

Proactive Marketing in a Tough Economy

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During this tough economic time it seems that everyone is looking to understand what the buyer wants, but we may be surprised to understand that cost does not drive every decision, or that return-on-investment may require a longer period of return than the buyer cares about. So, is there another area that marketing should be addressing?

Regardless if we are talking about retail or business-to-business, brick-and-mortar or online, these tough economic times seem to be dictating a direction to a more proactive position for marketers. I was recently speaking with a friend about his retail shop and there is nothing more direct than being one-on-one with the customer. He was concerned that his message was not reaching his customer base, and with his diverse line of products he was not sure how to focus his marketing message. In addition, he held a very strong online position where in many cases he may never meet the actual customer.

I will use the brick-and-mortar retail environment to discuss examples of creating a proactive marketing environment, and in that we are entering the holiday season we all may be able to empathize with this environment. I asked my friend to be more observant with how customers were reacting within his store as well as to monitor his website traffic with respect to the market basket section. Within a retail environment the conversation tends to be more open and honest. People are willing to discuss what they are looking for, thus this can create an excellent opportunity to try different techniques of being proactive in the sales [marketing] approach to generate a discussion, get a reaction, or close a sale.

Over the first few days my friend noticed that customers were a bit unsure of different purchases and that they tended to linger on certain items longer than others. My friend and I put ourselves into their shoes and thought about why would a certain purchase be more applicable than another? So, my friend started to employ a proactive approach with the customers, and he would tailor some of the discussion based on the specific item that the customer would be looking at. Yes, there were people who purely came into the store on a price hunt, and that group had their mind set, but for those who may be a bit uncertain it seems that a proactive approach provides a strong base to address any questions that they may have. He could have sat back and waited to answer any questions that arose if the customer asked a question, or he could nimbly engage the customer with open ended conversation directed at a reason they could be looking at a product. He found that if he engaged them in a proactive but not overly aggressive way they were very open to interact.

In the case where an item could be sold based on an exceptional return-on-investment, a typical response was "Looking at a year from now is not my concern; I am dealing with the here and now." To say that some of our basic attitudes with regards to how to interact and market to a customer are being turned upside down would be an understatement.

With the growth of the Internet the need to know who the customer is, and where you may find them is a critical element to being successful. But, once you know who they are and where to find them are you ready to connect with them and address their needs? Being proactive means knowing that everyone has been impacted directly or indirectly by the economic situation. If you look at a product or service with an eye on why someone would buy this product or service, or what need would this product or service solve, it may provide insight into how to market to the customer. In addition, you may be able to initiate a dynamic discussion with the customer when the opportunity arises either through your **Internet Presence**, a face-to-face interaction as in retail, or when you call on a

customer in a business-to-business environment.

With regards to my retail example, my friend's store had batteries for the iPod and iPhone line, but with so many different types and different specifications he stayed away from leading with conversation about the specifications. Thus, he led the conversation off with something like "If you travel a lot this is a very interesting choice." It may sound a bit trite, but he typically would get a response of "Why." This response opened the door and created an immediate comfort level to continue the conversation with the possibility to go in different directions based on their questions to his follow-up, or even better, to eventually move the customer forward to closure on the purchase. He saw that this process was effective and he moved immediately to change his marketing message across the different mediums and media to be more proactive and to address a challenge or problem with a solution.

The number of examples that could be used is limitless as everyone needs a certain product or service even if it may not be a necessity. The object is to understand how to connect with the customer with respect to fulfilling their need for a specific product or service. Do we really need another iPod battery? Well not really, but, if you continually forget to charge the device fully or if the device is used during travel and there is no access to an outlet to charge it then this could be a problem.

For an insurance agent I was working with, he felt that the troubled economy would strip away any money that people had earmarked for insurance. In many cases he was right, but when he stepped back and looked at the situation from a different perspective he thought about the need to protect the assets that people had accumulated versus looking at insurance to cover something that may happen. This proactive approach opened new doors for him, and once he was able to address dealing with protecting assets that people could relate to, he was able to build trust with his customers that will definitely pay dividends when the economy changes. In addition, he knew that he had a very strong **Internet Presence** thus, he made sure to change his website as well as his other media to address this issue of protecting the assets that a customer had worked hard to accumulate. He has not fully recovered all that he lost from the economic melt down, but he did identify a new business segment and slowly he has been winning new customers over to other insurance options, and more important he knows that he has gained his customers trust.

Once you have won a customer's trust you are in a strong position to further any discussion regardless if it is one-on-one or through your website. So, taking a proactive position can pay dividends for you business; why not give it a try.

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