



Communication Basics Can Help Businesses Connect

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Technology has multiplied the ways companies can communicate with clients and customers, making marketing, advertising and public relations decisions all the more complicated. Which type of communication will connect a company to clients and customers most cost effectively? Business owners and managers can maximize their communication budgets by knowing a few basics.

While communication is a topic that Focus has covered in the past, technology has expanded our options and at the same time made it much easier to spend money uselessly – thus it's important to continue to keep effective communication tips top of mind and as small business owners, realize the pros and cons of the various types of communication while at the same time managing the “zig and zag” of weighing many other opportunities for our businesses.

1. Advertising, marketing and public relations are not synonymous.

In this era of “integrated marketing” the three often overlap and can be confusing, but they each have a different role and can accomplish very different goals. Advertising is the best understood since most people are bombarded by it daily. Yet it will not work for every business. Very simply, advertising is purchased visibility in newspapers, on television and radio, on web pages or in outdoor formats such as billboards and bus cards. The advertiser controls the message and seeks to create action by potential customers. The ability to select from such a wide array of formats allows any organization to target its audience, however, care must be taken to be sure dollars are not wasted on a particular medium that will not deliver the desired audience.

2. Marketing involves activities or efforts outside of the advertising realm that draw clients or customers to a product or service.

Marketing is distinguished from advertising in that it reaches out to specific populations through mediums outside of the paid advertising arena. It may include product sample distribution, a complimentary service to acquaint a potential customer with the company or social media efforts to build awareness with potential customers.

3. Public relations, perhaps the least understood, is a process in which particular publics or audiences are provided information designed to educate them, change their behavior or persuade them to support a specific issue.

Public relations activities are generally not used to influence direct sales of a product or service, as are advertising and marketing; however, PR activities may improve the public's understanding of a company, which could indirectly impact its sales. Public relations programs are often confused with publicity efforts because practitioners often work through the news media to carry a message to specific audiences. Giving reporters and editors background information, interviews with sources and additional in-depth facts all help make media coverage more complete and accurate. Beyond the media, public relations efforts continue with well targeted communication

designed to reach a specific audience of stakeholders or constituents. Public relations is all about public relationships, not simply publicity.

4. Making decisions about where to put marketing dollars requires an understanding of your client or customer base and the type of communication that will produce the best results.

Is yours a service business with a broad array of potential clients or a more narrow, well-defined customer base? Do you sell a product to a wide variety of customers or is your product of use to only a particular category of the population? Do your clients come to you directly or is there usually a referral source as a middleman? Before deciding where to allocate your budget, evaluate your customers by segment and determine the most direct channel to reach them.

5. Research can make any marketing, advertising or public relations program more effective.

Prior to launching marketing and communication efforts, it's often the larger organizations that spend money on research, while smaller companies with smaller budgets consider it a luxury they can't afford. Yet, even informal, inexpensive research can help the smallest businesses improve their communication with customers and clients. Research need not be slick and sophisticated in order to yield valuable intelligence a business can use to improve itself. Quick surveys by phone or using electronic tools such as SurveyMonkey.com, small focus groups and even feedback from employees can offer much if companies are willing to listen. Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools can generate feedback and provide a window to learn what customers think about your product or service.

6. What a company says about itself in its advertising, marketing and public relations is less important than what its employees and customers say about the company.

The image you build for your organization in advertising will pale in comparison to the experience your customers have first hand or the information they glean from your employees. Pay attention to the intangibles that drive customer satisfaction – employee morale and engagement with customers, quick attention to customer feedback, service that values the customers' time over the employees.

7. A slow economy is not the time to cut communication with customers and clients.

Instead, businesses need to be even more aggressive and focused in their marketing, advertising and public relations efforts. Those who stay on course are more likely to stay in front of their competition when the economy begins to bounce back. As small businesses struggle to communicate effectively in a higher tech world, a few communication basics can help owners and managers sort through the many options now available in our constantly communicating society.

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