

The Fallacy of Free Advertising

By Angela Wu

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The temptation to turn towards free marketing resources can be an irresistible call, particularly to beginners on tight budgets. However, 'free' isn't a good bargain if it doesn't give you *results*! You still 'pay' for free advertising in terms of wasted time and effort.

There are many effective ways to promote your business free. However, let's start with a brief look at a few of the less-effective methods. Although the rare person might get results that justify their continued use, most people find them to be a waste of time. These include:

- * Free classifieds in newsletters. Some editors offer a free ad to new subscribers in an effort to build their lists. Unfortunately, if they're getting a lot of new subscribers, they're probably also getting a lot of free ad requests -- which means your ad is likely going to get crammed alongside several others. As you can imagine, readers often ignore 'classified ad' sections such as these.
- * Free classifieds on websites, or 'Free-For-All' (FFA) sites where you can post your link. Most people go to post ads, not read them. How often do YOU go to these sites to read ads? Enough said.
- * Free banner or link exchanges. You know the type: you place a snippet of HTML on your website, and the links or banners are automatically rotated through everyone in the network. These are not usually targeted enough to give good results.
- * Traffic-generating programs. You join a 'network' and 'share' traffic -- on your site, typically a popup or popunder window (advertising another member's site) is displayed as your visitor enters or leaves your site.

Other members display your ad in a similar way. A popular example are the 'start page' or 'exit page' programs. Sure, this can give you traffic... but the most important thing is, does it give you *results* -- subscriptions to your newsletter, for example, or sales? The conversion rate is typically negligible or low for these types of programs.

Now onto the good stuff... here are several excellent free marketing methods that have the potential to yield great results:

__Targeted Link Exchanges.

Place a link to another related site on your own, and in return, ask them to reciprocate. Do it consistently and you will eventually have a wide-ranging network of targeted, relevant sites on which you are linked.

Your 'link popularity', as it's called, is used by many of the major search engines to help determine how well your site is positioned in the results. Plus the more links you have, the more places people can find you. You essentially 'share' another site's traffic.

__Build and Use Your Own Opt-In List.

There's nothing like your own newsletter to develop a relationship with your visitors. Make it your goal to provide quality content and you'll have loyal subscribers who trust you.

Granted, hosting the list isn't usually free (although there are still a few free list hosts such as Yahoo! Groups, <http://groups.yahoo.com/>). Still, once you have your own list of targeted, interested readers, you also have your very own marketing tool -- you can promote your products or services to this list, plus use it as 'leverage' for potential joint ventures (see below). It does take time to build a quality list, but it can be extremely profitable in the long run.

__Search Engines and Major Indexes.

Web surfers regularly use search engines and indexes to pinpoint exactly what they're looking for. Although more and more search engines and major indexes are now charging for reviews and/or listings, some of them (such as Google, <http://www.google.com/>) are still free.

It takes time and effort to learn how to properly optimize your site for the search engines. It's no good to be #138475 out of 1437593 search results; no one will ever find you! Learn more about search engine optimization at <http://www.searchenginewatch.com/> .

It's well worth the time and trouble to get properly positioned -- if you get a good listing, it could mean a steady stream of targeted traffic.

__Free Publicity.

Imagine getting a radio or TV interview, or a write-up in a popular magazine whose readers are your target market. It's great exposure, and best of all, it's free! Many small businesses simply can't afford the advertising rates... and even if you could, publicity is even better because the radio show, TV show, or magazine provides credibility to your offer.

An excellent site to learn about free publicity is <http://www.prprofits.com/> .

__Referral Marketing.

Encourage happy customers to tell their friends about your business. This is a great way to build your customer base, year after year, through the power of the 'snowball' effect -- a happy customer tells a friend, who tells a friend, who tells a friend...

Referrals also tend to be easier to convert into paying customers because your product has been 'endorsed' by someone they know and trust.

You can offer incentives such as discounts or a free gift to encourage referrals. Regardless of whether or not the referred party makes a purchase, be sure to thank your customer for the referral -- reward his behavior and he'll be more inclined to repeat it.

__Write and Distribute Articles, Reports, eBooks...

Create useful free content and include a brief blurb about your product along with a URL. Encourage people to pass it around. Indicate that websites and newsletter editors are welcome to offer it as a gift, bonus, or premium to their visitors, subject to your publishing guidelines.

If you do this consistently, you can eventually have thousands of links back to your business all over the web! And the more people pass it around, the more exposure you'll get.

You can do this with practically anything: articles, columns, lists, reports, eBooks, software, worksheets... use your imagination!

___Joint Ventures.

Approach complementary businesses with win-win proposals. A simple and common 'JV' is an ad swap: you each publish one another's solo ads to your respective lists. You both avoid paying out-of-pocket expenses and have the opportunity to reach a new group of targeted prospects.

Another 'twist' to this common JV is to send endorsed ads to one another's lists. Review each other's products and, if it's worthy, mail an endorsed message to your readers. Endorsements usually outperform 'regular' ads because it comes from someone the readers trust (the editor).

The beauty of the Internet is that it allows you to run a business with very little money. The 'secret' is knowing which of the available free resources are worth your time!

Angela is the editor of Online Business Basics, a practical guide to building an Internet business on a shoestring budget. If you're tired of hype and just want solid, down-to-earth information, then visit us now -- and in moments you can have access to loads of instantly useable tips, specifically chosen for beginners!

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