

Low Cost Marketing Ideas

By Steve Strauss



Q: I am a solopreneur without a large marketing budget – actually without a marketing budget at all. Might you have some strategies that I can use to grow my business? Right now I basically get business from referrals, either from my old employer or from current clients. I know that I need to do more, but what?

M.K.

A: In his great book *The E-Myth*, Michael Gerber says that far too many small business people spend too much time working in their business and not enough time working on their business. Why is working on our business so important?

Because clients and customers leave.

They leave for all sorts of reasons – maybe they don't need you anymore, or they found what you do somewhere else that is more convenient or cheaper, or they moved, or whatever. Working on your business, especially if yours is a freelance or independent contractor sort of gig, means that it is not a crisis when a customer inevitably leaves.

Here then are four ways to work on your business – to grow your business – without breaking the bank:

I. Tap into the Power of Testimonials: Satisfied customers can be one of a small business' best marketing tools. A testimonial impresses potential customers because it is independent third-party validation that a business really is as good as it claims to be.

So get out there and ask some of your best customers to write you some letters of recommendation on their stationary. You can then take these testimonials and

- Put them in your shop window
- Add them to your website
- Add them as an email tagline
- Use them on your blog or e-newsletter
- Use them in sales presentations

Or what about adding a video testimonial to your website? Talk about making an impact.

2. Boost Your Word of Mouth Advertising: We all know that word of mouth is the best sort of advertising there is. But aside from just waiting or hoping that a customer passes your name along, you can

- Create a referral reward system that gives customers a discount when they refer you business
- Encourage comments on your Facebook page, blog or website
- Ask your best customers to recommend you

Finally, check out the organization *Le Tip*; a group whose purpose is to foster word of mouth referrals.

3. Stay in Touch: One way to make a one-off customer into a loyal, repeat customer is to stay top of mind. That is, if you want to get repeat business, your customer has to think of you when he or she has a need. And they will more likely think of you if you gently, consistently (but not too often) stay in touch with them.

Here are two ways to do this:

1. Social media is all the rage for a reason: It works. Creating a Facebook page for instance is easy, and by using contests and great content, you can get people to “like” it. Thereafter, that page becomes a friendly place to stay in touch. Tweeting can serve much the same function.
2. Email marketing is a great way stay in touch because it is permission marketing, that is, by signing up to receive your e-newsletter, customers are giving you permission to stay in touch with them.

4. Get Some Free Help: There is a lot to know and do when you run a business and none of us can do it all alone. Fortunately these days there is a lot of help out there, and much of it is free. Here are some places to check out:

- The Small Business Administration has field offices all over and a great website. Counseling and training is readily available. The same is true for
 - Small Business Development Centers, and
 - SCORE
- Chambers of commerce are in the business of helping their members succeed
- Like chambers, the purpose of a trade organization is to help its members
- Online forums and groups

Bottom line: Spending a little more time working on your business will allow you to work in it longer.

Today’s Tip: The Hartford recently released its inaugural Small Business Success Survey which polled 2,000 small business owners. The poll found that

- Despite high unemployment rates, finding qualified talent is a challenge for 59% of small business owners
- Achieving a comfortable lifestyle for themselves (79%) and their employees (72%) is important
- An overwhelming majority indicate they enjoy owning their business (90%)

And here is my favorite takeaway: 82% of the respondents defined success, at least partially, as doing something they feel passionate about and enjoy. Only 18% said profit is the most important factor in defining success.