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Monthly

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the Growing Business

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DECEMBER 2009

Grab Their Attention

4 guerilla marketing ideas to get through to consumers



With the economy seemingly stalled, and the vaunted recovery yet to be felt on Main Street, growing businesses continue to find ways to stand out. Guerilla marketing — employing nontraditional, sometimes provocative, methods to reach customers and prospects — has earned a lot of attention, though some of the novelty is wearing off. “People barely sneeze at

a stunt now, there’s so much going on,” points out Judith Lederman of [JSL Publicity and Marketing](#) in New Rochelle, N.Y. “Focusing people has become a challenge.”

We spoke with some marketing experts working in the field to find out which affordable guerilla marketing techniques actually get results. These four ideas can help you get through to consumers — online and off — who are looking for the products or solutions your business offers.

1. Give them something to remember you by. One surefire way to get attention is to give away something for free. That doesn’t necessarily mean you have to spend big money on items stamped with your company name. You can place your business firmly in the minds of your target customers by offering a free tutorial or workshop. Whether yours is a service business, such as home contracting or appliance repairs, or a retailer selling specialized items like imported wines and foods, this approach gives you the opportunity to position yourself as a knowledgeable expert.

If you choose this method, it’s important that you provide a true service and not make the event about selling, says Mary White, training coordinator with the [Mobile Technical Institute \(MTI\)](#), an Alabama company that provides business and computer training. She says her company conducted a free workshop for job seekers to help them get the skills they need. Because MTI’s clients are companies and not

ONLINE ADVERTISING

Follow the Playbook

Online advertising continues to befuddle many marketers and business owners, despite a decade’s worth of experimentation. To help clear up the confusion, Joe Plummer, coauthor of [The Online Advertising Playbook](#), offers these tips:

- **Target the right consumers.** Getting as much demographic, geographic, and buying history information about your target audience as possible can help you create innovative, cost-effective messages that connect.
- **Don’t recycle your offline ad.** Online advertising has introduced entirely new criteria for creating fresh ads. Rich media, video, games, and other new creative forms can positively impact branding and advertising effectiveness.
- **Streamline the shopping and buying process.** Research shows that most shoppers conduct some sort of research before they make an online or offline purchase. The key to capturing buyers during their search is creating a user-friendly, action-driven experience with minimal hassle.

job seekers, the event generated positive publicity for providing a public service. White says it also increased business, since hiring companies wanted to be involved.

2. Join the discussion. There’s a lot of buzz in business about social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (see sidebar, left). But Shel Horowitz, owner of [FrugalMarketing.com](#) and the author of six books on ethical marketing, is a big proponent of a more old-fashioned

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GET MORE SOCIAL

For businesses serving a very limited area or clientele, smart social marketing can be a huge boon. Judith Lederman of [JSL Publicity and Marketing](#) cites two examples: [Cupcake Stop](#) sells its wares out of a truck in New York. Each day, a Twitter feed tells fans where the truck will be stopped and what flavors are available.

[Garrett Popcorn](#), a Chicago company, surprises Twitter followers with a free popcorn gift. “We’ll pick folks out on an occasional basis and say ‘Thanks for your support,’” says Alicia Dantico, Garrett’s director of social media.

FROM THE EDITOR

To Better Days Ahead



This past year has been a difficult one, to say the least. I've seen local businesses fold, friends lose their jobs, and families struggle to make ends

meet. But I remain optimistic about the future because of the entrepreneurial spirit that exists throughout this country. That positive spirit is reflected in the pages of *FuelNet Monthly*, through the insights and advice of business owners. I know I'm better prepared today than I was 12 months ago for the myriad challenges that lie ahead. Here are three key takeaways from 2009:

1. Show the love. The best way to compete with businesses larger than yours is by providing a higher level of customer service. For that to happen, employees at all levels must show a genuine sense of caring for customers at every touchpoint.

2. Proactively seek feedback. Before you revamp your Web site, create a new marketing campaign, or launch a new product or service, survey your customers to get straightforward feedback. If they feel they're being listened to, they will become more engaged customers.

