

Developing a Marketing Plan

Business Information Factsheet

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Introduction

Developing a marketing plan is one of the most effective ways for a small business to survive and thrive, especially in increasingly competitive times.

As a small business owner, you must concentrate on getting plenty of new customers buying from you, any inactive customers coming back, and all your current customers buying more. An effective marketing plan will drive your business towards achieving these objectives.

Your plan will identify all the tactics and actions needed to achieve your strategic marketing objectives, with a timetable for implementation. In other words, your marketing plan will describe in detail how you will set about achieving your strategic sales and marketing targets. Most small business owners don't have a marketing plan, but by creating and introducing one, your business will gain a unique opportunity to stand out above your competition.

This factsheet explains how to write a marketing plan, what you should include in your plan and how to monitor and review your marketing performance.

The key elements of a marketing plan

Every marketing plan will be different depending on your individual business situation and marketing strategy. However, the key to marketing a business and being successful in a chosen market or particular niche is to implement a plan based around one or more of the following strategies:

- Attracting more customers.
- Increasing the average sale amount.
- Making your customers buy from you more often.
- Keeping your customers for life.

You don't have to write a book to produce a marketing plan, and you shouldn't be concerned with writing style or making your plan too complicated. The shorter and clearer it is the better, so that everyone can understand it. In fact, almost any marketing plan can be produced by following eight simple steps.

Step 1 - Defining your market

Your marketing plan should provide detailed information about your understanding of the market or target audience at which you are aiming your product or service. Many small business owners make a big mistake by promoting a product or service they believe is fashionable without first considering and understanding who will buy it.

You cannot sell something to people who don't want it - it's that simple. A profitable market consists of people who genuinely have a need for a product or service and will be most likely to buy it when you offer it to them.

Your plan should typically provide answers to the following questions about your target audience:

- Are there segments in your market that are currently underserved?
- Are the segments you are aiming at large enough for you to make money?
- How much market share do you need to capture to break even?
- Does the market already have too much competition?
- Have you spotted any weaknesses in your competitors' products or services - and can you capitalise on these?
- Does your target audience really want your product or service, and what value do they place on your unique competitive offer?

Step 2 - Understanding your customers

A thorough understanding of your customers is the essential starting point for effective marketing. To prepare a marketing plan, you must know exactly:

- Who your customers are.
- What they want.
- What will motivate them to buy from you.

To help you really understand your customers, your marketing plan should typically provide answers to the following questions:

- How do your potential customers normally buy similar products?
- What are the demographic characteristics of your target customers in terms of age, ethnicity, gender and so on?
- Who is the primary buyer and who has the primary influence in the purchasing process? These may not always be the same person (eg husband or wife, purchasing officer, project manager, company director, secretary).
- What kind of habits do your target customers have? For example, where do they get the information to help them make decisions (eg television, newspapers, specialist magazines, social media)?
- What are the main emotional motivators that will make someone buy your product or service (eg looking good, feeling smart, avoiding pain, saving money, being healthy, being popular)?

Step 3 - Identifying your market niche

The best marketing plans concentrate on supplying products and services to customer groups that fit the lifestyle (psychographic) and demographic (such as age, gender, occupation or income) profiles of a specific target market.

In other words, if you define your market as everybody and anybody, then you are likely to end up selling to nobody. If the marketplace is highly competitive, you'll find jumping up and down in a small puddle far more effective than trying to make a splash in a large ocean.

Your marketing plan should outline how you will carve out your specific niche and how you aim to dominate it. By defining the niche and narrowing your market focus, you will usually find that your product or service becomes more desirable and your name spreads more rapidly. It also becomes easier and cheaper to contact potential customers and you will almost certainly face less competition.

Step 4 - Developing your marketing message

Once you have identified your target market audience and profiled your niche customers, you will need to focus on developing your marketing message. This should explain what your product offers and persuade people to buy from you.

There are generally two types of marketing message. One is short, to the point and often referred to as the 'elevator pitch'. It's your once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be with someone important who asks you 'What do you do?' and you have 30 seconds to make your pitch.

The second type is the complete marketing message and your plan should develop this type of message and identify everywhere that it's going to be used. This type of marketing message needs to be compelling and persuasive and should typically include the following elements:

- An explanation of your target customers' problem.
- Proof that this problem is important and that it should be solved without delay.
- An explanation of why you are the only supplier that can solve the problem.
- An explanation of the benefits people will get by using your solution.
- Examples and testimonials of satisfied customers who have used your service.
- An explanation of prices and payment terms.
- Your unconditional guarantee.

