



Website planning for great results!

Top 10 Marketing Tips

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Hi there...When putting these top 10 tips together I intended to create a simple list, creating a few paragraphs for each tip, taking up but a few pages – however, it just kept flowing and so there are considerably more pages than I intended to write. Hopefully, there's something for everyone. Enjoy...Michelle Carvill

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These Marketing Top 10 Tips are intended to be a general guide and cannot substitute for professional advice. We cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned to any person acting or refraining from acting as a result of material contained here.

Tip No 1

Get emotional – and build your brand personality

In an overcrowded market place – finding a point of differentiation or an ‘usp’ (unique selling proposition) becomes a distant desire.

Unless you are offering something extremely unique – then you generally have a number of competitors who are offering the market similar products or services.

Given my experience with the accountancy profession, as an example, take a look at a range of accountancy firms’ corporate brochures, or websites – you will generally see the same services being promoted; accountancy, payroll, audit, tax advice, etc. And of course, they are all promoting these services, because after all – the nature of the profession is that these are the core services that general practices do indeed provide.

So thinking about your own market place, as I said, unless you are doing something truly different, new and innovative, it’s very difficult for businesses to create a ‘usp’ (unique selling proposition). So what can you, with lots of competitors, in a possibly saturated market, be doing to ensure you attract the type of customers you want to work with?

If it’s a given that the majority of businesses in your sector provide a very similar ‘type’ of service or product, then the differentiating factors can only be **‘how’** those services are delivered and the general **‘personality’** of the business.

For a moment think about the personality of British Airways, Virgin and Ryan Air. They are all providing a core service – air travel – but look at how very different just these three airlines are when we think of them from a ‘personality’ perspective.

Of course, there’s always the option to focus on a specific ‘strength’. For example, if your business has a specific area of expertise – a niche offering, then it’s possible to build your brand identity to compliment this offering. But how do businesses without any specific niche stand out from the crowd?

Instead of a USP – think about your **ESP – your Emotional Selling Point**. Think about what your customers and your prospective customers think about you. Do you think that your customers are with you because of the ‘range’ of services or products you provide – or is it that your customers are with you because a) they get on with you b) they feel comfortable working with you and the services or products that you offer, or c) they enjoy the level of service they receive.

Such areas form your **business’s personality** – and whilst your range of services and products may be very similar to those of your competitors – a business’s personality is distinctly different.

It’s important to remember that a ‘brand’ isn’t just a logo on your business card or letterhead – it’s far deeper and more psychological than that. A brand is what your customers and prospective customers, and indeed your team, feel in their hearts and minds when they exchange an experience with you. Therefore, how a customer ‘feels’ about your services and products is key. A great example of a brand that makes me feel great to experience is Innocent Smoothies; personal, tasty, simple - yet still innovative. There are lots of companies in the smoothie selling business – but Innocent sell their personality.

So let's look at some practical things you could be doing to get your personality across:

Assess your business's personality - Your business's personality dictates the type of people you attract – from both an employee and customer perspective. Run a research exercise with the directors, the team, and a handful of customers. What type of business are you? What type of personality does your business have? Get a clear understanding of what you currently communicate to the marketplace – and be sure it fits with the message you want to convey.

Communicate your personality – Project a clear message of who you are and what you offer. Does your brand clearly communicate your values? Is it friendly, laid-back or tight lipped and corporate? Just what message does your brand communicate? If you are targeting large corporate organisations, then your message and materials will be positioned quite differently than if you are targeting the start-ups market. So ask yourself, who are you; who are you targeting and what is your message?

Be consistent – Once you've agreed your personality – be sure to communicate it consistently. Your brand, your values and your personality should be stamped firmly on everything you do and everything you communicate. Ensure you have consistency of message, materials and personality.

Tip No 2

Get your data in order

Customers are the lifeblood of most businesses – agreed? However, when it comes to customer management and management of information to those all important customers, many businesses fall short of smooth communications.

In fact, UK businesses waste in excess of £75 million each year mailing companies and individuals whose details have changed. Not only does this hit companies in hard cash but ineffective database management leads to negative brand image too; for example, if a customer is deceased, yet is still receiving four mailings a year – even once the aggrieved family have communicated their sad loss, then this can build a negative image. And what about incorrect spelling of names, or a simple Mr instead of a Mrs – oops – doesn't look great does it.

And in the age of email communications – sending emails to email addresses that are broken, incorrect and simply bounce, can get you into all sorts of issues with deliverability* (*more on that later).

Your database is far more than an electronic 'filing cabinet' holding all your customer's details. It's the platform for all your marketing activity enabling you to communicate with customers, efficiently, speedily and in a targeted way.

An accurate and well loaded database is a valuable resource. It's essential for effective marketing campaigns. It is important that your database is flexible too - making it easy to segment and target marketing activity, tracking the success of promotions and as much as possible, behaving as a 'customer relationship management' tool. By categorising your customers, you are able to target different segments, where you identify different needs, giving your customer the

perception that you have gained a good understanding of their needs, and are dealing with them as individuals – rather than as part of a bulk mailing.

So, is your database up-to-scratch?