3. Support a cause. Find a way to support the causes that are important to your community, either through an existing charity, your own branded program, or a presence at local events. Make sure the cause embodies your brand's values.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: \$97 in U.S. funds for one year (12 issues)

NEW RESEARCH

Social Media for Small Businesses

In a survey of 2,000 small business owners conducted by the research firm Internet2Go, 79% reported having an advertising budget of less than \$5,000 a year, and 44% spend less than \$1,000. It's no wonder, then, that 45% of respondents have a presence on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Unlike many other forms of online marketing, most social media sites allow you to create a page and post content for free. Social media marketing also enables enhanced communication with customers, providing a way for growing businesses to boost brand awareness, increase loyalty, and generate new business leads.

Not surprisingly, growing businesses are employing social media as a marketing tactic, given its

effectiveness in reaching consumers. A survey by Anderson Analytics found that 52% of social networking users support brands or businesses on the sites. Additionally, 46% have said something positive about a brand or company on the sites, as opposed to 23% who have said something negative. In another survey, by MarketingSherpa, 92% of marketing professionals agreed that these sites influence brand reputation, and 91% said they increase brand awareness.

Bottom line: Due to the growth of online marketing, says eMarketer senior analyst Debra Aho Williamson, "companies that want to maximize their presence on the social Web must take advantage of social networks in all stages of the purchase funnel, from awareness to learning to buying to loyalty." — Abbie Rickard

OFF PRESS

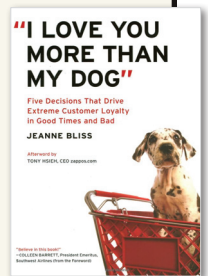
Become a Beloved Company

How do you get customers to worship your brand, to go out of their way to buy from you — and only you? "When you make decisions that respect and honor customers, you will earn their admiration, eventually even love," writes customer service pioneer Jeanne Bliss. "Then customers will begin to grow your business for you."

In her new book, *I Love You More Than My Dog: Five Decisions That Drive Extreme Customer Loyalty in Good Times and Bad*, Bliss provides insight on the five essential decisions that lead to a loyal customer fan base:

- **Decide to believe.** Believing in your customers means you trust them. By getting rid of rigid rules and policies, you will provide a more open and enjoyable experience for your customers, leading to stronger relationships.
- **Decide with clarity of purpose.** By establishing a specific culture for your business, you create the memory you want your customers to walk away with, leading to an experience they look forward to revisiting again and again.
- **Decide to be real.** Beloved companies know how to combine personal instincts with business decisions and forge personal relationships with their customers.
- **Decide to be there.** Brand loyalists return not only for quality products or services, but also for the positive experience they have with the company. Bliss says companies that support their customers in this way "earn the right for their customers to return."
- **Decide to say "Sorry."** Admitting when your company has failed and then resolving to address the problem speaks volumes about your company's humanity. Your customers not only will forgive you, but will love you even more.

— A.R.



How Can I Cut Costs and Jump-Start Sales?

A One of the most valuable things you can do as a business owner is make your employees feel like they have a stake in the company. Creating a sense of ownership among employees helps ensure an organization runs more efficiently and less expensively, which drives results. Here's how to go about it.

• **Ask staff for their opinions.** As a business grows and evolves, it needs change. Rules and regulations that were once vital may now be antiquated and even counterproductive, costing you time and money. Ask your employees the one thing they would get rid of, whether it's a policy, paperwork, your regular morning meeting, etc. Because they're in the trenches every day, they'll have a good idea of what's not working. Hearing them out may save you time and money in the end.

• **Reconsider whose money you're spending.** Or rather, have your employees reconsider whose money they're spending. Ask anybody whose money they prefer to spend

and the answer is sure to be the same: someone else's. That can be a scary thought for a business owner. While an extra \$50 a month spent on paper products may not seem like much to an employee, to the business owner, it's an extra \$600 per year that could be drawing interest in the bank. We are all much more conservative when spending our own money, and helping your employees look at the company's money as their own could save you big bucks. If they were paying for coffee cups in the break room, would they be more likely to reuse them for refills? Ask staff to be on the lookout for coupons that could help the company cut costs. By giving the people in your organization a sense of ownership over the way the money is spent, you'll open yourself up to finding new ways to cut costs.

— *Pamela Bilbrey and Brian Jones, coauthors of Ordinary Greatness: It's Where You Least Expect It ... Everywhere* (pambilbrey.com)

How Can I Boost Sales Online?

