it's very easy to get sucked into.

The easiest way to get yourself out of the vicious cycle of "parroting" is to take off your blinders and start looking outside your industry for inspiration. Look at things that have nothing to do with your business. Go to the mall, browse on the Internet, learn about companies and industries you've never encountered. That's what will really inspire you and help you take your business to the next level.

6 Beware of "too good to be true" advertising offers: Advertising doesn't work the way most small business owners expect it to.

Entrepreneurs would love nothing more than to be able to write a check to a newspaper, radio station, magazine or coupon mailer and sit back smiling as the phone starts ringing off the hook.

Unfortunately though, this is an unlikely scenario and there is rarely a straight line between these types of “mass media” advertising initiatives and actual sales dollars. That isn’t to say that advertising isn’t useful - there remains no better tool for boosting brand recognition and awareness - but be prepared for a low ROI, especially when compared to other types of marketing activities.

So if a salesperson approaches you with an offer to grow your business by leaps and bounds simply by investing your marketing dollars in advertising with their firm, approach with caution. And keep in mind that it is highly unlikely that any single marketing initiative will ever make a large impact on your business.

7 Don’t try to do everything yourself; find good vendors, partners + advisors to help you:
It’s impossible for one person to do everything at once and unlikely that any single person possesses expert knowledge across every business function required to run their company. Just like professional baseball team managers have coaching staffs and the President has a cabinet, entrepreneurs need a team of people they can trust to help them succeed. Find people you can lean on and who will support you as you work to build your enterprise.

8 Don’t hire a plumber to do an architect’s job: “Marketing” has become one of the most overused and generic terms in the business lexicon. A lot of people will tell you they are in “marketing.” In fact, they may be printers or sign makers, sellers of advertising, promotional products or direct mail. These people may have an outstanding

knowledge within their specialty and may be savvy and creative. But that doesn’t mean you should trust them with your marketing strategy. You probably wouldn’t want your plumber to design an addition to your home, nor would you allow your dentist to perform brain surgery.

Be careful of you allow to advise you regarding your overall marketing strategy and do be sure that it isn’t someone who stands to profit from your continued patronage of one particular marketing tool over another.

9 Never lose focus on your referral business: It is easier, cheaper and often more profitable to sell to warm referrals (and existing clients) than it is to sell to strangers. You also have a much greater chance of success. So while selling to “cold” strangers is a necessary part of every marketing plan, make sure that at least as much focus is put towards earning referrals and additional business from existing clients.

10 Don’t look for single “silver bullet” solution: That one magic advertising buy that’s going to fill your pipeline with eager, qualified prospects just isn’t out there. Success in marketing takes time, patience and stick-to-itiveness and just as the “get rich quick” schemes don’t work in life, they don’t work in marketing either.

One of the first things you’ll learn in any fundamental marketing communications book or class is that marketing is a science of Reach x Frequency – or “How many people are seeing my ad and how many times are they seeing it?” What isn’t intuitive about the Reach x Frequency

formula though is that Frequency is the more important variable of the two. I will sell more of my product if I reach 20 people 10 times each than if I were to reach 200 people only once.

So consider this: in your local community newspaper, your ad can probably be seen by 10-20,000 people every week. But how many of those 20,000 are really ideal customers for you? It likely isn't 20,000. For example, if your product or service is geared more towards women than men, you can already cut that 20,000 in half. Geared towards women with young children at home? Take another significant cut. Odds are that when you really narrow it down, you've only got a few hundred to a couple thousand people left out of the 20,000 you're paying for. And to make that spend

meaningful to the 5-10% of that audience that you need to reach, you're going to have to run that ad a LOT.

And, taken on it's own, independent of a bigger strategy, most small business owners can count the number of times that the local newspaper made their phone ring on one hand.

Does that sound like a silver bullet solution to you?

This isn't meant to be an indictment in any way of newspaper advertising or any other flavors of mass media advertising out there. But as a small business owner, if you're going to use them, be sure that you're using them as part of a greater plan and not as a one-time "silver bullet" for quick success.

About Zero-G Creative

You don't need to be a \$50 million company to look like one. Zero-G Creative delivers sound marketing advice and award-winning design to small businesses and startups at affordable prices.

Zero-G's full suite of services includes branding, marketing strategy, graphic design, web design, e-commerce, collateral development and more – all delivered to an exclusively small and mid-sized business clientele. With Zero-G at their side, entrepreneurs know they can reach for the stars.

About Erik Wolf

A small business marketing expert, Erik Wolf founded Zero-G Creative to work with entrepreneurs who felt "weighed down" by ineffective marketing and small budgets.

Having gained experience in a variety of industries including consumer products, IT and journalism, Erik became a full-time entrepreneur in 2006. Erik holds an MBA in Marketing from Georgia State University and a BA from Emory University. He lives in Johns Creek, Georgia with his wife and two children.