

Relationship Marketing - Key for Small Local Business

By Sharon Fling

Relationship Marketing - Key for Small Local Business

Sharon Fling
sharon@localbizpromo.com

Relationship Marketing - Key for Small Local Business
<http://www.localbusinesstoday.com/articles/relationship-marketing-key-local-business.htm>

Someone wrote me recently and said "I don't think every small business has the need nor inclination to send regular follow up emails."

The "no inclination" part I can believe, but no need? Not unless you have all the business you can handle. Otherwise you need to collect (opt-in) email addresses at every opportunity, and use them to establish and build relationships with your prospects and customers.

The key word in that sentence? Relationships. If you want to promote your local business effectively online, relationship marketing is key.

WHAT IS RELATIONSHIP MARKETING?

Relationship marketing is the act of building close relationships with existing customers and prospects. It's about having an ongoing dialogue with them over a period of time. It can also include gathering customer information and analyzing their behavior, but don't let that scare you. You can practice relationship marketing on a small scale and get plenty of benefits without implementing a full-blown system.

You may not have the financial resources of Office Depot or WalMart, but as a small business owner, you can do something they can't -- have real person-to-person relationships with your customers.

There are 2 critical components to making this strategy work: a relationship-oriented website and the consistent use of email to stay in touch.

RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED WEBSITE

The relationship marketing process starts when a visitor arrives on your website. If you want the relationship to progress beyond "hello", make sure it's a wonderful experience. Invite her in, introduce yourself, and offer refreshments in the form of free information or something equally enticing.

At this point you should ask for her email address so you can send more valuable information in the future. This is crucial to your success - you must obtain the email address on the first visit. You may not get a second chance.

Once you have the email address, point your visitor toward helpful resources. A restaurant could offer recipes or discount coupons. A plumbing business might offer tips for avoiding costly repairs. A small business site could offer a collection of articles. Whatever the business, there's some sort of information or gift customers would find useful. Give valuable information freely and don't worry about giving too much away. Give before you get, that's the way of the web.

Ideally you'd have the ability to collect information about individual customers, but not all small businesses can afford the technology needed to track individual preferences and provide different experiences based upon them. If you can't, don't worry about it. But do try to collect first name at a minimum so you can personalize emails.

What else characterizes a relationship-oriented website?

- FAQs: Make it easy for people to find the information they need by providing online help files. Make a note of questions you're asked repeatedly and compile them into a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions).
- TWO-WAY DIALOGUE: Make it easy for customers to contact you and encourage them to do so; what you want is a two-way dialogue between you and your customer. When in doubt, ask them what they want. They'll tell you. If you find out what your customer wants and become a friend, you will beat most of the competition hands down. And be human - life is in the details.
- TIMELY RESPONSE: When your customer does "raise her hand", reward her with a quick response! There's nothing more de-motivating than an unanswered email to someone who claims to want my business. More than once I've purchased a product and written a followup email, only to have it go unanswered. Guess who won't get another dime of my money?

- FREQUENT UPDATES: If you want people to visit frequently, you must give them a reason -- new content, a fresh look every now and then, information updates. A website is never finished.
- MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE: If you're selling something, you should offer an ironclad "no questions asked" money-back guarantee! Then honor it. Sure, there are jerks out there who will try to rip you off. Consider it a cost of doing business online.
- FREE OFFER: And of course the most important thing on the first page and every page is your subscription box with offer of a FREE report or other incentive your customers would value.

Above all, show your customers that you're in it for the long haul, not the quick score. No flashing banners screaming "Buy Me!". No pressure to hurry up and buy before midnight. Set yourself apart from your competition. Slow and steady wins the race...and builds relationships.

CONSISTENT USE OF EMAIL

If you are emailing your local customers, sending them offers, coupons, and useful information about your business, you are more likely to get their business than some stranger out in cyberspace. And if you're sending out a newsletter, you'll be light years ahead of all of your competition, local or not!

Maybe the idea of having to write a newsletter is the stumbling block. If so, don't call it an ezine and don't lock yourself into a schedule. But just as you use snail mail, newspaper ads, radio or tv ads to keep your name in front of your customers, you should use email to do the same thing. And it's a lot cheaper than any other form of advertising, so why on earth wouldn't you?

Here are a few ways to use email to create "brand" awareness within your local community.

- KEEP IN TOUCH: Email your customers and prospects on a regular basis, at least twice a month. Any less than that and they may forget you. Don't contact them just to sell them something. Send them useful information, related articles, notice of new content on your website, product announcements, etc. Your goal is to keep in touch so that if they or someone they know needs your product or service, you'll be the one they call.
- SUPPORT: When customers purchase a product or service,

use email to help them get the most out of it. For a book or publication, it could be an email "walkthru" series highlighting important topics, or telling them what they would learn if they'd only read it!

- JOINT VENTURES: If at all possible, you should do joint ventures with neighboring businesses. Band together with several other (non-competing) businesses and form a coupon exchange. Every week or two, each of you send the same email to your customer list, with email coupons for each business, or a link to a web page with the coupons.
- TIMELY RESPONSE: When your customer does "raise her hand", reward her with a quick response! There's nothing more de-motivating than an unanswered email to someone who claims to want my business. More than once I've purchased a product and written a followup email, only to have it go unanswered. Guess who won't get another dime of my money?

I know all of this sounds like an awful lot of work, and I won't lie to you...relationship marketing is timeconsuming and can be hard work. If it were easy, everybody would be doing it.

Building a website that focuses on the customer takes more thought than slapping up an ego site (all about you). Maintaining a mailing list can be a real pain. Unsubscribing people who can't seem to read. Potential spam complaints. Answering subscriber questions. Responding to feedback or inquiries.

It's so much easier to forget the whole thing, which is what most people do. On the internet, if you want to rise above the clutter, you must do something to distinguish yourself from the masses. You must be willing to do what others are not willing to do. For a small business, that means relationship marketing.

Sharon Fling is the author of "How To Promote Your Local Business On the Internet", and publishes an electronic newsletter that gives business owners tips, tools and resources for targeting local customers. For more information, visit <http://www.geolocal.com> or send any email to: <mailto:subscribe@localbizpromo.com?subject=TRAART>

[Get-Articles.com : 1000's of reprintable business and internet marketing-related articles.](#)

[Submit your article for reprint.](#)