A The best way to grow your online sales is to develop a separate landing page for your products or services. A landing page continues the conversation you started with your original marketing vehicle, whether that was a direct mail postcard, billboard, door hanger, or even a TV or radio ad. Sending potential customers to your homepage adds random, unrelated information to the conversation that they probably aren't interested in. With a homepage as the entry point, you get nothing but a statistic of unique visitors, while the landing page

gives you a valuable lead — something you can follow up on.

According to recent research, landing pages can significantly increase conversion rates over homepages. More exciting is that it's not just high-end b-to-b landing pages that are posting these numbers, but entrepreneurial businesses like spas, home contractors, and lawn care companies. A landing page is the fastest, easiest, and least expensive way to maximize marketing results on the Web because you have better control over the visitor's experience, and it gives your sales staff an easy and reliable way to acquire new leads.

— *Joy Gendusa, CEO of PostcardMania* (postcardmania.com)

How Do I Avoid Email Errors?

A Emails are an extension of how you present yourself. Professionals must be especially careful in this economy

not to do anything that could cause employers or customers to question their competence or judgment. That means paying close attention when sending any kind of message. Consider these tips:

• **Respond immediately.** Let the person know when they can expect to hear back from you. Then, compose the email when you're free from distractions.

• **Type the address in last.** When writing a confidential message, wait until it's complete before carefully selecting the recipients. This will help you avoid sending out an incomplete thought or selecting the wrong recipients.

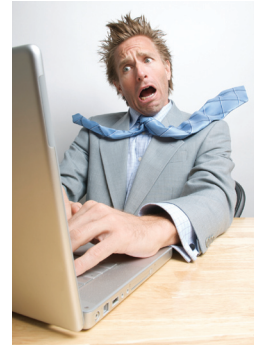
• **Use a real computer.** If it's an important message, wait until you're in the office or have a moment to take out your laptop. The small screens on smartphones can make it difficult to spot errors, and those handheld devices don't always have grammar and spell-check.

• **If you're seething, hold off on hitting "send."** Give yourself some time to cool down before responding. If it's a real issue, it may be better to meet in person anyway.

— *Megan Slabinski, executive director, The Creative Group* (creativegroup.com)

FREE FUELNET SMART PAPER

Email marketing is complex, with many choices to be made for optimum results. To harness the full power of email, download the free FuelNet Smart Paper *Email Marketing Tips to Increase Your ROI*. Or visit our site, Fuelnet.com.





MARKETING

The Secrets to a More Powerful Webinar

In a public speaking role, your goal is to deliver a specific message and make it stick with the audience. But as more businesses, in an effort to save on travel costs, shun in-person events for webinars — live presentations delivered over the Internet — how do you catch and keep listeners' attention? Here are some tips:

- **Plan your structure.** Outline your presentation on paper or a flip chart before you create the PowerPoint slides. Be sure you:
 - Introduce your objective.
 - Sell the benefits.
 - Explain the agenda and timing of your session.
 - Explain how the audience can interact with you.
- **Be more visual.** Tell stories and give examples as you go through your program, the same way you would in person. However, a webinar needs more visuals to help engage the audience. Also, don't present a list of bullet points; build up to your key takeaways. Keep the presentation simple, keep it moving, and interact often.
- **Grab the audience's attention.** Engage your audience immediately with a powerful, relevant opening. Never start by saying, "Good morning." Instead, say something like, "Welcome, you are about to learn how to ..." Keep listeners interested by selling them on how they are going to benefit. Remember, participants can't see you, so it's all too easy for them to answer their email or go get a cup of coffee.
- **Introduce yourself.** Once you have sold the session, you can introduce yourself. Do not do it first. Just as with an in-person session, start with something the listeners care about. Then they will care about who you are.
- **Play to their emotions.** Engage listeners' imaginations by involving them in your illustrative stories. Use the word "you" frequently, and answer their unspoken question, "What's in it for me?" For example: "In the next 56 minutes, you will learn the six secrets of making a webinar work."
- **Build interaction.** Be sure to stop and ask, "Based on what you have heard so far, are there any questions?"
- **Use memorable stories.** People rarely remember your exact words. Instead, they remember the mental images that your words inspire. Support your key points with vivid, relevant stories. Help listeners "make the movie" in their heads by using memorable characters, exciting situations, dialogue, and humor.
- **Use effective pauses.** Like good music, good communication contains changes of pace, pauses, and full rests. This is where your listeners think about what they have just heard. Whenever you say something that you want to stick, pause.
- **Review what you've covered.** As with an in-person presentation, always review your key ideas. Then say, "Before my closing remarks, do you have any questions?"
- **Emphasize next steps.** Be clear what listeners' next logical steps should be. Send them off energized and focused.