If you were set the task of mailing all of your customers to advise them of, let's say, a seminar you were running – how simple a task would that be?

Ideally, it shouldn't be a problem at all – because you would hold your entire customer's contact information and their preference as to how they want you to communicate with them (email or mail). The pulling of the distribution list together should be simple – put the mailer together, merge with your customer base and press print or send. The real effort should be focused on getting the seminar together and creating the marketing campaign.

However, for many businesses, communicating with customers just isn't that simple.

In many businesses there are a number of 'databases' relating to different products or services. Therefore, the total customer base is spread across different platforms and often fragmented – and it then becomes a considerable task to pull together the entire customer base onto one centralised electronic database – the core marketing hub.

However, that's what's needed for efficient and effective customer management and effective marketing.

Building your marketing database

To build your marketing database, start with the basics and then add on the information that is of particular interest to your business. Be sure to keep your database simple though – you need to be able to retrieve data quickly.

1. Customer Identity and Characteristics

- All names, addresses and telephone numbers
- Business: Type of business, number of employees, key personnel, current customer or prospective customer.
- Consumer: Sex, date of birth, family members, hobbies.

2. Service Requested/Special Requests/Interests

- Services purchased
- Complaints
- Enquiries, Instructions, Agreements

3. Recency /Frequency / Monetary Factors

- Recency = when customer last bought your service
- Frequency = how often they buy
- Monetary = how much they spend on what

4. Media that influenced Transaction

- Advertising, Direct Mail, Tele Sales, Publicity

5. A History of Customer Relationship

- The information gathered will give you a complete history of your customer relationship.
- You will be in a position to contact customers on a personal basis, through the most

appropriate medium.

6. Your Return on Advertising and Sales Budgets

- By recording all transactions in your database, including the medium that stimulated it, you can break down the return you get from all advertising and marketing activity.

Database Management

Once you've agreed the type of information that you are going to collect, and created the relevant fields for your database. The next stage is to input or import the data.

Until your database is well established, it is wise to give responsibility to one individual for overall Database Management. This Database Manager will set up a 'protocol' for how data should be entered, which fields have to be filled, and is responsible for the deletion or addition of entries.

It is also important to regularly 'clean' your database. If a mailing is returned marked 'gone away' be sure that your database is 'up-dated' accordingly. Aim for your database to be 99% accurate at all times.

The platform for your Marketing activities

Once your database is established it becomes the focal point for all your marketing activities.

All too often businesses embark on marketing activities without having an efficient means of delivery. With a sturdy and accurate database in place, marketing activities are far more successful, as the method of communication is easy.

Also – email marketing had rapidly grown and is now a key marketing tool. In fact for many businesses it's the preferred communication medium. It's an efficient and inexpensive way to communicate with customers.

Further, why not add a fun element to your database – which also lets your customer think that you are thinking of them. It is likely you will hold dates of birth – why not schedule a simple 'Happy Birthday' email.

Your database is the nerve centre for all your marketing activities, providing you with a means to apply tactics to nurture your customers and capture prospective ones.

Tip No 3

Right Message, Right Person, Right Time!

“Mailshots don’t work” – is a phrase I have become accustomed to hearing when discussing marketing tactics with businesses. Indeed, when I enquire further, I am offered tales of how hundreds and sometimes, thousands of letters, invitations, newsletters and all matter of communications – have been sent out using up significant resource (both time and money) and yet yielding not a single response.

Even in the age where ‘emarketing’ has seen rapid growth, direct mail is still a serious tactic – with direct mail increasing by 130% over the past 12 years – it is estimated that Consumer Direct Mail now generates £26.283 billion worth of business every year.

To get the most out of direct mail requires a combination of skills: 1) a clear understanding of the purpose of the mailing; 2) accurate and relevant targeting; and 3) an interesting execution that involves the reader and creates a response. To put it simply, the most successful campaigns are those that put the right message in front of the right person at the right time.

So let’s take a look at the winning combination: Right message, right person and the right time.

Right Person

Targeting is the first step in any direct mail campaign. Question your motives: who are you trying to attract? Who do you want your mailer to reach? Targeting is not easy – ideally you have to have some knowledge of your audience, in order to be able to target effectively.

A great start to targeting is utilising existing customer information. Such information should enable you to identify the potential to sell more services to them, or to generate profiles of who the best prospects will be.

Of course, when approaching the cold market, there is also the option to purchase marketing lists – where you have the ability to drill down to specific information – such as turnover, size of business, number of years in business, number of employees, demo and geographics etc – however, you still have to establish the ‘profile’ of who you are looking for – based from your own knowledge, which is likely to be gleaned from experiences with your own customers.

Right Message

There are many tactics and ideas for making your direct mail piece ‘stand out’. And indeed some businesses spend enormous amounts of money on their direct mail – and go to extreme lengths to ‘make an impact’ – sending chocolates, lollies, cakes and all matter of goodies as part of their direct mail campaigns.

It’s worth remembering that what customers are really looking for is **relevance** – they are far more likely to respond to a mailing which has an offer they are interested in, than to one which has a great design or gimmick, but is of no relevance to them.

