

Don't Be A Lemming, And Other Lessons Of The Post-Mass Marketing Age

By Jay Siff

While you've been busy running your auto repair business, working hard to provide good service and reverse declining car counts, something has happened out there in the non-automotive world: the "accepted" rules of marketing have died. Gone. Kaput. And in their wake, a brand new promotional ballgame has arisen.

Fortunately for you, your competitors haven't noticed. But you should. Because while they're still hammering away with the same old, tired—and ultimately ineffective—advertising tactics, you have the opportunity to not follow suit. And in doing so, gain the upper hand in this hotly competitive marketplace.

You see, the onset of modern technologies such as email, the Internet, and customer database programs have changed the marketing game forever. Borrowing concepts from the direct marketing world and empowering them with an amazing ease of use, these new technologies have made communicating with customers simpler, more immediate, more measurable, and less expensive than ever.

One would think these breakthroughs would be immediately embraced by businesses everywhere. Yet it's amazing how many auto repair shops—independents and chains alike—still look at cheesy local television and radio commercials as the "gold standard" for marketing their business.

You know what? Let them believe that. Why should you follow others who are caught in old-school thinking, when the power of the post-mass marketing age is here?

John Wanamaker, the father of modern advertising, once said, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The trouble is, I don't know which half." Like Wanamaker, too many small business owners believe the effectiveness of marketing campaigns is just one of those things man was not meant to know. Perhaps that was true in Wanamaker's time. But it's certainly *not* true today!

In the modern world, the best way to get real bang for your marketing buck is to leverage this era's new tools to create immediate and one-on-one communications that target your best, most receptive customers and prospects. Capture these lucrative audiences and, once you've brought them to your door, give them a reason to come back. *That's* how to spend an advertising dollar without wondering where fifty cents of it went.

As an example, let's compare two methods of obtaining new customers: mass media marketing versus targeted direct mail. The mass media strategy ultimately depends on brand switching; that is, bombarding people who frequent your competition with messages, in hopes that someday they will want to try your operation instead.

Trouble is, it may take years before these folks have the inclination to make the switch from one brand to another. Why waste marketing dollars in a scattershot effort to pry loyal customers away from the other guy? Persuading a consumer to switch from a business he or she has frequented over a long period of time is a difficult, costly, low ROI proposition.

On the other hand, there is a vast pool of consumers who are not tethered by habit and inertia to their auto repair provider. In the United States today, large numbers of people relocate for many different reasons. “New movers”—people who are relocating from one geographical area to another—are a goldmine of market potential.

Research shows that new movers are 80% more likely to try out new products and businesses during the weeks and months following their relocation. In fact, the U.S. Postal Service has identified a “hyperspending” phase following a move, during which new residents spend \$7,100 on average for everything from refrigerators to takeout meals.

During this period, they are also looking for merchants who can provide the products and services they are going to need over the long term. Including, most notably, auto repair.

In her 1999 book *Making the Big Move*, noted career and relocation transition expert Cathy Goodwin outlined the importance of approaching new residents during the first few months following their move. This is a key period, one that occurs before the new residents have fully assimilated into their new neighborhood and established the habit of taking their business to your competition.

To bring in these new prospects, the key is to offer a “too-good-to-pass-up” offer: a gift certificate offering a *free* premium service. Not a discount...not a “buy one, get one free” deal...but a true giveaway, paired with a personalized letter that welcomes the recipient to your community and outlines your company’s location and services.

A huge percentage of prospects respond to such offers. Make sure that their first experience with your operation is warm, welcoming and professional, and chances are excellent you will have won yourself a loyal, long-term customer.

Bringing in a new customer, however, is just one weapon in today’s target marketing arsenal. To make gift certificates worth their cost, you need to keep customers coming back. You can do this by gathering email contact information from each customer, creating an electronic database, then offering specials that get those customers back in the door far faster than if you wait for the next appointment to occur.

Once you know who your customers are and how to reach them, it’s relatively easy to offer last-minute, one-week-only deals that will perk up car counts during slow weeks. Perhaps you offer 50% off the cost of a tire rotation and alignment service package. Compose a short email outlining the discount, include a certificate good for the package,

and hit “send.” Before long, you’ll have your best customers coming in once again for a sampling of your friendly, high-quality service.

Perhaps the best thing about these “new mover” and “loyal customer” strategies is that your customer database becomes the vehicle for establishing a measurable and definable ROI. Let the other guys fritter away their money on nebulous mass marketing campaigns. Thanks to your state-of-the-art approaches, you’ll know exactly what you’re spending. Better still, you’ll be able to generate business at a lower cost-per-customer than anyone in your service area.

While it’s true that the auto repair field is challenged with declining car counts and less frequent service appointments, it is by no means an epitaph for the industry. Starbucks, the wonder story of coffee retailing, has reshaped its category in an era when coffee consumption has actually decreased. It is, in fact, possible to thrive in a shrinking market.

To do so, savvy business owners must target sympathetic audiences, spark genuine interest in their company’s product or service, and keep those customers coming back for more. Don’t be a lemming. Mass marketing is dead—but by embracing new-media strategies, your business can remain very, very much alive.

About the Author

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