

Ask SCORE

I own a business that installs residential security systems. We've done fairly well in the three years we've been in business without doing any advertising, however, now we're seeing more competition and beginning to think maybe it's time we ran some ads. Any advice you can offer?

Advertising is a basic and valuable marketing tool for any small business. But developing and placing an ad does not mean it will immediately generate more sales.

Successful advertising requires a lot of research into the various options available—print, broadcast, Web, direct mail, etc.—and whether their potential results are worth the investment. In other words, people may see your ad, but will they respond to it? And are they the audience you want to reach in the first place?

Before you spend your hard-earned money on advertising, you'll want to understand what to realistically expect from it. Only then should you draw up a plan for moving ahead.

Ads can do the following:

- Attract new customers, prospects and leads.
- Encourage existing customers to spend more on your product or service.
- Build credibility, establish and maintain your “brand” or unique business identity, and enhance your reputation.
- Inform or remind customers and prospects of the benefits your business has to offer.
- Promote your business to customers, investors or others and slowly build sales.

But here's what advertising probably *cannot* do:

- Create an instant customer base.
- Solve your cash flow or profit problems by producing an immediate sales windfall.
- Cure poor or indifferent customer service.
- Create benefits that don't really exist or sell products and services that nobody wants.

In short, advertising won't guarantee quick sales for your product or service by itself, but it *will* get you noticed, if you do it right. That means you must know, as precisely as possible, the demographics of your target audience and craft a precise message about your product or service that will touch them. You must give customers a compelling reason to call, visit your website or stop by your business.

Other considerations include what your ad looks like, and the context in which it appears. Attempts to be clever may backfire, while something too simple may be overlooked. How often your ad appears is also important. Depending on your goals, a one-time placement may not be enough. When your ad appears many times in many places, there's a better chance your prospective customers see it. Just make sure the cost of multiple placements fits your advertising budget.

This column is brought to you by the Southern New Hampshire Chapter of SCORE, with more than 65 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on counseling, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score-manchester.org, with “Ask SCORE” in the subject line.