Indeed, it’s easy to get carried away with the ‘attention catching gimmicks’ – this is the fun stuff. And whilst the ‘whacky’ designs may catch attention – what all direct mail experts agree on is the importance of ‘the sales letter’.

Experts agree that in writing the sales letter the key is to 'plan ahead'. And 90% of the thinking should happen before those eager fingers start tapping at the keypad.

The focus of the letter is to win new business. Some key tips to follow when crafting your letter:

- **Be yourself** – personalise the letter as much as you can and demonstrate a sound knowledge of your audience's business dynamics and a clear understanding of the obstacles they face. If the reader believes you have empathy with their situation – they are far more likely to continue reading.
- **Don't talk too much about yourself** – readers are interested in what you can do for them – not what you do. Focus on the opportunities your products and services present for them.
- **Use the words 'you' and 'your'** as much as possible and minimise the 'we's'. This will warm up your letter considerably.
- **Use sub-heads**, bullet points and highlighted or bold text to convey key points.
- **Be very direct about your offer** – and get the value proposition or the offer in quick. If you can save them £500 immediately – then tell them this in the headline. And of course, repeat the offer again, half way through the letter – don't let them miss the opportunity.
- **Make it easy for people to buy** – have clear instruction of how to take advantage of the offer; 'simply phone Jack on ...', 'simply send back the enclosed prepaid response card'.
- Be sure to **keep your response mechanisms simple** and provide a few response options. Don't stipulate that orders must be done 'online' – as that may present an obstruction to buy.

Right Time

A key aspect to Direct Mail is 'timing'. It's very difficult to know exactly when your target customer is 'ready to buy'. Of course, there may be some seasonal opportunities which determine an opportune 'direct mail' time – and so consider this when planning. But that still doesn't provide any guarantees.

Timing is exactly why 'one hit wonders' are extremely rare – if evident at all. More often than not – deciding 'when to mail' is more of a case of what you can internally manage and resource.

And that's fine – provided that you don't plan on doing mailers in 'isolation'. By this I mean – that you do not attempt to attain the elusive 'one hit wonder' – but instead plan a Direct Mail Campaign – or an integrated marketing campaign of which direct mail is one component.

Regular communication is the **only** solution to the 'right time' problem. Even with sophisticated consumer behavioural profiling, knowing just 'when' a customer is ready to buy – requires skills beyond the realms of our 5 senses.

Even if your offer is amazingly compelling – for many of the people you mail, it may simply be a case that now is just not the right time for them. However, 6 months down the line – it may be the perfect time for them. And so – regular communication allows you to build **‘share of mind’**, loyalty, and eventually ‘hit the mark’.

Let’s think about it this way. Research in ‘sales activity’ tells us that the optimum number of times you need to ask the customer to buy in order to gain a positive result is 7. And of course, your direct mail piece is effectively a ‘remote sales man’ trying to win over your chosen target. This tells us that regular communication is necessary to achieve the end objective. It’s a bit of a numbers game (which Capital One by the level of the direct mail activity must know all about!).

Learn from your activity

The bottom line exists – and so you need to measure success. Did the campaign fulfill its objectives; achieve the desired results, all within the set budget?

The key to ongoing successful campaigns is that of monitoring responses. Like many things in life – the more you do it – the better you get at it. The same applies to Direct Mail.

Over time you’ll learn which targets respond to which messages and of course, you’ll be able to monitor any particular ‘response’ patterns too – giving you a valuable insight into the ‘Right Time’.

Tip No 4

Consider the ‘mix’

The Marketing Mix is a term used to describe the combination of tactics used by businesses to achieve its objectives by marketing its services or products effectively to a specific target audience.

For many years, in marketing jargon, this was referred to as ‘the 4 Ps’ – namely; product, price, promotion and place.

The logic behind the ‘4 Ps’ is to apply a tactic that focuses on marketing the ‘right product’ to the ‘right person’ at the ‘right price’ in the ‘right place’ and at the ‘right time’.

Once you’ve identified your target audience – then the ‘4 Ps’ provide you with a simple process to follow to ensure that you’ve got your marketing proposition right. For example, let’s say we want to market umbrellas – and have decided to target schoolchildren. Given our audience it would therefore be appropriate to market:

- Coloured, cartoon character covered, small size umbrellas (product)
- At a low price (price)
- Selling them through school uniform outlets (place)
- Promoting them through point of sale / school book bags (promotion)

Let’s now say that our target audience is gentleman’s smart umbrellas

- Black, high quality, business like, oversized umbrellas (product)
- Premium price reflecting the quality (price)
- Selling them through gentleman's clothes outlets, tailors (place)
- Promoting them through point of sale, possibly relevant trade press (promotion)

The above examples clearly show that identifying your target audience, determines how you apply the '4 Ps' tactic.

So let's look at the '4 Ps' a little more closely – and then I'll introduce some more 'Ps' for you to consider.

Product

Marketing is about many things – but in its simplest explanation, it's about identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer needs. Therefore, you need to be sure that your products and services continue to meet your customers' needs – and perhaps even 'delight' them!

