

Are You Afraid to Sell?

By Elena Fawkner

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Relationship marketing. It's the backbone of a successful online business. Fail to forge online relationships and your business will suffer. Simple enough concept, right? But what does "relationship marketing" really mean? Simply put, it refers to the principle that, in order to be successful in business, especially an online business since the Internet is such an anonymous medium, you need to establish a relationship of trust with your prospective customers before you can expect them to do business with you. It requires a commitment to customer service and a willingness to help others for no certain reward other than the satisfaction of helping another and building for yourself and your business a reputation of credibility and trustworthiness.

At the end of the day, though, if your business is to be financially successful (and if you don't care about that, you're engaged in a hobby, not a business), you have to turn a buck. One of the most common anxieties expressed by new (and even not so new) online entrepreneurs, though, is that they don't want to come across as "selling something" to those with whom they have forged the very relationship that is a prerequisite to actually making the sale!

In other words, the focus on "relationship marketing" has been so much on the relationship that the marketing begins to seem crass and a something of a violation of trust. Many new online business owners report that they feel like they're taking advantage of the trust of those with whom they have forged a bond. Of course, there's no reason to feel any such thing so long as you believe in what it is you're selling and that it's something that will benefit your customers. If you don't feel this way, then your bad feelings are well placed. You ARE taking advantage!

The discomfort associated with selling is not restricted to the business owner, either. I have received several indignant emails over the course of the past three years I have been in this business from readers of my ezine in response to promotions I have run for programs I actively promote. The recurring theme of these sorts of communications is that I have a "responsibility" to my readers because they've come to rely on me as an authoritative source of information and I have somehow breached this responsibility by doing something so crass as to actually *market* the programs I promote to earn part of my online income.

Some have even gone so far as to suggest that, since I accept paid advertising in my ezine, I should be content with that revenue stream and not seek to make money by promoting outside programs. (Of course, these are generally the very same people who complain about the advertising as well.)

My response to this line of reasoning is simply that I'm running a BUSINESS. I'm not working nights and weekends on my site and on my ezine out of the goodness of my heart. I'm just not that noble, trust me. I have a profit motive. Despite what some people seem to think, a profit motive is NOT, in and of itself, a Bad Thing. A profit motive is only a Bad Thing when one misleads, deceives and otherwise takes advantage of the trust of another to pursue that profit. There's no reason to apologize or feel guilty for wanting to make an honest profit.

How about you? Do you have just a twinge of uneasiness when it comes to marketing your products and services? Here are some ideas to help you overcome the reticence you may feel in pursuing sales from your prospective customers and how to manage these relationships so that your customer understands that, although you are there to help them, you are also out to help yourself by earning an honest living.

CRYSTALLIZE YOUR PURPOSES

The very first thing you need to do is decide what it is you're really doing when you create your website or publish your ezine. Is it a hobby or is it a business? The difference, respectively, is the absence or presence of a profit motive. If it's a hobby, fine. Don't try and turn a profit, just enjoy yourself and generate just enough income to cover your expenses (if you can). But if it's a business, understand that making a profit is non-negotiable. It's the reason for your business's existence. You will no doubt have several purposes. But the profit motive is key.

Do whatever it takes to crystallize your purposes. For some people, just thinking about it and making a mental decision is sufficient. For others, crystallization requires seeing it in black and white. If that's you, write down your purposes. Again,

though, if you're running a business rather than indulging in a hobby, turning a profit must be on your list of purposes (unless, I suppose, you're running a non-profit business but we'll leave that aside for present purposes). Recognize that purpose for what it is. Embrace it. PURSUE it with a vengeance. It's nothing to be ashamed or coy about. So long as you intend to do so, and actually do so, by legitimate, honest and ethical means, give yourself permission to aggressively chase a dollar.

BE BUSINESSLIKE AND PROFESSIONAL

The concept of "relationship marketing" does NOT mean getting up close and personal with your customers. You'll save yourself a lot of grief and angst if you just keep things businesslike and professional - friendly to be sure, but not *overly* personal. It's possible to be friendly and helpful in a professional, businesslike manner without stepping over the line into the personal. The people you're dealing with are not your friends, they're your customers. Of course, over time, you may become friends with certain people who started out as customers. But don't start from the position that you have to be friends with your customers in order to engage in relationship marketing. You don't. Keep it businesslike and professional and you won't raise any unrealistic expectations.

ACT IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR BUSINESS'S BEST INTERESTS

One way of keeping yourself in check is by constantly testing your decisions against the criteria "is this decision in the best interests of my business?". If so, do it, recognizing that something can be in the best interests of your business even if it doesn't involve cash flowing in your direction. If not, don't.

Occasionally, it will be in the best interests of your business to do something that may be perceived by your customer as a personal favor. An example might be giving a refund for a purchase under circumstances where the customer is not strictly entitled to one and where you have an ongoing relationship with the customer. You do so in the interests of customer service and this is certainly an example of something that is in your business's best interests.

Sometimes, however, customers can take advantage of such a policy. To forestall this type of problem, if you decide to do something that benefits your customer/reader/visitor over and above what they have an entitlement to, make it clear, in a subtle way, that you are doing so for business reasons. Be prepared to set limits though. Know how far you are prepared to go before it stops being a business decision and becomes a personal one and to the detriment of your business interests.

Being uncomfortable saying "no" is not a good enough reason

to sacrifice your business's best interests if that's the right decision in all the circumstances.

BE DIRECT AND HONEST

Don't be shy about promoting your products and services and letting your prospective customers know you would like for them to purchase from you. Be direct, open and honest about it. For example, if someone emails me and asks for my advice about how to get started in an online business of their own, I'll recommend products that I think will benefit them.

Usually, if I like a product, I'll be an affiliate and so every time someone purchases that product following my recommendation I earn a commission. Would I recommend any products that are directly relevant to my business that I don't have a financial interest in? No. Why? I have a profit motive. My time is money. The key is in the products. If I thought there were better products out there than the ones I was promoting I'd recommend them too. But only after I signed up as an affiliate so I could earn a commission from my recommendation.

On the other hand, occasionally I'm asked to recommend a webhost. I'm an inactive affiliate of one of the major webhosting companies but I never recommend them because I think they're too expensive. In this case, I refer the enquirer to the webhost I use for my own site. I'm not an affiliate of theirs and I have no financial interest in making the recommendation. I'm not particularly interested in webhosting as a product to promote so I haven't bothered (yet) to sign up for my webhost's affiliate program. It's just an honest recommendation just as the recommendations I make for products of which I am an affiliate are honest recommendations. The only difference is, I make money on the latter and why not?

The point is, so long as you're making an honest recommendation, there's no reason why you can't make a profit at the same time. It's a win-win situation. So stop being afraid to sell. It's the reason your business exists but it won't for long if you don't sell.

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Elena Fawkner is editor of A Home-Based Business Online ... practical business ideas, opportunities and solutions for the work-from-home entrepreneur.

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