

# EFFECTIVE – NOT EXPENSIVE – MARKETING

Get attention with creative ideas.

By Tammy Whitehouse

**B**udding entrepreneurs stay awake at night wondering how to make a big marketing impact on a small marketing budget.

Cynthia McKay, CEO of Le Gourmet Gift Basket, Inc. in Castle Rock, Colo., finds her customers not by searching for them, but by meeting them. McKay quit her job as an attorney in 1992 – “the job was absolutely wrong for me,” she said – and opened a gift basket company with no prior retail or creative experience.

“I decided that marketing was merely exposure to my products and services,” she said. “I took a gift basket and rode up and down high rise elevators all day chatting with individuals who might invest in the products I was selling.”

McKay said she strode into the offices of a large financial services firm one day, just hoping to get noticed. She landed more than

\$60,000 in business doing so. “I make it a habit to hand-deliver items when I can and often get off at the wrong floor of a building, enabling me to meet more individuals who turn into prospective clients.”

## Get Personal

McKay’s approach represents two of the hallmarks of the most successful, low-cost marketing tactic, according to experts. It’s creative, and it’s personal.

“Marketing is conversations and relationships,” said Beth Silver, managing director of Doubet Consulting in New York. Business owners must be comfortable with the kind of personal, one-on-one interaction that helps sell the product or service. “If you’re not confident talking about your business, you need to learn what to say and how to say it. And you need to practice it with family and friends.”

Daniel Decker, president of the Quantum Media Group in Jacksonville, Fla., said that building an effective approach to marketing on a limited budget is extremely subjective. “It really depends on the goal and the budget of the client,” he said.

Decker described the success of a single-location restaurant franchise operator for whom marketing was an expense he didn’t think he could afford. The operator asked customers to sign up for an e-mail list. “Each week we gave away prizes and food offers exclusively for the e-mail subscribers and encouraged them to share the e-mail with their friends and colleagues,” Decker said. “The viral effect was huge.”

That campaign was followed with door-to-door flyers and posters offering catering services, followed by television advertising. The e-mail list has grown to 20,000

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subscribers and the restaurant operation grew to five locations.

#### **Form Partnerships**

Advertising is among the most expensive forms of marketing, so it should be pursued cautiously, said Will Dylan, author of the e-book *Small Business, Big Marketing*. It's tough for a small business owner to commit the funds necessary to create an effective ad campaign – one that has a strong message and cuts through the bombardment of ad messages circulating in our culture.

Dylan suggests small, local business owners look for partners to create complementary promotions to get attention. Neighboring tenants in a retail plaza, for example, might make good partners. A furniture store and a housewares store can declare “kitchen month” and advertise it jointly, each offering their own kitchen-related specials. “It cuts your costs in half,” Dylan said.

Business owners also can partner with non-competing, complementary businesses to share costs and prospect lists. “If you’re a realtor, you could share the cost of a direct mail postcard with a mortgage company,” Fisher said. “Or put links to a complementary business site on your Web site and ask the other business to do the same.”

Even competitors can be a marketing resource, Fisher said. “Ask competitors for overflow or for prospects not in their target market,” she said. “A handyman I know is often too busy and refers his work to competitors.”

Selection of media is important, too. Dylan recommends avoiding large-circulation daily newspapers, which tend to be more

expensive. Focus, instead, on local community papers that are more geographically specific to your business.

Margie Fisher, president of Margie Fisher Public Relations in Boca Raton, Fla., suggests a similar logic for television advertising. “[Consider] cable TV spots,” she said. “Cable TV allows you to target a narrow geographic area and specific viewer, at much less of a cost than traditional TV advertising.”

#### **Make News**

Plenty of experts advise business owners to seek the free attention of reporters – public relations – instead of spending money on advertising. R.J. Garis, a national publicist with the Garis Agency in San Marcos, Calif., said the key to getting publicity is creativity.

Garis said his agency helped Becky’s, a San Diego restaurant, gain attention with a huge event at modest cost because virtually everything was donated. The restaurant asked San Diego Children’s Hospital if it could offer a gala holiday lights tour to hospitalized children, ending with a party at the restaurant. A local limousine service donated transportation for the 30 or so children. Hotel Del Coronado hosted a stop to provide gifts and hot chocolate. Police escorted the motorcade on a tour of some of the city’s best light displays, ending with a party at the restaurant and lots of attention from Santa Claus.

“The television news and print media covered the whole thing,” Garis said. “The publicity value for the restaurant was priceless.”

Vince McMorrow, director of public relations for RMD Advertising in New Albany, Ohio, agreed that creativity is key. A small, new

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