— Patricia Fripp, author of *Get What You Want! and Make It, So You Don't Have to Fake It!* (fripp.com)



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Get Customers to Stick with You

Countless studies show that even satisfied customers will defect in a heartbeat if they think they can get a better deal somewhere else. In today's marketplace, you have to create completely devoted customers whose loyalty can't be swayed by the competition. Here's how to go about it:

- **Take a big-picture approach.** Demonstrate how your product or service can help customers accomplish their long-term goals.
- **Be a source of intelligence.** Dedicate yourself to finding new information and insights that can help your customers succeed.
- **Know who the customer is today, not yesterday.** Your customers constantly change. You have to know how to serve your customers' current needs, not their needs from a week or a month ago.
- **Point out what an incredible deal they're getting.** How are you providing value to your customers that goes above and beyond the expected? Let them know.
- **Make it the first six weeks again.** The first six weeks of any relationship are magical. Everyone loves everyone. Gestures of appreciation are made on a regular basis. Then it gets old. Go back to those first six weeks. Make it magical again.
- **Make them tell you how to be better.** Don't ask your customers if they're happy. Ask them how you can better serve them. They'll appreciate the gesture, and you'll gain information that can lock in loyalty.
- **Have a face-to-face "thank you" session.** Don't discount the significance of expressing thanks to your customers. Tell them in person how much you appreciate their business. It could be your best insurance against defection to a competitor.

— Joe Calloway, partner, Engage Consulting Group (joecalloway.com)



BRAND BUILDING

3 Ways to Elevate a Branding Campaign

Companies want to achieve results when embarking on a branding, marketing, and advertising campaign, especially in today's rough economic climate. But creating the "it" factor that draws customers in requires a highly strategic approach. The goal when building a brand is to make it recognizable, memorable, and respected. Whether it's a Fortune 500 company or a growing business, the same rules apply.

Branding is not about stirring people into irrational buying decisions; it's about communicating the benefits and value that a business service or product provides to customers. It's a sophisticated process that combines proven techniques with creative insight. Business owners have three key tactical decisions to weigh when it comes to creating a powerful branding campaign:

1. Good branding requires a consistent voice. Think about the most recognizable advertising campaigns. They express the brand's

core values and benefits while driving home a simple and clear message. Maintaining this balance is difficult, but devoting the time, effort, and resources to fine-tune a brand's voice can make a tremendous difference to any organization's bottom line.

2. Use competitive branding as an advantage. My company, for example, recently performed a competitive analysis for Zoom Interactive Marketing, a top provider of direct mail and Web filtering services, to determine what best differentiates Zoom from others in its marketplace niche. The analysis showed that Zoom's competitors appeared to be more technically focused and serious. To help the company stand out from the crowd, Zoom's branding campaign took a contemporary, youthful approach that utilized humor.

3. Think repetition. Every branding asset a company has — including its logo, Web site, marketing materials,

and products — should work in tandem to convey the brand message. Consistency is important right down to a company's color scheme, fonts, and even familiar graphics. Studies show the typical consumer requires approximately 27 touches before brand recognition begins to build.

Many organizations feel that sitting on the sidelines and conserving resources is the best strategy for weathering the economic storm. But this is the perfect opportunity to expand your mind and market share. While competitors hibernate, proactive businesses can gain ground. By using a strategic approach that integrates the critical elements of branding, companies offering different, innovative, and captivating products and services can get the attention they're seeking to drive business.

— Scott Creamer, president and owner of the Screamer Company (screamerdesign.com)



2 Types of Referrals to Pursue

Every sales professional talks about referrals, but few actually pursue them. Referrals should be considered a by-product of excellent customer service. If you're not asking for referrals, you're only cheating yourself. There are two types of referrals you should actively pursue:

1. Client to client. This referral is typically to someone outside your customer's company. Upon making an introduction, immediately let them know that you have a successful relationship with a mutual contact, and based on your past success, the contact suggested you contact them. You are calling with the purpose of earning their business. Don't expect to have business handed to you; you have to impress the new client. Be professional and respectful. Once you have established some rapport with the new prospective client, you have to earn his or her trust.