To keep on top of how your products and services are performing, it's good practice to periodically carry out customer research asking your customers:

- What they think of your product/service
- How satisfied they are with the quality
- What they think of your support services (if appropriate)
- Are you meeting their needs
- What else could you be doing

Be sure to ask these questions for each service or product you provide – and have a system for collecting and analysing feedback.

I have worked with a number of businesses that do extensive customer research, find out some great product and service enhancements – but then don't actually 'implement' anything in line with what the customers are saying they want.

If you are going to go to the trouble of undertaking research – be sure it has a purpose. And be sure that you are going to use the information to further enhance your products and services. It's also really good practice to provide your customers with an update of 'why' you are updating, enhancing your products or services.

“Thank you to all customers that kindly participated in telling us what they thought of our A Product”. We received excellent ideas and really constructive feedback. In light of which we have developed Product A so that it now includes XYZ.”

A statement such as the above provides your customers with the open knowledge that you are 'listening' to their needs and 'responding' respectively - the mark of a truly marketing focused organisation.

Place

Place relates to your means of distribution. Depending on whether you provide products directly to the consumer (B2C) or directly to other businesses (B2B) is likely to impact your pricing and promotion decisions.

You may be selling through wholesalers, direct to retail outlets, or direct to the consumer. If selling to wholesalers, then there are likely to be 'mark up' costs to cover their overheads, similarly with retail outlets. And from a promotional perspective, wholesalers and retailers will have to be persuaded to stock your products and services. It may be that you have an online presence, and may be selling directly to consumers 'online' – so you may be advertising with search engines and on related websites.

Price

Price determines your profit and is therefore, a very important element of the mix. And probably the most influenced by the other elements of the mix. Place impacts price, promotion impacts price as does product.

When determining 'price' you need to consider:

- a) Your target audience. What will they be prepared to pay for your product or service. Going back to the umbrella example above, children's umbrellas say, £4.99 Gent's umbrellas £9.99. There's a clear difference between the 'price positioning' of these two offerings.
- b) Costs. What does it cost you to produce this product or service? This is key – you don't want to be selling a product and making a loss. Consider the margins you want to make – how many you have to sell to break-even. Map out all the costs associated with production. There are a number of hidden costs that come out of the woodwork – and if you don't calculate what it costs you to produce your product correctly, the more you sell, the more you will lose!
- c) Competitors. Look at what your competitors are charging. Go online and run a quick 'Google' search on the type of product or service you provide – and see the costs. Even call competitors for a price if costs are not readily displayed.

Promotion

Traditionally, the promotional mix was made up as follows:

- Advertising
- Sales promotion
- Public relations
- Direct marketing
- Personal selling

And how you used these elements depends on your message, your reach (target audience) and of course, your budget.

Of course, there are a whole new tranche of 'promotional' elements to consider now too. I refer to these as 'Social Media' – and whilst one could argue that these fall into the

'Advertising' or 'PR' categories, I prefer to outline some of the popular 'online' angles for you to consider:

- Blogs / forums
- Email marketing
- E-Newsletters
- Websites
- Social Networks
- Search Advertising

3 More Ps

The '4 Ps' have provided a tried and tested tactic for marketers over the years. However, in the late 70s – came the rise of the 'service' organisation. Marketers then developed the '4 Ps' further to create '7 Ps' – including, People, Process and Physical Evidence.

People

You can clearly understand that in a service organisation – people determine the quality of service your customers receive. Where people are the front line communicators, it's important that they are happy, skilled and motivated. A happy team makes for happy customers.

Indeed, in a saturated and competitive market place, service is usually the only means for an organisation to differentiate itself. Think of Apple. Their service level is amazing. Ok, they have good products too – but so indeed do Dell. However, from my experience of being both a MAC user and a PC user – from my perspective, Dell doesn't come close to Apple's service levels.

And of course, the level of service you provide can often mean that you can charge a more premium price. Customers are likely to pay more for excellent service levels.

So here are some tips for creating a happy, skilled and motivated team:

- Recruit wisely. Be transparent with the level of service you expect from your team at the interview process. Recruit those that are enthusiastic, motivated and that you can see have a clear understanding of how important their role in keeping customers happy is.
- Train your team. Provide a good induction to your products and services – ensure that your team member understands what it is you do, what you offer and who does what within the organisation.
- Look after your team. Nurture them, get them involved. In fact, get them to set some service standards; key measurements that they want to be assessed against. These Key Performance Indicators – are then something that you can measure and monitor and discuss with your team on a regular basis.

Process

The processes involved in delivering your products and services to the customer have an impact on the way in which your customers perceive you.

Be sure that you map out these processes to ensure they are logical and not causing unnecessary delay or inconvenience for the customer.

Consider how you communicate with your customers and how easy it is for them to communicate with you. I recently worked with a business (and they are not alone in this practice) that sent post transaction confirmation emails from the customer support team from a 'no reply' email address. The email was asking the customer to contact them if they had any challenges etc – yet had no contact details within it – and the customer couldn't just simply reply to the email.

My question to them was 'how does that look to the customer'? You're communicating with them, yet giving them no means to respond. Getting your customers to communicate with you should be simple and easy.

My advice is to review your business processes on a regular basis. Review how things are working and look at ways to 'tighten up' any gaps.

