

Starting Smart

This is the time of the year when you should be thinking about sales forecasts and marketing budgets. At least, that's true for those of you who operate on a January-December accounting year. But I'm not going to badger you today about the wisdom of this sort of planning. I've talked with enough printers to know that the smart ones already do it, and most of the others don't read these articles anyway.

What I do want to talk about today is how you will spend the money you budget for marketing and promotion. I have some thoughts on how you should apply your marketing resources to the situation you find yourself in as this year comes to a close.

Ending On An Upswing

If you're coming to the end of a good year of business, first of all, congratulations! That's something only a relatively small percentage of printers will be able to say. Your challenge for the immediate future is to keep the momentum going. In that situation, a program of "maintenance" marketing is indicated.

Let's say you've budgeted \$12,000 for marketing and promotion next year. I'd break that up into fairly equal chunks—\$1000 per month, or \$3000 per quarter—and plan programs and activities to expend the money at that consistent rate.

(Please don't read anything into that \$12,000 figure, it's only a convenient number to divide. I feel I should point that out, though, because I'm often asked "how much should a printer my size be spending on marketing and promotion?" There is no single "right" amount for a printer of any size, whether you're talking about dollars or percentage.)

Ending On A Downswing

What if last year was *not* a good year? Your guiding principle should be that you want to make things change, and you want to make them change *fast!* In that situation, you should spend the largest part of your marketing and promotional budget in the early part of the year to try to *create* some momentum.

With that same \$12,000, I'd plan programs and activities that would put \$6000-\$8,000 of it to work in the first quarter, and most of the rest of it to work in the second quarter. I'd do it that way even if I had to borrow the money to do things that cash flow alone wouldn't allow.

That's not what usually happens, though, is it? The typical printer coming off a bad year starts out slowly with marketing and promotion. And then, when things don't improve, he probably cuts it out altogether. This *self-fulfilling prophecy* has been all too common in the printing industry, especially during the last few years.

What Activities

So what do I think you should do with your marketing and promotional money? What activities will guarantee success? That's too broad a question to cover in a single column. (And of course, as much as I'd like to be able to give you guarantees, I haven't found anything yet in printing marketing that works *every time*.)

But here are a couple of quick thoughts. If my need were for "maintenance" marketing and promotion, I would do things that stressed image and capabilities. I'd design a series of ads or mailers to go out to customers and prospects alike, each one demonstrating a different service or capability. That would tell my story to prospects, and reinforce my relationship with existing customers, reminding them of all of the things I'm capable of doing for them.

If my need were to build business fast, I would do things intended specifically to start the process of gaining new customers. I'd design a mailer with a response card that said "send this card back if you'd like me to call you for an appointment to talk about your printing needs." Then I'd send out *lots* of those mailers.

This kind of marketing is a numbers game, but if a few thousand cards generated 30-40 responses that turned into 3-4 new customers in the first few months of the year, I'd consider that a good start.

I'll write more about allocating your marketing resources in the next several months. For today, I hope I've given you something to think about as you start a new year.