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## *A professional marketing plan saves money, produces results*

BY RANDYE SPINA

**Y**ou answer the phone and a very friendly voice introduces himself and tells you about an advertising opportunity you just can't pass up.

"It's a fantastic opportunity to market your business," he says. Hmmm, how does he know this?

Better yet, do you know how to market your business?

All too often when I review a company's marketing efforts I see a pattern of haphazardly pieced together one-off attempts that produce lackluster results, if any.

Here are some examples:

A company whose target is single-family homeowners spent more than \$11,000 in coupon advertising trying different ZIP code configurations and different offers. A valiant effort, but sorely misspent marketing dollars. Why? The coupons are mailed to single-family homeowners – as well as apartment dwellers and condo owners who have no use for his services. Bottom line: a dismal return on investment.

Another spent her entire marketing budget of \$40,000 on local TV ads. She was told she would reach her target market using a "full coverage" approach. Thinking this would be her ticket to launch the business, she went full steam ahead. Not a good idea. Why? The ad lacked any call to action and, worst of all, was full of features, not benefits. Bottom line: no more budget to spend on anything else and the ad failed to deliver a significant revenue stream to this new business.

Another person launched an online retail business. A friend referred a Web designer who would give him a good price. What he didn't know is he would be the guinea pig for the Web designer's own new business. The site is a colossal failure. Why? The designer didn't have the depth or breadth of experience to recommend solutions tailored to this business owner's needs and in an effort to impress him, installed the first adequate solution he could find. Bottom line: more than \$10,000 spent, with \$0 in sales in the site's first year.

Society has evolved into a world of "order takers" rather than consultative professionals and unless you know exactly how to evaluate these opportunities, you too could fall victim to wasted marketing dollars.

So, how does this happen? It's easy when a well-meaning business owner doesn't have any marketing experience or a solid strategic marketing plan (including a detailed budget) to use as a guide to make decisions.

Here are some tips to prevent this from happening to you. Remember though, it is possible this could indeed be a fantastic marketing opportunity for your business so listen to what the company's representatives say. However, also be sure to:

- Ask for a press kit that details their target demographic. If their customer demographic is too different from yours, it will be a waste of your marketing dollars. If their publication is too new to have a handle on this, politely ask them to follow up with you after they've been around a while and can be sure they're in sync with your target market.

- Be cautious of anyone telling you this

opportunity's deadline is in a few days. This means they're desperately trying to fill dead space. Do not be pressured into making a quick decision that may not benefit you.

- Ask for references. You won't get references from unhappy customers, but if you ask the right questions you can get behind the mask they may put up (approach this in the same way you would if calling a potential employee's job references). Any company that won't provide references is not worth investing your marketing dollars in.

- For coupons or print ads ask if category exclusivity is possible. This will almost never be offered outright but can be had if you ask for it. Depending on your industry it may not be possible. For example, this is never doable in the restaurant category since consumers frequent many different types of restaurants, so if you're a deli and want the exposure anyway, be sure to make an offer that beats your competitors in the same media. However, if your business is less frequently used, such as plumbing, ask for category exclusivity. After all, how many plumbers does someone need?

In the end it all comes down to this: Do you have a marketing plan that includes a budget? Investing some time and energy and a modest budget to create a professionally developed marketing plan is one of the best moves you can make. In the long run, you will save money and produce results to drive revenue to your bottom line.

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