Re-engineer your processes to keep a pace with the business environment. Be sure to check that the way you deliver your products and services is the most efficient, cost effective and customer centric way possible.

Physical Evidence

Physical evidence is the term used to describe the image that your business portrays to the external environment in a physical way. Namely; premises, team appearance, car park, vehicles, reception area etc, effectively, how you position your business.

When customers do not have anything that they can touch, see or try before they buy, they are more likely to assess you by the image and associations you portray.

I personally explain 'physical evidence' as part of an organisations 'brand values'. What is communicated physically, says everything about the brand – and therefore, your business. Customers are building a mental picture which they will retain from the moment they are introduced to your business. So it's important that your physical evidence is consistent with the type of product or service you provide.

Tip No 5

Don't forget your current customers

With most of the clients I have worked with in the past – their key focus from a marketing perspective is always about achieving new customers.

Whilst it's important to look ahead at new markets and audiences, it's also important to continue to nurture the customers that you already have. After all, they are 6 times more likely to purchase services from you than a 'cold' audience.

Ask yourself:

- Are you doing everything you can to nurture your current customer base, creating advocates that spread the word and refer you to others?

- When was the last time you surveyed your customers to find out what they thought about your service / product?
- How valuable are your customers? Is the value of your customer base varied? Do some spend more with you? Are you spending more time on customers that are not very valuable? How can you make them more valuable?

Here's a valuation model you might want to consider:

The value of a customer to your business is the annual net profit you make from that customer, multiplied by the number of years that customer is likely to deal with you, plus the value of an average of 10 new customers recommended by your satisfied customer.

Listening to your customers is key to understanding how your products and services are working in the real world. And running a customer survey should not be something which creates sheer panic - usually about receiving complaints.

Smart businesses are those that **actively encourage and welcome complaints**. Here's why:

- The average business never hears from 96% of its unhappy customers. For every complaint received, the average business has 26 customers with problems, of which 6 are 'serious'. So if you gauge the standard of your service by the number of complaints you receive, you're dealing only with the tip of the iceberg.
- Complainers are more likely than non-complainers to do business again with you – even though you've upset them and even if their complaint isn't satisfactorily resolved.
- Of customers who register a complaint, between 54 and 70% will do business again with the organisation if their complaint is resolved. That figure goes up to a staggering 95% if the customer feels that the complaint was resolved quickly. So you should be doing everything possible to deal with complaints quickly and thoroughly.
- The average customer who has had a problem with an organisation tells 10 people about it, and 13% recount the incident to more than 20 people.
- Customers who complain to an organisation and have their complaints satisfactorily resolved tell up to 5 people about the positive treatment they received.

Because of my passion for customer service, I tend to do a lot of complaining – and never before has the power of complaining been more 'connected'. There are established blogs and forums out there just waiting for people to add their complaints to and unite with others – and of course, you can always start one if one doesn't already exist. Word of mouth when recounting negative incidents – is no longer restricted to 10, there's now the power of viral to contend with – so, all the more reason for service excellence, listening to customers and welcoming complaints.

Tip No 6

Email Marketing Tactics

As I discussed in Tip No 3, marketing effectiveness, whether offline or online is 'simplistically' based on the following:

“right message, right person, right time”

There are many factors that can determine the success of an email campaign – and indeed there are many ways to define the success of a campaign.

Jupiter Research undertook some research in 2005 which identified that 73% of immediate purchasers bought because an email message featured a 'sale price' (targeted offer) and 67% bought because it featured free or discounted shipping (giving them something for free).

Further, 60% of buyers said that a key motivator to purchase was the fact that the message contained a product the recipient was already considering.

This makes sense – and provides a strong case for 'intelligent' **targeted** marketing campaigns – by which I mean following up **specific segments** behaving in a particular way.

For example: A newsletter is deployed and promotes 3 items. Three follow up emails are then sent to the users – dependent upon which item they explored.

Whilst there are no 'hard and fast' rules as to creating a 'successful' email communication – the following considerations should apply when crafting them:

- Personalise: Where possible personalise the email by using the intended recipient's name in the body of the email and where appropriate in the subject line (however, don't get too carried away with this if it is difficult to do – as this practice has not shown to make a significant difference).
- Relevance: If there is a 'history' with the intended recipient include reference to previous purchase history, enquiries or preferences you are aware of. Eg: 'We noticed you were interested in our New Organic Bodywash – we have a special 50% discount you can take advantage of, however, it's only available for the next 48 hours... so act now'.
- Multi-part: Research has identified that HTML emails pull a higher response rate than plain or rich text emails. In the registration process be sure to ask your customers how they want to receive their emails. However, most online marketers opt for sending both emails simultaneously. The recipient's computer will then recognise and display the optimal email format.
- Layout: Research shows that a user browses their emails before being drawn to a particular area of interest. It is advisable not to 'play around' too much with the layout of a regular communication – as overtime users become familiar with its layout (how frustrating when supermarkets change their sections just when you're familiar with all the areas you need). Newsletters often benefit from a Table of Contents at the top of an email outlining the copy contained within the communication.
- Most read: As part of your layout – particularly where there is multiple messages (as in a newsletter style communication) it is widely known that the 'top two' messages are the most read. Therefore, ensure you keep key messages at the top.