2. Client to coworker. This requires a little more hand-holding. Your goal is to have your client champion you in other departments at his or her company, based on the added value you bring to the table. Lunch meetings or joint conference calls are great ways to get introduced. Make sure you are on your game and prepared to put your best foot forward.

— Jim Cross, author of *Bacon & Eggs: How to Be Totally Committed to Your Sales Career* (thecrosscorp.com)

BONUS TIP

Marketing slogans have long been a critical element in building brands and business, but over the past 10 years, the marketing profession has produced few memorable lines. In fact, most slogans today mean nothing and get no traction with the consumer. Here are some tips to help you create a great slogan:

- Incorporate your company name.
- Use a phrase that rings true with all employees, despite their title or skill.
- Even if you don't operate worldwide, assume you do.
- Don't create a slogan by committee.
- Once you have a slogan that is shorthand for what your company is all about, stick with it.

Gain Greater Visibility

How to improve your search engine ranking

Internet search engines are like a great PR firm: they can make your business look awfully good. But to achieve a top ranking on Google, for example, you need to understand how to optimize your Web site for search engines. It doesn't require technical expertise or a big marketing budget, but a focus on copywriting, among other tactics. "I call [SEO copywriting] one of the secret weapons to online success," says Scott Fox, author of *e-Riches 2.0*. Here are some proven techniques to improve your SEO efforts:

1 Utilize free advice. Chris Finnegan, interactive media director at [Planit](#), a Baltimore-based marketing and communications firm, highly recommends Google's SEO handbook, available as a [free download](#). Google also offers a free [keyword tool](#) to help you find relevant keywords for your business based on actual user searches.

2 Don't get too technical. According to Fox, your keywords should reflect "your audience's natural language." "Don't use industry jargon," he says, "and eliminate buzzwords and acronyms. Use the words your customers use when they research products like yours online."

3 Be the customer. Particularly in the b-to-b space, it's important to think like a buyer. That means knowing how they search and how long and how precise their keyword entries are likely to be, says Linda Rigano, executive director of strategic alliances for [ThomasNet](#), a leading industrial Web site.

4 Consistently produce new content. "Search engines comb the Internet each day looking for and indexing new content," says Carisa Miklusak, cofounder of [SoMedios](#), a social media company.

"The more content you add, the more opportunities you create for your company to be recognized by the search engines."

5 Be original. Cutting and pasting text from another source is a big no-no, contends Radha Vij, associate director at New York-based [Gutenberg Communications](#). "Instead, write copy that employs specific keywords and phrases commonly searched online." And since most online users scan copy, Vij recommends including keywords in headlines and subheads.

6 Key in on the title. The title tag, which appears at the top of the browser window, above the Web address, should include your most important keywords, says Kenneth Saunders, president of Cincinnati, Ohio-based [Search Engine Experts](#). "Many companies like to see their name in the title," he points out. In such a case, the company name should appear after the keywords.

7 Use keywords when naming your images. By doing this, says Finnegan, your site will rank higher with the search engines. "Additionally, the image files will show up in image searches," he notes.

8 Link up. Link-building with Web sites that receive a lot of traffic is especially critical to search engine success, Vij says. Get business partners, media, and friends to link to your site. The more links you have, the more likely you'll come up in a search.

9 Don't go keyword crazy. Although it may be tempting to stuff your site's content with keywords, Fox says that only creates unattractive copy for readers. "Improving your SEO won't help if the people you attract find your site unreadable," he adds.

1/2 Get users to act. "Your copy needs to conclude with a call to action that gets the reader to travel down the path you want them to," says Jean-Pierre Khoueiri, CEO of [Constant Click](#), an SEO services agency in Coral Gables, Fla.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 >

Grab Their Attention

online venue. Internet discussion groups, like those offered through Yahoo! and Google Groups, enable you to reach a highly specific audience for no cost beyond your time. "It's my number one avenue for new business," Horowitz says.

Twitter and Facebook offer limited exposure to those who have opted in, he notes, while discussion groups let anybody get involved. Establishing expertise through an active presence in a group like Google's [rec.sport.soccer](#) or [Winelover](#) on Yahoo! can be a boon to a niche business. "Even people who've never used my services but have seen my comments have sent me work," Horowitz says. "One

discussion I took part in brought in \$10,000 in business."

