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## Back-to-basics best for small companies

By HOLLY M. O'NEILL

Marketers hailing from corporate America often have difficulties adjusting to new marketing posts at small companies because the marketing almost certainly is conducted on tighter budgets and without large inside staffs or the advertising and promotional agencies' assistance that big-company marketers rely on so heavily. Nonetheless, this transition can be easy if marketers take with them the right tools—that is, not transferring an innate skill to balance a \$12 million budget within \$100,000, but remembering and implementing marketing's basic rules. Therefore, the following advice can help assemble your small company marketing tool kit.

◆ **Understand the customer.** Big companies can afford expensive customer research, while small companies often cannot pay for these "luxuries." Nevertheless, even on a limited budget, marketers can gain a keen understanding of their customers by scheduling learning exchanges with their sales departments, for example, or organizing focus groups with clubs or organizations such as a women's church group. They also can get insight from consumers by including brief customer satisfaction surveys with orders. (They should, however, be sure to include return postage.) Playing mystery shopper is another good way to glean customer information as well as check on the company's customer service department.

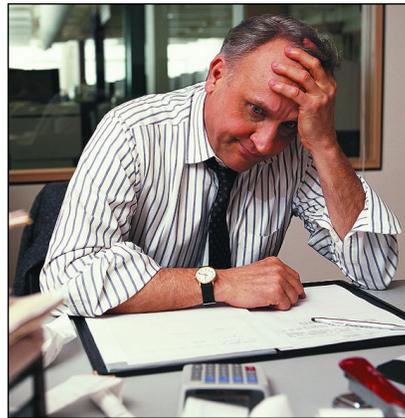
◆ **Develop a marketing plan.** Small companies have a tendency to "wing it," while large corporate bureaucracies often overplan at the expense of "doing." Seize the opportunity to have the best of both worlds—develop a plan and act upon it. Like all good, flexible marketing plans, small-company marketers must craft

their company's vision and strategy first before implementing the tactics and then coordinate the events to stretch the budget.

◆ **Be an "identity cop."** When forced to work with smaller budgets, it's often difficult to manage a company's and product's brand identities. Small-company marketers often make the mistake of trying to communicate too much with too little, but by projecting a single, strong idea and then religiously reinforcing it in all external and internal communications, marketers can further stretch their budgets while simultaneously building the company's brand.

◆ **Choose appropriate media.** Large companies' working media budgets often are fat enough to buy plenty of television spots. Thus, the small-company marketer often must make due with less expensive media such as direct mail, local cable buys, trade magazines, trade shows and the Internet, but each of these is excellent if they appropriately match the target audience and communicate the marketing message. Determining which budget-conscious media are best for the target audience should dictate how working media dollars are spent, not vice versa.

◆ **Don't forget the little things.** It's amazing how many marketers lose sight of the little things that not only reinforce identity and image, but also provide stimuli for repeat purchasing. And little things often are inexpensive to implement, like providing goods in image-conscious packaging or making sure the company's Web site downloads its information quickly. Perhaps most overlooked, however, is just plain old good customer service; saying "Thank you" to customers even if they merely



are browsing goes a long way. At the same time, marketers need to be careful not to waste marketing money on little things that don't provide value. For example, are those trade show pens really consistent with the company's identity?

◆ **Forge supply chain relationships.** Often, big companies have the luxury of paying attention to only their end-customers, not their suppliers. In fact, suppliers often salivate just to be associated with certain big-name companies. However, marketers at small companies need to treat their suppliers like partners because doing so often will lead to more attention from representatives of these firms, and a host of little things that prove quite beneficial for small companies, such as favorable delivery terms, may follow.

◆ **Cry "Uncle" if you need help.** While hiring a big-gun advertising or promotions agency may not be realistic, marketers occasionally need outside advice and assistance. While these professionals may be too costly for a small company on a regular basis, their services on an *ad hoc* basis—such as during a new-product launch or providing services such as copywriting or focus-group moderation—will pay for themselves and add value. Indeed, it may be much more costly to let opportunities pass by because there were not adequate resources or the right talent to evaluate and act upon them. ■

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