- Auto preview:** It is worth considering the content of the first paragraph of the plain text version of the body copy which is visible via Auto Preview. It is generally accepted that the '3 second rule' applies to email marketing messages – and therefore the most compelling copy or image should appear in the first paragraph to encourage the individual to open the email and read on.
- Images:** Images can play a large part in getting a key message across – whilst image blocking is increasingly prevalent – a way to get around this is to utilise 'alt tags' (so that if images are blocked, descriptive text will appear in its place).
- Email size:** There are Best Practice guidelines which advise that messages should not exceed **60k** in total file size. Large images can cause emails to get caught by spam filters.
- Subject line:** The subject line, like any headline, should convey a strong call to action – a compelling subject line will draw the recipient into the email. If a regular communication – it's good practice to maintain a 'consistent' subject line. Good practice guidelines advise that the subject line should not exceed more than 70 characters.
- Spam triggers:** Be aware of trigger words such as: free, hot – and other seemingly innocuous words such as 'tips', 'enter', 'sample', 'private', 'reserved', 'products' and 'introductory' – these have also been identified as key 'spam' triggers.
- From box:** Similarly as familiarity of layout – people become accustomed to knowing who is sending emails to them – and will determine whether they open them based on who they are from.
- Transparency:** The subject line should accurately reflect the subject, purpose and content of the messages.
- Testing:** There's a practice called 'split stream testing' whereby you take a subset of the data and test two different subject lines. You can then assess after 24 hours and roll out the campaign using the most popular subject line.
- Pre testing:** It is really important to test emails before they are deployed. Some email deployment systems have these testing processes in built. This way you can test how your email will look on different browsers. Some deployment systems also check that your email template works effectively – and is optimised for deliverability.
- Unsubscribe:** An unsubscribe method needs to be apparent on every email communication.
- Timing:** It's worth testing email 'timing'. There is some benchmark data (reliability not verified) to suggest that more customers are likely to visit websites and make purchases on weekdays rather than weekends. And that conversion rates for visitors peak around midday on weekdays – making this an optimal time for reaching consumers.

For more information about Best Practice Guidelines for Email Marketing visit www.dma.org.uk

Tip No 7

Make sure your emails get through

In tip no. 2 I mention the importance of email deliverability.

Deliverability is the biggest challenge for email communications – it doesn't matter how much time or effort has gone into the creative, the copywriting or the targeting. If the email cannot be 'received' then the effort is wasted.

The volume of spam is driving the ISPs to block emails. Currently 80% of email traffic is spam, so there is a legitimate financial reason for the ISPs to control the amount of spam traffic on their networks.

However, deliverability can be improved by following a few codes of good practice:

- a) **Data Hygiene Policy.** Install a Data Hygiene Policy to ensure that the data within your Marketing Database is as 'clean' as possible. The goals of the policy should be to:
 - Reduce incorrect, incomplete or outdated addresses to a minimum
 - Process online unsubscribe requests immediately
 - Process unsubscribe requests received offline within a maximum of 7 days
 - Inform those unsubscribing that their request has been received and how long it will take to be effective –AND what to do if they ever want to 're-subscribe'.

There are email systems that enable the unsubscribe email address to be 'suppressed' rather than deleted. This way if a customer opts in at any point this overrides the unsubscription.

- b) **Email Hygiene.** Following opt in / opt out policies and list hygiene is one of the most effective ways to maintain high deliverability rates. In off-line direct marketing, the cost of producing and mailing each pack acts as a deterrent to 'over mailing'. In email marketing however, the marginal cost of each additional email does not hold the same disincentive – and invalid email addresses are continuously mailed. If an email address is returned 'invalid' – then it should be checked for basic errors and if none are found, it should be removed from the mailing list.
- c) **ISP Relations.** Organisations that don't manage their data efficiently and continue to mail 'invalid' email addresses without cleaning them out will get 'tagged' as spammers. This means that your emails will be 'blocked' as you are put under 'spam arrest' by some ISPs. You can rebuild these relationships – you need to identify which ISPs have blocked you and contact them to explain that you are a legitimate business – and that you are now following 'best practice guidelines' to ensure that you implement a good data and list hygiene policy. After all – spammers are not likely to contact the ISPs directly. Therefore, by making the effort to contact the ISPs and show that you are willing to do whatever it takes to rebuild a good mailing reputation – then you can start to build a good reputation.

There are email systems which you can purchase which directly manage your list hygiene and ISP relationships – if your business is dependent upon online communications – then it is likely that you would opt for this type of email service provider.

Tip No 8

Create a website that works for you

Once upon a time all a website needed to do was promote who you were. Now websites and ecommerce are a key part of doing business successfully, so you need to ensure that your website is not just a 'corporate brochure' but that it is a working resource achieving the right results.

Many websites I've reviewed are indeed professionally designed, even stunning – but my question is always – 'and what results is it returning to you'?

Most businesses, very small right through to very large, will have a web presence; after all, a website is a key marketing resource. So I am not going to focus on the 'why it's important to have a web presence' area. But what does seem to be lacking with many of the websites I review, is good 'web planning' – ensuring that a website is a useful commercial asset.

