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Once is not enough – Selling Frequency

Like any sales person, I hate to hear a prospect tell me “NO”. But, I’d much rather hear an outright “NO”, than have someone tell me, “I’ll try an ad and if I get some business, we’ll take it from there.” I prefer the “NO” because I will have a chance to sell that customer another day. The “buy AN ad” response is a trap that sets me up for long term failure. In most cases, a “one shot” program will not produce noticeable results. One of the most challenging objections to overcome is, “I tried advertising in the past and it didn’t work.” When I probe these prospects further, almost always I find that when they “tried advertising,” they had run just one or two ads. This would be equivalent to taking a dip in the pool once or twice a year and then being surprised when you don’t make the Olympic Swim Team. To be successful a sales person needs to sell their prospects on the benefits of advertising frequently.

Elements of effective advertising programs

There are three components of an effective advertising program: Reach, Frequency and Message. Reach is easy to understand, advertisers know they must get their name in front of a potential customer if they want a chance to sell them. Likewise, they must reach these people with a compelling message that will entice them to patronize the advertiser’s business. The importance of reach and message are relatively easy to explain. Maps and spec ads provide tangible examples of these aspects of a well-crafted advertising program. The importance of consistent advertising is much harder to demonstrate because frequency does its work inside the human brain.

Why TOMA matters

Advertising sales people have talked about TOMA (Top Of Mind Awareness) for many years. Recent psychological and economic research has explained the mechanism behind this concept. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann stated that, “Familiarity is a pre-condition of trust.” Researchers found that the more familiar a person is with a firm, the more likely they are to make a purchase from that firm. One of the senior reps that I work with tells his customers, “My job is to make you famous.” Frequent advertising does just this. By staying in front of the customer, a business makes their name familiar to potential customers. When making a buying decision, consumers prefer to spend their money with a company whose name they know and therefore, trust.

The thin market – I’ll be right here when you need me

America is the land of the microwave pancake. We are an impatient people. Consumer research has found that most sales are made within 24 hours of the

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decision to buy. Another 25% of sales are made within a week of the decision to buy. This means 75% of sales are made within 7 days of the moment when a consumer decides to make that purchase. If a consumer decides they need a pair of shoes in a week when Jones's Shoe doesn't advertise and Smith's Shoes runs a sale, guess who gets the business?

The "Thin Market Concept" describes the distribution of sales throughout a certain period of time, a year for most products, shorter for seasonal items. For example, if consumers in a certain market purchase 200 washing machines in a year, appliance dealers in that area will sell about 4 machines per week. If an advertiser decides to skip just one week per month, and taking consumer behavior into account, they will miss the opportunity to make 48 sales (12 weeks X 4 machines per week). These opportunities can never be recovered. In addition to the lost revenue, these businesses have lost the chance to build a relationship with a new customer. The "Thin Market" highlights the risks businesses take when they do not advertise consistently.

The sale is in the eye of the beholder

I work with an advertiser whose ad is virtually invisible to most of my readers. He runs a large display program 52 weeks a year, but most people simply don't notice his ad. This customer owns a business that specializes in emergency water heater replacement. He doesn't care that most people pay no attention to his ad, because he knows that it screams at the people who need his service. Neuroscientists have named this phenomenon "Reticular Activation", after the reticular cortex in the brain. The job of the reticular cortex is to protect the brain from information overload. To make sense of a complex world, our brains are conditioned to filter out all but the most interesting and important data. This is why if you decide to buy a Honda Civic, suddenly you start seeing Civics everywhere. By advertising consistently, my plumber customer made sure people would have access to his ad when they needed him.

Selling frequency

As a sales manager, I also told my reps that I never wanted them to sell "An ad." I wanted my people to always sell programs. Even a fire hall advertising their annual carnival benefits from frequency. They can generate interest in their event by running a series of ads in the weeks leading up to the event. I encouraged my reps to refuse single ads. This is not easy for a commissioned rep to do, but it is in their best interest. Consistent advertising produces results and leads to solid customer relationships. Here are some ideas to help you sell advertisers programs that will make them (and their rep) successful.

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- Think contract from the 1st contact – When approaching new prospects plan to sell them a program. Build your presentation around the benefits of consistent advertising.
- Get the client thinking long-term – When probing for information ask the prospect about their goals and long-term plans. Ask them where they want the business to be in 5 or 10 years and what must happen for them to achieve their goals. This will put them in the right frame of mind to discuss long-term advertising.
- Don't take the quick sale – As discussed above, customers who run an ad now and then are unlikely to get measurable results. If a customer suggests doing this, defend your program recommendation. Concentrate your efforts on building your territory, not on making a quick sale. This will pay dividends in the long run.
- To sell a program, plan a program – Develop a marketing plan for your prospect. Talk to them about different approaches for different aspects of their business. Talk to them about how to promote their business in different seasons. This approach will help them see the benefits of long-term programs.
- Advertising agreements are more than a discount – If your publication offers a discount to advertisers for making a commitment, do not try to sell the program on price. Position the program based on the benefits of consistent advertising. If the customer is not totally sold on the value of the program, it is not likely that the discount will motivate them. If the focus is on simply saving money, they can accomplish this by simply cutting back on their advertising.
- Manage the customer's expectations – Don't promise the customer immediate results, remind them that they are building a program that will produce long term results. Stay close to the customer and help them develop their ads and reassure them that they made the right decision. One of my reps tells a customer not to expect any increase in business for three months. When advertisers begin getting results in a month or so they are pleasantly surprised.

Be committed to selling advertising commitments

Selling long-term programs is always difficult; the recession has made this even more challenging. In an uncertain economy customers are nervous about making a commitment. The key to overcoming this objection is reminding the

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customer that they committing to the success of their business. Business owners have already made many commitments; they have financial commitments, commitments to their suppliers and to their employees. Committing to an advertising program is a minor commitment which protects all of their other commitments.

As a professional advertising sales person my job is to help my customers to be successful. My training and my experience tells me that the best way to help my customers is to keep them in front of their customers. Selling ads is easy; selling advertising programs requires a professional. Professionals must sometimes tell people things they don't want to hear, but need to hear. Professionals help people understand what is best for them. We show our commitment to our customers by convincing them to commit to their own futures. I'll finish with the words of Edwin L. Artzt, CEO of Proctor & Gamble, "No company that sells products or services to the consumer can remain a leader in its field without a deep-seated commitment to advertising."

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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