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Topic: Marketing

For a small spa business owner on a very limited budget for marketing, what key area or areas should be top priority in today's marketplace?

First, you need to develop your marketing plan. Your plan is your roadmap to help you navigate the best roads to take in order to reach your desired destination. This marketing plan should include an analysis of your competition's strengths and weaknesses. This analysis will show you where opportunities lie for your company.

At the beginning of the year, I urge you to sit down and create an annual marketing plan with either monthly or quarterly promotions outlined in advance. Having creative promotions outlined is more important than having a lot of cash for your promotions.

Your marketing plan should also include an analysis of potential threats in the marketplace. For example, the current economic challenges can actually present opportunities as clients are stressed about finances. It's important to craft a marketing message that speaks to the needs of your consumers. Attract clients by putting together a campaign to address their needs. For example, you can provide a workshop on stress management or help clients empower themselves by bringing an image consultant into the spa for an informative session on how the right clothes can help them present a more powerful image while job hunting or competing for business.

It is also very important to identify your target market. You may think that your target market is everyone, though when you put some thought and research into it, you'll most likely discover that instead, it's a very specific niche. Is your primary market women between the ages of 35 and 45? Or, could your targets be men and women with children? Perhaps you do have both markets. Determine your primary and secondary markets and then allocate your marketing dollars accordingly.

When marketing your spa, you need to take this target market research into consideration and craft messages that appeal to those particular individuals. For example, women are emotional buyers. We buy on our feelings and we are more complicated than men when it comes to what triggers us to make a purchase. "The Female Brain" is a book that I highly recommend for spa professionals who are creating marketing campaigns. This book enables you to get into a woman's head and heart providing you with ideas for developing more attractive programs and services, as well as for crafting more effective marketing messages.

Once you identify your target markets, the next step is to develop both internal and external business strategies. Examples of internal marketing strategies include:

- Newsletters
- Offering complimentary services to promote therapists and treatment offerings

- Educating your consumer on the benefits of the spa experience, how it benefits your lifestyle, etc. This can be done through your newsletter, informational pieces in the spa, an educational section on your Web site, etc.

External marketing techniques are those that are conducted outside of the spa and the spa's existing clientele. These include:

- Participation in community events
- Direct mail pieces and post cards
- Participation in Philanthropic and community events
- Public relations

Partnering with another local business during an event is a great and inexpensive external marketing strategy. For example, there might be a signing at the local bookseller with a line of people waiting to get their book signed. This is a great opportunity for a chair massage therapist to promote the spa as well as sign people up for a contest for a prize to help you build a mailing list.

Question 2: When implementing a new marketing strategy into a small spa business, how much time should be allotted for a positive result before switching to a new strategy?

This actually depends upon the strategy. One key consideration is whether you are promoting a new or existing spa business. For example, if a new, small spa business invests in television or radio advertisements, it is tough to track the direct ROI in terms of the number of people booking services as a result of the ad campaign. However, television and radio can be a powerful means for building brand awareness. You may not get an immediate call to action, but in a few months or even a year from now when a consumer needs to purchase a gift certificate, they may remember your business. Billboards also build brand awareness and should be placed three to six months prior to opening a spa.

Once a spa is established and consumers associate the business with quality and exceptional service, billboards and radio/TV ads are probably not going to be as effective. Promotions that are focused on discounts/specials sent via direct mail and/or e-mail tend to yield better results.

Another powerful tool can be public relations (PR) in the community and region through media outreach programs. PR creates awareness and builds your brand and reputation. I often recommend PR instead of buying advertisements. Let me explain; when a spa places an advertisement, the consumer expects the business to claim they are the best, so the reader might be skeptical as to the actual quality of service. However, with PR, someone else gives an objective opinion after having participated in a service or using a particular product, which is a far more powerful type of marketing.

With that said, is it better to spend money on PR or direct advertising? The only way to know if your marketing is working is by tracking your endeavors. Always ask your guests how they learned about your services. With promotional mail and e-mail campaigns you can require individuals to bring the e-letters or cards in when booking featured specials, which will help you gauge effectiveness. Last but not least, regularly survey your customers on their knowledge of your services and specials.

Question 3: What are the best ways that a smaller spa on a limited budget can brand itself to compete with the larger corporate spas?

Focus on your strengths. Smaller spas can offer a more personalized service at a higher level of quality than larger spas simply because of their volume of clients. This personalized, higher level of quality makes a great marketing message.

Smaller spas have the luxury of extending treatment times a bit in order to spend more time with guests or to educate them on home care products or services. Smaller facilities can also offer more personalized care by sending clients thank you notes, birthday and anniversary cards and taking note of clients' likes and dislikes.

If a client likes a particular brand of tea, make sure you have it in stock and prepare a cup for her before she requests one. Anticipate your guests' needs. If you have a male client who comes in for a weekly massage and he mentions he is preparing for a big sales presentation, ask him how it went during his next visit. You might also send him home with a sample of energizing aromatherapy to help him "power up" before the event. Exceptional personalized service can be one of the most effective ways towards building a brand. You won't have to do anything except wait for your clients to spread the word for you.

When branding a spa, it is also important to understand why some clients go to larger spas and why others visit smaller spas. People going to day spas are looking for results and maintenance. If your products and services don't produce visible results, you'll have a tough time maintaining clients. Clients that visit resort and hotel spas are generally going with relaxation in mind. They know they won't be able to eliminate acne or get rid of cellulite during their vacation. So, services focused on relaxation and pampering are generally desired in this setting.

Question 4: If a small spa identifies a main competitor in its marketplace do you recommend copying its marketing strategies or going in a completely different direction?

Don't ever copy. If you copy someone else, not only does it show a lack of creativity, but also there is nothing to differentiate your company. However, you can and should emulate the strengths of your competition. You'll also want to find out what they are not doing right, make sure that you are doing it right and then build your marketing message around those points. That is much more powerful than copying your competition.

Question 5: What would be the number one marketing strategy that you would always recommend because it has been proven to give results?

Every business is a little bit different and what works for one doesn't necessarily work for another. However, I do recommend creating a discount campaign on a quarterly basis. Customer rewards programs or loyalty programs, such as punch cards, usually provide results too. Online gift certificate sales are also great for smaller spas and have proven effective for every spa where I've seen them offered.