Just as in any other area of marketing communication – you should be thinking about how the user is going to engage with your website. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your home page provide a total overview of what you do and how your potential customers can buy / access your products or services?
- Do you have a telephone number on the home page?
- The 'back' button is the second most used button on the web – does this feature work on all of your web pages?
- Do you understand how users are scanning your text? Have you inserted relevant links in the body copy?
- Are you measuring site statistics? Do you know how long users are staying on your home page – where do they go next? (Google Analytics is free and provides you with a range of powerful stats).
- How are you driving traffic to your site? Do you do online advertising? Is your site fully search engine optimised - and do you keep on top of this?

If you have an ecommerce facility – just as I mentioned testing business processes (in Tip 4) on a regular basis – be sure to test your own online business processes. Are response emails automated? Are they clear, friendly, consistent with your brand message? Are you using these emails as an upsell opportunity, linking through to other services / products you provide?

Take a close and critical look at your website. View it as a critical business process – and ask yourself if it's doing what you need it to. Ensure it is up-to-date, accurate and above all, user friendly.

Tip No 9

Research and review

Market research has always been considered important in new service or new product development. 'Let's find out what the people think' – has, in most good marketing organisations, always been a clear way of reviewing how things are going and identifying a way forward.

Business has indeed speeded up and many traditional market research methods can take too long for the 'must know yesterday' CEO. So, many companies are looking for short cuts to get feedback from their customers. Customer surveys are a great way of finding out how your customers are feeling about your services – and if you incentivise your survey in some way (eg: they enter a prize draw to win a weekend away; case of champagne; ipod etc) then you hold quite a chance of getting a decent enough sized sample to provide you with some interesting and useful results.

Of course, as when crafting a 'sales letter' – don't rush into putting your 'survey' questions together. You really have to consider what it is that you want to learn from your audience – and ensure that you craft the questions to really hit on the key questions you want answers to.

I have crafted a number of surveys over the years – and a couple of times I've drawn the conclusion that 'I simply didn't ask the right questions'. This is also why it's always good practice to test a survey to a small sample of people before you release it to the broader audience. This way you ensure that your questions are not misunderstood – you see the quality of the data that comes back and you get an opportunity to assess and tweak where necessary.

There are some great online survey resources – one I am very familiar with is Zoomerang (www.zoomerang.com) – very easy to craft, flexible and I've never had any reason to complain.

Of course, it may be that online surveys are not for you – and that you need to get a more 'indepth' view of your target audience / customer group.

More qualitative research lends itself to 'Focus Group' – 'Customer Group' (call it what you will) in-depth research.

So here are some Focus Group Research pointers for you to consider:

- Consider what information is being sought and how insights derived will be used.
- Create an interview guide which is essentially an outline of the key issues, areas and questions to be covered
- Questions must be open and non-committal, leading the group to discuss the issue without being biased by the wording or presentation of the topic.
- Group size between 8 and 12. No fewer than 4 and no more than 12. The more sensitive the issues, the smaller the group should be.
- Group should be fairly homogeneous, with a little diversity to ensure different points of view and to stimulate discussion.
- The quality of the output from the group is dependent upon having the right people participating.
- For a group to develop a relaxed, comfortable, natural discussion – its members must have a 'community of interests'. The group must have some common interest they can establish, be it in background, product use, attitudes, etc to help them form themselves into a group.

- The moderator's objective is to focus the discussion on the relevant subject areas in a non-directive manner. To facilitate this, the moderator must establish rapport with the participants, make them relax and promote free discussion.
- In order for the moderator to 'draw in' the participants – and not seem as if the participants are being interviewed – it is useful to use other methods of analysis – such as 'wish lists' etc.
- The venue for the focus group must be one in which the respondents feel comfortable and at ease. It must also be one they can find and reach easily. A normal and familiar setting, where there is sufficient space for discussion, and where the group will not be disturbed.
- It is best practice to record the session – so that the moderator can participate within the group, without having to focus on detailing responses. The use of the tape recorder must be discussed at the outset to all participants.
- The moderator's opening remarks will set the style and tone of the discussion.
- Open the group by asking the participants to introduce themselves, and say a little about their business/occupation etc. This should break the ice and start the process of the participants relating to each other.
- Two hours is considered the outside limit for a productive group session. The moderator must pace the discussion so that all topics in the guide are covered, and ensure that important areas are not missed.
- Analysis and interpretation of the discussion – playing back the tapes and systematically relating and classifying the information according to objectives, problems, ideas and source.

Tip No 10

Practice positive PR

PR is a process focusing on developing an image and a reputation with your customers and the market as a whole. Often this image is created by cumulative effect, based on the quality of your services / products, your communication materials, your team, you; and the willingness of your customers to broadcast their positive experiences.

Developing a profile to the market is a long-term process. Many businesses I've worked with believe PR to be predominantly 'sending out press releases', in an ad-hoc way, in the hope of landing a big feature or national/local press presence. However, whilst press releases are indeed part of a PR plan – there's a whole load of groundwork that happens before you get to the Press Release stage.

