

Offline Promotion Matters Too

By Elena Fawkner

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With all the talk of the importance of search engine positioning, online directories, keyword metatags and publishing your own ezine, you might be forgiven for thinking that the online world is the only one that matters when it comes to promoting your online business. Only occasionally will you see something like "and don't forget about offline promotion too".

Why do I need to engage in offline promotion when I'm promoting an online business? The reason is simple. The concept of a paperless office is all very well, but your potential customers live in an offline world. To get their attention, you need to reach them where they live. Here's how:

STATIONERY

Every item of stationery that leaves your office is an opportunity to promote your website. Make sure your website address (URL) appears on every single piece of stationery including:

- = business cards
- = letterheads
- = envelopes
- = address labels
- = fax cover sheets
- = checks
- = invoices
- = receipts, and
- = reorder forms.

PROMOTIONAL ITEMS

Tangible promotional items that people see or use every day are a great way of keeping your name in front of your customers and prospective customers. Make sure your URL appears prominently and it will be a constant reminder to visit your website.

Promotional items that lend themselves well to this concept include:

- = coffee mugs
- = paper weights
- = pens
- = t-shirts
- = calendars
- = key chains
- = magnets
- = bumper stickers, and
- = car license plate frames.

PRINTED MATERIALS

Printed materials are a great way to generate (especially) repeat business when included with product orders. After all, your existing customers are already predisposed to deal with you so make sure you take the opportunity to promote your entire line of products and/or services to give them a reason to return. Here's a few ways:

= Coupons

Coupons are great to use as incentives for future purchases. Offer a range of coupons including percentage off orders (for example, "10% off your next order of \$20 or more"), free shipping or free items (for example, "buy one, get one free" type offers).

Coupons can also be used to generate new business by making them freely available around the traps. For example, if your business is educational software, make arrangements to have a supply of "30 day free trial" coupons made available at your local school.

= Gift Certificates

Gift certificates are good because they allow your customer to share their discovery of your products and services with friends, family and colleagues. To be effective, especially in connection with services, a gift certificate needs to have a tangible dollar value to the recipient rather than merely offering to redeem the certificate for a particular service. This is because the referral customer probably has no conception of the dollar value of your service. The potential customer can, however, readily appreciate the value of a "\$30 toward your purchase of \$60 or more" gift certificate.

= Product Sheets

Product sheets are a way for you to make your existing customer aware of what *other* products and services you offer in addition to those they have recently purchased. This need not be any more elaborate than a one page price list but it can be as extravagant as a glossy product page replete with photos if your budget permits.

= Brochures

Brochures are an effective way to create a professional image and promote your products and services at the same time. Give them to prospective customers for a quick overview of your business and to give them a reason to visit your website for more information.

Distribute your brochure whenever you get the chance: carry them with you wherever you go and hand them out whenever you hand out your business card. Mail your brochure to current clients to inform them of additional products and services that they may be unaware you offer and to prospective clients sourced from rented mailing lists.

Also, get permission to leave a small stack of your brochures in places where potential customers are likely to congregate such as doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, local schools etc..

Another good idea is to send your brochure to the editors of your local and regional newspapers together with a letter advising of your availability for interview as a local expert in your field.

ADVERTISING

Advertising can be as simple as placing classified ads in your local newspaper or as grand as purchasing television advertising slots. Here's a few ideas:

= Classified Ads

Place small classified ads in your local and city newspapers and include the URL of your website.

= Yellow Pages

If you purchase display advertising in the Yellow Pages, be sure to include your URL.

= Flyers

One page flyers advertising your product or service and including your URL can be printed cheaply and left on car windshields or distributed via letterbox drops in your local area.

= Local TV Guide

Your local TV guide can be a good place to advertise cheaply if your product or service is of particular interest to a local geographic target audience. Again, be sure to include your URL.

= Radio Advertising

Radio advertising can be an excellent buy for many small businesses. Call the sales department of several radio stations that target your demographic. Be sure to ask about rates for different times of day and package deals.

= Television Advertising

You're not going to be able to afford the high price advertising exposure that's offered by the likes of ABC or NBC but you may be surprised at how affordable advertising on your local cable channel can be. Contact the sales department of your cable provider for details. This type of advertising is particularly effective if your product or services is oriented toward a specific geographic target market.

= Direct Mail

Mailing lists of various sizes are available for rent or purchase for direct mailing your offer to prospective customers.

= Press Releases

Press releases can act as a form of de facto advertising. Send your press release to the editors of print periodicals.

NETWORKING

Any local community offers ample opportunity for networking. Each networking function you attend is an opportunity to publicize your business and your website. Consider the following:

- = local Chamber of Commerce
- = local industry groups
- = school functions
- = social events
- = charitable organizations
- = community functions, and
- = public speaking.

EVERY CHANCE YOU GET

Last but not least, getting the word out should be a daily habit.

= Telephone

Every time you answer your business phone be sure to give the caller your website address so they can find out more information about you and your business. Make sure your website address is included in the message recorded on your answering machine.

= Mail Inserts

Include a small insert promoting your business and your website in every piece of mail that leaves your home or office.

= Word of Mouth

Finally, perhaps the most effective and under-appreciated tool of them all - word of mouth. Talk about your business and your website at every opportunity and encourage your customers, friends, family and colleagues to do the same. You would be surprised at just how many businesses out there owe their success to little more than word of mouth referrals.

Successfully promoting an online business requires a sound understanding and methodical application of the principles of online marketing and promotion.

But to focus on online methods to the exclusion of offline does only half the job. Give due attention to offline methods of promotion in conjunction with your online promotional efforts to ensure the widest possible coverage of ALL of your potential markets.

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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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