Step 5 - Defining your marketing medium

This is a crucial part of your marketing plan and will define the methods and media you will use to ensure your message reaches your target audience. It should identify exactly how you will sell your product or service.

Your marketing medium is the communication vehicle that you will use to deliver your marketing message. The best medium for you will be the one that reaches the most people in your niche at the lowest possible cost. The following is a selection of different types of marketing media you can use to get your message out:

- Newspaper and magazine adverts.
- TV and radio adverts.
- Online search results such as via Google or Bing.
- Mobile apps.
- Online directories such as Yell.com.
- Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.
- YouTube and other video-streaming platforms.
- Posters and billboards.
- Seminars and talks.
- Leaflet drops.
- Trade shows.
- Press articles and advertorials.
- Classified ads.
- Charity events.
- Networking.
- Telemarketing.
- Sales letters.
- E-mail.
- Sales agents.
- Press releases.
- Gift vouchers.
- Word of mouth.
- Business cards.
- Brochures and catalogues.
- Window displays.

Step 6 - Choosing your route to market

Your route to market will largely depend on the type of product or service you are selling and the target market you are trying to reach.

For example, you could choose to sell by a combination of routes such as mail order, via e-commerce, through distributors or sales agents or directly to customers. You must be precise and clear in your plan about how and why you choose your particular market route and what alternative you will use if your initial route does not produce the results you expect.

Step 7 - Setting sales and marketing targets

Targets are critical to marketing success and these should be realistic and specific. If you haven't written down your goals and targets in your marketing plan you are simply wishing for success instead of aiming for it.

Ensure that your goals and objectives use the SMART formula:

- Specific.
- Measurable.
- Achievable.
- Realistic.
- Time-defined.

These goals should include financial values in terms of volume of sales, monthly and annual revenues, profit targets and sales per salesperson. You can also include targets such as enquiry levels, sales conversion rates, website traffic generated, contracts won, press releases and articles published.

Once these targets are set, your marketing plan should indicate how and when you will review and adjust them.

Step 8 - Setting your marketing budget and timetable

Your plan should include a realistic budget to allow you to undertake all your desired marketing activity and a timetable for its implementation. You can calculate your budget using either exact figures or an estimate.

If you have been trading for a year or more already, you will be able to calculate your 'cost to acquire one customer' or 'cost to sell one product' by dividing your previous year's annual sales and marketing costs by the number of customers you have acquired or units you have sold.

Take this unit cost and multiply it by your sales or customer acquisition goals for the year ahead. This will give you an indication of how much you need to invest to achieve your sales and marketing targets.

Once you have calculated or estimated your budget, you will need to produce a timetable to implement the plan. This timetable will identify:

- Each specific marketing action you will take.
- Who will carry these out.
- A timescale for each activity and when it will start.
- Key events and milestones during the year, such as trade shows and product launches.
- When you will need to bring in external expertise, such as specialists in PR, graphic design or direct sales.

Monitoring and reviewing progress

Once your marketing plan is underway, you will need to monitor and review its progress continually. Ideally, you should do this each month. You should also consider possible scenarios, such as how to handle responses to particular marketing activities or how to deal with seasonal aspects of your industry.

Additionally, you will need to consider how to manage your marketing plan overall. For example, you must ensure that you don't spend your entire annual budget in the first couple of months. Decide how you will monitor and interpret results and think about how you will adjust the plan or introduce new tactics as you progress.

Hints and tips

- The marketing plan will be one of your most important business documents, so make sure you set aside some uninterrupted time to develop it.
- Following the steps in this factsheet will help you create your plan, but you must make the effort to study the detail around your proposed marketing media and methods, your overall marketing budget and how appropriate your marketing message is to your target audience.
- To begin with, don't worry about writing style or making your plan too complicated or long-winded. In fact, by following the steps described in this factsheet, you should be able to create a successful marketing plan in just one day.

Further information

BIF107 Profiling your Target Audience

BIF185 A Checklist for Start-up Market Research

BIF392 A Guide to Creating a Marketing Strategy

Useful publications

'The Guide to Market Research for SMEs'

The Market Research Society

Website: www.mrs.org.uk/researchbuyersguide/research-for-smes

'Glossary of Market Research Terms'

The Market Research Society

Website: www.mrs.org.uk/glossary

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