I've worked with businesses in the past which have initially chosen to manage their PR activity in-house with a 'semi-dedicated' resource. However, they soon realise that PR is a resource intensive activity – and not something that can be done half heartedly.

Good PR agents have spent years building trusted relationships with journalists. They are close to the coal face and know when and what journalists are looking for.

There comes a stage in any business where getting proactive with PR makes sense. My recommendation would be to find a small PR agency or a good freelance / self employed PR agent, who ideally understands your target market.

So here are some steps to consider:

- Create a PR Brief. Creating a Brief is the best way of ensuring that the PR agent/agency understands your thinking. The Brief should cover information such as:
 - Background – about your business
 - Communications objectives – what you want to achieve from PR activity
 - Target audiences – who are you aiming your activity at
 - Reach – local area, national press, global, trade press
 - Communication channels – ideas on how you reach this audience
 - Messages – what do you want your audience to know
 - Challenges – anything that may need to be addressed
 - Timescales – are you working to a timeline
 - Budget – how much you have to spend on PR
 - Evaluation – how will you measure effectiveness

Putting together a document which incorporates all of these elements not only helps you to cement exactly what it is you are looking to achieve, but it also provides the experienced agency/agent with a great starting point.

If you do decide to go it alone – and manage your PR ‘in-house’ – then set up a PR Process. You’ll need to create your own press lists to target on a regular basis – and ideally start courting relationships with the editors/journalists you want to engage with.

When creating press releases be sure to consider the ‘**so what**’ factor - if there’s nothing really compelling, groundbreaking, innovative or topical – then it’s unlikely that any journalist will pick it up. Review the news piece and keep asking the question – so what? Only put out genuinely newsworthy press releases. You only have to look at press coverage in the nationals or your local newspaper to see the types of news covered. Be sure you position your press releases accordingly. The media are often interested in survey results, joint alliances, take-overs, topical issues that your service/product solves for the consumer etc.

So you’ve got a newsworthy story – be sure that your press release grabs the attention it deserves:

- Title. The title should be bold and is often put in capital letters. Keep it succinct and action focused – eg: ABC COMPANY LAUNCH BREAKTHROUGH TECHNOLOGY FOR ABC SURGERY.
- Subtitle. If your title warrants it – you may need to provide a little more information. ABC company launches product x to compliment its range of bespoke robot technology.
- Features and Benefits. Include a description about the key features and benefits.
- Quote. If possible add credibility by including a customer quote.
- Quote. Be sure to include a quote from the MD, CEO or relevant company spokesperson. If reporting on a joint alliance – then include quotes from both companies.
- Detail. Include pricing and availability detail. Keep in mind that journalists will want to construct the story based on the information you send to them.

- Contact and boiler plate. Be sure that you include contact details – email, phone and url – and a specific named point of contact. A boiler plate is effectively a quick overview of your company – your mission and strategy – some people refer to it as a company ‘sign off’.
- Keep it succinct and easy to read. You really don’t want to circulate a press release that is more than a couple of pages long – and definitely no more than three pages. Use 1.5 spacing.

Do keep in mind that journalists are often looking for expert opinion – and so if you have a specialism or specific expertise, then it’s worth communicating that you are a credible source that they can tap into.

And finally, keep at it. As I stated before, if you are going to start PR activity internally from scratch – then be sure you are committed to ‘dripping’ newsworthy information to your target press list on a regular basis. But be sure it’s newsworthy, as you don’t want to be labeled a nuisance.

To reiterate, PR agents have formulated trusted relationships over many years – and so whilst you may strike it lucky, PR is a specialist field, a long-term and committed tactic.

And finally...

Aim to WOW

Within my Top 10 Tips (and believe me it was difficult to restrain myself to 10, but there’s more in my blog), I’ve covered some pretty varied and general marketing areas. Throughout, you may have picked up that I have a recurring theme – and my theme leans towards differentiation and service excellence.

So – I thought I’d sign off from my Top 10 Tips with some questions and ideas on achieving customer WOW.

To be open with you – I am thrilled when I am WOWED by a business or service. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, it sticks. And of course, I am so thrilled, that I then proceed to tell everyone I know about the WOW experience.

Do WOW’s have to be big and expensive gestures? Not at all - often it’s just the unexpected.

For example, what would you think if when waiting in the lunchtime queue at the bank (because all the tellers are on lunch and that’s the time you use to do your banking) a member of their team came up and asked if they could assist – get you a coffee or some refreshments whilst waiting! Oooh – that’s different. Wouldn’t take much planning or cost – but quite different!

And what would you think if you received a letter from your gas supplier – thanking you for consistently paying your bills on time – and therefore, they were sending you a £20 credit voucher. It just doesn’t happen at the moment, does it.

Ok – just two very simple gestures – but unexpected. And I would certainly tell others about it because it’s unusual.

So my quest is to find out all the WOW things that businesses are doing – and to ask you what you can be doing to get a little WOW factor into your service offering.

Tell me all about WOW visit www.sitetastic.co.uk

And if you have any questions relating to my Top 10 Tips, or you simply want to share your experiences or tell me what you think email me at siteplanning@sitetastic.co.uk or post comments to my blog www.sitetastic.co.uk/blog