

## It's All About The Plan!

In last month's column, I wrote that you should be talking with your customers right now about their goals for next year, because those goals are the starting point for their eventual marketing plan—and you want to be part of that plan! “Eventual” is a key word here, though, because it's been my experience that lots of business people talk about creating a marketing plan, but few of them actually do it. So this is an area where a “marketing consultant” can be of great value.

Please note that I used the lower case on those two words. I'm not suggesting that “Marketing Consultant” becomes your title. I am suggesting that “marketing consultant” becomes part of your role as a print salesperson or Marketing Services Provider.

### Building A Plan

OK, why is there so much more talk than action when it comes to creating a marketing plan? I've actually asked many small-to-medium-sized business owners and managers that question, and the answers have been pretty consistent. I've either heard some variation on “it's hard to find the time,” or some variation on “I don't know where to start.”

I think you can bring value by reinforcing the importance of *making* the time to do things that are really important. But you might bring even more value by saying “I can help you to get started!” And here's how you do that. Simply explain that a marketing plan is really only the answers to three questions: (1) Where are we now? (2) Where do we want to be? And (3) How will we get there?

### Situation Analysis

The first question calls for a situation analysis. *Where are we now* in terms of what the company sells, who it sells it to, trends in the marketplace, strengths and weaknesses and competitive issues. As a marketing consultant (lower case), you don't have to know those things, you just have to lead the conversation. And that's a key point. If you're capable of leading this discussion—just asking the right questions!—you will probably sound like you know what you're talking about. That becomes especially important when you get to the third stage of the conversation.

But still in the first stage, I hope you'll see how this conversation might progress. You ask: “What do you sell?” They answer: “We sell widgets.” You ask: “Do you fit a specific niche within the widget universe?” They answer: “We sell mostly medium-sized widgets to doctors' offices.” You ask: “Could you also manufacture or source small widgets and large widgets?” The answer: “Yes.” You ask: “Could you also sell the medium-sized widgets to dentists and veterinarians?” They say: “We never have, but we probably could.” You say: “That gives us some things to talk about when we get to the next stage of this plan, but let's keep talking about what, who, etc. What sort of trends are you seeing in the marketplace for medium-sized widgets?”

It may be helpful to start this conversation by telling your customer that you're going to ask some very basic questions, including some that you think you know the answers to. “I want to hear *your* thoughts,” you might say, “on the most basic issues, because we're building *your* marketing plan. The better I understand where you are and where you want to be, the more likely it is that I can help you to get there.”

### How To Get There

I bet you already have some thoughts on how a typical customer might generate more revenue. Direct mail is a common strategy, with proven results in everything from fundraising to increasing retail or commercial sales to membership development and retention. And you may well have ideas on how to improve the performance of a customer's direct mail, ranging from better design to a better message to a better mailing list. These are things that print salespeople have talked about for years, though they barely scratch at the surface of the broad range of Marketing Services you might eventually provide.

Depending on how long you're planning on staying in the printing industry, becoming a marketing consultant is somewhere between an opportunity and a necessity. Actually, I should probably say that a bit differently. It all depends on how long you'll be staying in the *communication* industry, because that's what we are. Think of it as the *print* segment of the *communication* industry, and I think you'll have it exactly right.

So maybe half of the lesson for today is to start building your own marketing plan. Where are you now? Where do you want to be? How will you get there?