3. Meet the press. You don't need a big PR budget to get media outlets to help you spread the word about your offerings. Whether the right venue for your business is a neighborhood newspaper or an industry newsletter, small specialty publications are always looking for a good story that's relevant to their audience. Horowitz recommends [Help a Reporter Out](#), a free online service that connects journalists with experts in various topics. "If you can respond quickly to reporters looking for sources, you're going to get printed," he says. "I've been quoted in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*." Another site where you'll

want to sign yourself up as a resource is [ExpertClick.com](#).

4. Be the press. A more direct way to get your message out is to write articles yourself. Online directories like [ArticlesBase.com](#) and [ActiveAuthors.com](#) allow journalists to search for articles on any subject, and writers can add their articles to the database for free. Writing articles that offer helpful advice or explain a complex subject increases the likelihood that people will find your company online, MTI's White says: "The more you educate people, the more market there is for what you do." The article should be in your voice and not that of a professional copywriter. The key is to convey what your business is about. — David Plunkett

Adding Profits to the Menu

PROBLEM: Competition was taking a bite out of Michael Passalacqua's restaurant sales, and the third-generation owner of Angelo's had a lot on his plate. The restaurant's once-thriving neighborhood in Washington, Pa., had gone downhill, and a mall with a 15-screen movie theater that had opened on the edge of town was drawing away customers. Worse, within a few months, several chain restaurants, supported by national advertising and constant promotions, had opened in the area. "I knew the only way to compete was some sort of frequency marketing program," Passalacqua says.



SOLUTION: The Fast Track program from the Restaurant Marketing Group (RMG) served up the software tools, manuals, and coaching Passalacqua needed to turn things around. "It's a 90-day program that shows the owner how to improve the service cycle and use database marketing to individual customers and neighborhood businesses to make the restaurant stand out," says Ron Wilkinson, president of RMG. Key to the program is the ProfitMax database management software, which owners use to offer customers incentives around birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

Effective database marketing is a key item on the Fast Track menu, and to ensure restaurateurs make the most of it, RMG offers weekly coaching sessions from an experienced industry professional. "Coaching on how to build sales and service is the most effective part of the program," Wilkinson notes.

RMG's focused approach provided Passalacqua with the tools to build a customer database, which gave him the foundation to expand in a new location. "The database is crucial to my 'four walls' marketing approach because it keeps customers coming in," he says. "At this point I have 28,000 names in my database and 6,000 on my email list. The chains are struggling, but I'm now able to do something different."

Sing Your Way to Sales

PROBLEM: Direct response advertising doesn't easily lend itself to marketing complex products and services. So when JG Wentworth, a purchaser of long-term payment settlements, wanted to refresh its DRTV campaign and push a new branded phone number, the company faced the challenge of how to do it effectively in just 60 seconds. Wentworth's previous campaign of delivering a straightforward message using a series of spots with the same spokesman wasn't bad, but it was time for a change. The Bryn Mawr, Pa.-based company's goal was to find a way to explain — and sell — its services more effectively to a target audience completely unaware of cash option services.

SOLUTION: Instead of a spoken pitch, JG Wentworth put its message to music. With the help of Karlin+Pimsler, a New York-based creative agency that specializes in DRTV, they came up with a humorous spot based on, of all things, Wagnerian opera. "Making fun of opera has been a staple of comedy since the Marx Brothers," says vice president and creative director Steve Pimsler. "So we didn't have to be clever, but just tell the story. It's entertaining, but straightforward. And the phone number gets framed in a call to action and repeated more than in a regular 60-second spot."

While using music may seem old-fashioned, it gets results and can save on the marketing budget. The opera spot wound up getting 50% more response with 25% less media outlay than the previous spots. In terms of branding, the spot is a favorite on YouTube and gleans emails from fans who can't get the song out of their heads. Pimsler says that cost-effective music messaging works for more than TV and radio. "There are lots of applications. It works in sales presentations and corporate video," he says. "'Sing and sell' is a great way to get a message across for less money than you might think. It's worth exploring, whatever your product is."

CUSTOMER RETENTION STRATEGY

3 Proven Ways to Appease an Angry Customer

It happens to the best of us. An upset customer calls to complain about a product or service, and you're caught completely off guard. Do you fly off the handle? Or do you respond calmly and thoughtfully? According to Maribeth Kuzmeski, author of *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life*, you can use this opportunity to truly connect with your customer.

