Let's Talk About Marketing, Advertising and Promotion

Here are two important questions regarding your marketing program. First, what exactly are you doing to advertise and promote your company? Second, what exactly do you want that activity to do for you?

I have some thoughts to share on what I think you can and should be doing in terms of advertising and promotion, but first, we may need to talk about the second question. Because it's been my experience that many printers' marketing plans are flawed by a misunderstanding of the roles of advertising and promotion in their businesses.

Let's start with some definitions. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *advertising* as "the action of calling something to the attention of the public, especially by paid announcements." My own definition is that advertising — especially *good* advertising — creates visibility for your company, by telling people what you sell and why they should buy it from you. Visibility is a key concept. One of my old mentors used to say that you have to be seen before you can expect to be heard. We talk a lot about *branding* today, and that's also a key concept, but it's important to understand that visibility and branding don't have a chicken-or-egg relationship. Visibility must come first, otherwise all the branding in the world won't get you where you want to go.

Visibility is not just a matter of keeping your name in front of your customers, though, and that seems to be the advertising goal of most of the printers I talk to. My objection to that goal starts with the definition of the word *customer*. The same Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *customer* as "one that purchases a commodity or service," but I think we would all be better served with a more restrictive definition — "one that purchases a commodity or service *from us!*"

If they buy your product or service from someone else, they're that someone else's customer. For you, they're no more than a prospect, and maybe not even that.

Suspects, Prospects, Etc.

I have written in the past that there are four kinds of people on the buying side of the printing sales equation: suspects, prospects, customers and maximized customers. The way the progression works is that they're suspects when you think they might be prospects, but you can only call them prospects when you know for sure that they qualify. They become customers when they're actually buying from you, and maximized customers when you're getting maximum value from the customer relationship.

What does "qualify" mean? In order to call someone a prospect, you have to know — not just think or hope! — that they buy, want or need what you sell, with enough volume potential to make pursuing them worthwhile, and that they have some real interest in buying from you.

Here's how that relates to advertising. Each of these four categories requires a separate and distinct message. It still starts with what you sell and why you think they should buy it from you. But beyond that, the suspect message is *are you at all interested in any of this*? The prospect message is, *c'mon, please give us a try*. The customer message is *please buy from us again, and while you're at it, please try some of our other products and/or services.* And if we're talking about truly maximized customers, the only relevant message is *thank you!*

What I'm really trying to say here is that there's no "one-size-fits-all" solution for advertising and promoting a printing company, but too many printers seem to be attempting to do just that. "Keeping your name in front of your customers" doesn't cut it on any level

Into The Store

In the retail world, it might be accurate to define and state the goal of advertising a little differently. Adding on to the dictionary definition, retail advertising is "the action of calling something to the attention of the public, especially by paid announcements, *for the express purpose of getting them into the store.*" Why do you want them in the store? Duh, so you can sell to them!

Granted, while a printing company may have a retail presence, you don't really run a store. But think about this, in the modern world, a "store" is no longer defined by bricks-and-mortar. Amazon is the world's third largest retailer, and their "store" is a website. I maintain that your website is also a store, and if you can get people into that store, you can sell to them — especially if you embrace my definition of selling, which is "to help people to make the decision to buy from you."

Think about that. A website is an ideal canvas for the educational component of good advertising, a place to describe what you sell, using both text and images. It is also ideal for the initial stage of the convincing component,

a place to present the reasons you think people should buy from you — which, by the way, should include everything from your own value statement to testimonials from happy customers. Beyond that, a well-designed and highly functional website can support all four category messages, suspect, prospect, customer *and* maximized customer. E-commerce and web-to-print capabilities can even allow you to "close the sale."

All of this adds up, I hope, to the understanding that your website should be the center of your overall marketing program. Now all we have to do is get people into your "store." OK, let's advertise and promote *to that specific purpose*, not just to "keep your name" in front of customers.

Advertising Options

In this modern world, you have two main advertising options. One is to identify "likely suspects" and invite or incentivize them to take the next step. The other is to make yourself easier to find when those suspects go looking for you. Direct mail has huge possibilities for the former, and Search Engine Optimization is the key to the latter, with Social Media offering possibilities on both ends of the scale.

For most "small format" printers, direct mail is both a product and an advertising media. I think it's interesting that very few printers make full use of the product's capability. Many printers actively sell what they call "variable data printing," but not many actually use it for their own advertising — other than printing "variable" address data on each piece.

