

Spam Free Marketing

By Donna Schwartz Mills

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Donna Schwartz Mills
donna@parentpreneurclub.com

The ParentPreneur Club <http://www.parentpreneurclub.com>

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I received an email the other day from a work at home mom who recently started a small publishing company. She wanted to start selling advertising to other WAHM businesses but was concerned about bulk emailing them... with good reason.

Spam is the four-letter word that most offends those of us working online. Everyone with a website receives it and like bad art, we all know it when we see it. But also -like art- in a way, spam is in the eye of the beholder. I have participated in discussions that disintegrated because each member had his or her own definition of spam and was angry at those who disagreed.

In the offline world, it is perfectly acceptable to cold-call or snail mail a business to tell them about a product or service you offer. When I worked in an office environment, I took such calls all the time. Often, I said 'no thank you' and that was the end of it. But every once in a while, the call came in at just the time I was searching for such an item - and a sale would be made.

Of course, the power and low-cost of email make this an inexact comparison. So what do you do when you have a product or service that you *know* your target market *needs* -- and you want to use the power of the Internet to let them know about it?

THE PERSONAL APPROACH

The keywords are 'target market.' Find out who they are by doing an Internet search to find them. Check out sites which include directories of businesses in your target

market. Then, visit those sites - and send their owners a *personal* email pitching your product. Be sure to use their *names* and comment on something you learn about their businesses from their sites. If they offer newsletters, sign up for them and comment upon something you read there. This establishes a prior business relationship and is not considered spam by *most* people.

However, even this personal approach will offend *some* webmasters, and it will cost you a lot of time relative to the number of people you reach. A more efficient means of getting your message out would be to join discussion groups geared to your audience and announce your product there.

ONLINE NETWORKING THROUGH DISCUSSION LISTS

But message boards and discussion lists have their own spam issues. When joining a list, you must read their guidelines and follow them. Sending out a blatant advertisement to the members of a discussion list will not be tolerated - but you are welcome to describe your business where it is *appropriate* (i.e., someone asks where they can find a product just like yours and you announce that you just happen to sell that).

You are also allowed to put information in your sig line that directs people to your website - so whenever you contribute to the discussion, you have an opportunity to promote your business.

When you join, sit back for a couple of days and follow the conversation so you can get a feel for the tone of the discussion, the people involved and what is customary among them. Then, introduce yourself as a new member (which also give you an opportunity to bring up the subject of your business, website, product - within the guidelines they set when you join).

An added benefit to marketing through discussion groups is the fact that you will build new relationships with other business people that can lead to joint ventures, assistance and even friendship. In the offline world, it is similar to being part of a chamber of commerce or other networking group and it works just as well on the web.

At the ParentPreneur Club, we have our own discussion group, PPC Advisory, where members brainstorm the issues they face as work at home parents. To join, email <mailto:ppca-subscribe@topica.com> .

Here are more of my favorite groups targeted to work at home parents. You'll find others specific to your needs by

searching for them at <http://www.yahogroups.com> and <http://www.topica.com>

<mailto:clubmom-affiliates-subscribe@yahogroups.com> This group is made up of members of the Club Mom affiliate program. All members have websites with mom-related content and products, which makes them ideal partners for the Club Mom membership program. You must be an affiliate of Club Mom to be a member of this list.

<mailto:DirectSelling-subscribe@yahogroups.com> For direct sales consultants who exchange ideas and suggestions on building a client base, fund raising, recruiting, booking, inspiration, motivation, party games, contests, merchandising, holiday ideas and more.

<mailto:EP-subscribe@yahogroups.com> This is a function of the Entrepreneurial Parents (<http://www.en-parent.com>) website. A forum for Entrepreneurial Parents (EPs) to connect directly with each other, discussing topics ranging from balancing work and family under one roof, to sharing practical business tips, to collective brainstorming, to supporting each other in responsible parenthood.

<mailto:themompack-subscribe@yahogroups.com> The MomPack (TM) is a cooperative, not-for-profit organization, founded by working moms, run by working moms and for working moms to exchange business information amongst each other to help promote and advertise each other's businesses on and offline.

DON'T FORGET THE SEARCH ENGINES!

Do not overlook the value of getting your site listed in search engines, which will bring prospective customers to *you*. There are still many engines that will list your site for free. If you plan to do this yourself, walk do not run to <http://www.jimtools.com> . Jim Wilson carries one of the most complete free site submission resources we have seen.

Merle at <http://www.mcpromotions.com> also has a wealth of resources at her site. She specializes in promoting websites and handles our monthly search engine submissions for the ParentPreneur Club. Her prices are very reasonable.

GET PUBLICITY

Press releases should be part of your marketing plan, as well. There is nothing so cost effective as having your business mentioned in an offline publication or other medium. One newspaper article could result in dozens of leads for your business.

Karon Thackston has put together a free email course on how to write effective press releases. To receive it, send a blank email to <mailto:pressrelease@zipresponse.com> Karon can also handle your PR needs. <http://www.ktamarketing.com>

Another interesting offer comes from JeriLynn Thomas of the Womens News Bureau. Jerilynn is offering a PR Boot Camp tailored to the needs of female entrepreneurs. Check it out at <http://www.womensnewsbureau.com/prbootcamp.htm>

EZINE ADVERTISING

Finally, there will come a time when you will need to pay for some advertising. Ezines that go out to your target audience give you a big bang for your advertising buck - your cost per thousand (CPM) is generally way less than what you could expect to pay in other media. Most sites that publish an ezine carry an advertising page.

We could devote several more articles to the particulars of writing ads and creating marketing campaigns. The one thing you need to keep in mind is that writing advertising copy is not an exact science. No one can guarantee how your audience will respond to an ad, no matter how well you think it turned out. The big marketers always test ads first and we suggest you do. You can buy ezine ads at deep discounts at <http://www.ezineadauction.com> (another site run by Merle of MCPromotions). We use it ourselves to sell remnant space in our ezines and have bought ads in other newsletters at a fraction of their published rates. This is a great resource for anyone who needs to advertise their businesses.

As you can see, there are lots of low-cost options for promoting your business online that do not entail bulk email. They're easy to implement and are proven to work... try them and see!

Donna Schwartz Mills is the work-at-home parent behind the ParentPreneur Club

<http://parentpreneurclub.com/cgi-bin/art/pl.cgi?sp>

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