"If a customer thinks enough of you to give you the chance to repair a bad

situation, take it," Kuzmeski says. "Play an active role in making your customer happy so that you can be sure to keep him or her on board with you." She offers these tips to keep your customer retention program strong:

1. Extend a peace offering. Proactively reaching out to your customers can squash any negativity they may be feeling. Offer an apology when you've made a mistake. Then, make things right by extending a peace offering. It can be as simple as a handwritten note, a refund, or a coupon.

2. Get them to listen to you by listening to them. Customers will listen to what you have to say if you respectfully listen to what they have to say. Knowing that you are truly listening to their concerns can cause your customers to agree to your suggestions much more quickly.

3. Have a standard service protocol in place. By creating a service protocol in advance, you provide a way to "enforce" how customer conflict situations are handled. This allows you and your employees to more easily resolve customer issues.

Plan Now to Have a Breakout Year

It's time to think hard about how to make 2010 a breakout year. Oz honestly feels optimistic that a firmly grounded turnaround is within sight, but are you ready? In a recent survey by JP Morgan Chase & Co., 80% of small businesses described their outlook as "pursuing a moderate or aggressive growth strategy."

As mentioned here many times, owners of growing businesses represent the backbone of the economy and America's entrepreneurial spirit. Many financial experts believe the economic recovery will begin on Main Street. You don't want to be left in the dust. Here, in my humble opinion, are 12 areas of possible opportunity, based on existing conditions:

1. Consider a move. Square-footage costs for office space have dropped 40% or more in some markets, and landlords are hungrier than ever to offer longer-term leases. Although technology allows us to operate anywhere, location remains paramount. A move that saves you operational costs and conveniently positions you closer to the flow of customers is always good.

2. Lower your monthly expenses. Look at your telephone calling plan, the service charges assessed by credit card companies, and the shipping fees you pay to companies like UPS and FedEx. There is no better time than now to seek better deals.

3. Rethink traditional media. With newspapers, television, and radio reeling from the recession and the flow of ad dollars to the Internet, you're in the best position ever to bargain with media companies and gain access to spot ads you previously couldn't afford. One of the best ways to get a bang for your buck: billboards.

4. Upgrade your Web site. It never hurts to contact a few Web firms to see how you can bolster your company's visibility on the major search engines, improve customer service, and create a stronger brand identity. Get bids on what it will cost you to implement the changes that make the most sense for your business, and if the price is right, move forward.

5. Expand your offerings. Begin laying the groundwork now to get one more product or service offering in the pipeline by the middle of next summer — even if you don't know what it is yet. The process alone will improve your creativity and force you to gain a wider view of the playing field. Necessity breeds innovation.

6. Get a little greener. Find ways to reduce, recycle, or eliminate waste. You'll be amazed at what it will do for your conscience — and your bottom line. Assess the cost of heating and cooling your office. Many power companies provide free energy audits. Switching to energy-efficient lighting alone can save hundreds of dollars.

7. Visit the Small Business Administration's Web site.

There are lots of rumors swirling around about health care requirements for business owners, tax rates, and the impact of the financial crisis on borrowing. The SBA offers loads of free advice, including how qualified companies can get low-interest loans for business expansion.

8. Create a rainy day or contingency fund. At the very least, stash 1% of your profits in this account. This will help get you through the next downturn.

9. Be the symbol of optimism. Vow to give out one more compliment to a deserving employee every day. Don't be too stoic — be the boss your employees want to work for. Whether you believe in karma or not, it will make your employees and you feel better.

10. Consider reconfiguring tasks and responsibilities.

No doubt, the recession has forced you to scale back. Now you need to assess how you're going to grow. Part of the process involves examining how tasks get accomplished in your company. Future staff costs can be streamlined by assembling a flow chart showing who is doing what. Don't be afraid to make changes.

11. Hire an intern. Ask universities and junior colleges in your area if they have internship programs offering students the chance to gain real-world experience in their field of study. Interns usually earn course credit from their school and a small wage, or none, from the employer. An intern can even turn into a valued full-time employee.

12. Become a mentor. Share books that have shaped your perspective on people, leadership, and running a good business. Take a member of your staff to a rotary club meeting or introduce them to an important client. Or assign a task that requires trust to complete.

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Oz's identity can't be revealed because he is wanted in six states for peculiar thinking.