For what it's worth, I don't like the term "variable data printing." I don't like *any* jargon that a buyer may not fully understand. Beyond that, it's not really *data* we're talking about, it's *personalization*, and digital printing provides us with what I like to call *extreme personalization* capabilities. Driven by a database, each piece in a print run can be modestly or totally different — different words *and* images.

Case Study

Let's consider a printing company which has a database of 2500 records. Of these, 500 are actual customers and 50 of those are truly maximized customers. Another 100 are fully qualified prospects, who've been engaged and are showing real interest, but they have not yet placed an order. Further, this company's product line has five main components: wall graphics, floor graphics, window graphics, vehicle graphics and retractable banners/stands.

This company has used direct mail in the past, most recently by creating a series of five post cards, each one featuring one of its five main products. Over the course of a full year, they sent each postcard out twice to each of the 2500 records in the database, at roughly 5 week intervals. The message was "We Sell A! (or B or C or D or E), Call us if you need any!"

That's a more-or-less appropriate message for the 1900 *suspects* in the database, although I would suggest two important modifications. It's not the best message for the other 600, the *prospects* who need to be motivated to place that first order, the *customers* who need to be educated about other products, and the *maximized customers* who must already be educated and motivated because they're already buying everything they're ever likely to buy from this printing company.

Here's how I would change the *suspect* message. Rather than featuring different products on each card, I would combine them all on a single card. *"We Sell Graphics! Whether you use them on your walls, your floors, your windows, your vehicles or anywhere else!"* And I would change the "call to action" to an invitation to visit the company's website, where I would provide more information on each of the products along with contact information *and* a way to take the next step online if they're not ready or willing to pick up the phone and make a call.

Here's how I would change the *prospect* message. I would turn the postcard into a coupon, redeemable for some percentage of discount or some number of dollars or some other incentive to take the next step and place that first order. Remember, we're talking about *qualified prospects* here, not raw suspects. Your challenge is to create a tipping point, and that takes us to role of *promotion* in your marketing plan. Advertising tells them what you sell and why in general you think they should buy from you. The role of promotion is to give them an incentive to act *now*.

Not For Everybody

Here's an important distinction. I think you should *promote* to your prospects and customers, but not to your suspects and maximized customers. With your maximized customers you shouldn't have to "buy" their business. I have no problem with anything you might do to show appreciation for their business, but that's *gifting*, not *promotion*. And please consider whether any *gifting* — beyond remembering to say "thank you" and consistently meeting or exceeding their quality and service expectations — is really necessary. If it is, you should do it. If not, it drains profitability, just like any other dollar you don't really need to spend.

With your suspects, I prefer to *invite* them to take the next step rather than *incentivizing* them. That's also about maximizing profitability, at least partially, but it's also about marketing to the right kind of buyers. Do you really want customers who will buy from you only when you give them a discount, or would you prefer to attract new

customers for all of those "other" reasons you think they should buy from you? Let's say that an "invitation" mailing to 1900 suspects will bring 95 of those suspects to your website. Is there any reason to believe that a "promotion" mailing, offering, say, a 20% discount on their first order, would generate significantly more response? If you'll indulge me in a fishing analogy, this is really about catching the kind of fish you really want to catch, and the bait you use has some bearing on who will bite.

Marketing To Customers

Here's how I would change the *customer* message. Let's go back to the five main components of this fictional printing company's product line: wall graphics, floor graphics, window graphics, vehicle graphics and retractable banners/stands. As a first step, I would evaluate each customer to determine which of these categories they're already buying. As a second step, I would modify the original set of postcards so that each card now included a coupon or some other incentive to try its product. As the third step, I would devise a schedule by which I'd *promote* each of these products to the customers who are not currently buying them, combining an educational component and an incentive component to communicate a complete customer message: *please buy from us again, and while you're at it, please try some of our other products and/or services*.

Now let's look back at each of these 2500 piece mailings. Driven by a database — which needs to identify suspects, prospects, customers and maximize customers *and* which products each customer is currently not buying — 1900 pieces would be personalized to the suspect message, 100 to the prospect message, 500 to one of the customers messages and 50 to the maximized customer message. I hope you'll agree that this is better advertising strategy than any "one-size-fits-all" attempt.

Final Thought

Here's a final thought to pull all of this together. Your overall marketing plan should probably have six main components:

1. A well-designed, highly functional, e-commerce-capable website
2. Internet advertising to get people to your website/into the store
3. Traditional advertising to get people to your website/into the store
4. Consistent sales/prospecting activity
5. Consistent sales/customer maximization activity
6. The willingness and ability to follow up on inquiries and close the sale

If you're doing all of that consistently, you should be pretty well positioned for growth in the years to come!