

Email: The New Secret Weapon Of FixedOps Marketing

By Jay Siff

While you've been busy running your fixed ops business, working hard to provide good service and maintain strong car counts, something has happened in the sales and marketing world: the "accepted" rules of promoting a business have died. Gone. Kaput. And in their wake, a brand new way of relating to customers has arisen.

Fortunately for you, many of your competitors haven't noticed. But you should. Because while they're still hammering away with the same old, tired—and ultimately ineffective—promotional tactics, you have the opportunity to not follow suit. And in doing so, gain the upper hand in your dealer's all-important parts, service and body repair businesses.

You see, the onset of modern technologies such as email, the Internet, and customer database programs have changed the 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 car dealers everywhere. Yet it's amazing how many dealerships still look at 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 people 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 one-on-one communications that target your best, most receptive customers and prospects. Capture these lucrative audiences and, once you've done so, give them multiple, valuable reasons to come back. *That's* how to spend an advertising dollar without wondering where fifty cents of it went.

But there are even more good reasons to embrace today's Internet-based communication channels. Never before have marketing messages been more immediate. Using targeted email sent to your most loyal customers, you can make an offer this morning and literally see cars line up this afternoon. *That's* direct response. What's more, when implemented correctly there is no such thing as "junk email"—the messages you send are not only welcomed by the recipient, but highly valued.

So how do you make email work for you—with minimal effort and technical knowhow? Simply 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.

Most merchants don't realize the incredible value to be found right under their noses, in the names and email addresses of people who already spend money with them. That information represents thousands of dollars in new revenue. And all you have to do to get it, is ask. "Would you like an email every so often for a free gift certificate?" is a good way to make the request at the time of payment. Chances are they'll say yes, after which the cashier can then ask the person to fill out a card listing their email address.

Once you have an accurate list, it's easy to offer last-minute, one-week-only deals, either through offers you send yourself or through an outside email marketing service. Perhaps you offer 50% off the cost of a tire rotation and alignment package. Compose a short email outlining the discount, include a certificate good for the package, and hit "send." Before long, you'll have people coming in once again for a sampling of your friendly, high-quality maintenance.

You can also use your prized email list to achieve other strategic sales goals. Say you're ready to launch a detailing operation and you need to jumpstart a customer base. By emailing your customers who come to you regularly for oil changes, you're tapped into people who know you, who like your service, who are used to stopping in, and who are interested in maintaining their cars. Offer these people membership in a "Complete Car Care Club" featuring two-fer specials every three months on detailing combined with a oil change. Kick it off with a too-good-to-pass-up deal good this Thursday and Friday *only*, and your detailing business is off and running.

If one of your fixed ops goals is to broaden your customer base, you can even use email to gain new customers from your existing ones. Encourage your senior citizen customers to refer you to their friends with a 25% off repair offer, good for both parties.

Perhaps the best thing about the "loyal customer" strategy is that your customer database becomes the vehicle for establishing a measurable and definable ROI. Let the other guys fritter away their money on slow, low-return 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 dealership fixed operations face more competition from a greater variety of sources than ever before, it doesn't at all mean that you can't have the upper hand. The key is to target your most receptive audiences, spark genuine interest in what you have to offer, and keep those customers satisfied and looking for new reasons to come back. Mass marketing may be dead—but by embracing new-media strategies, your fixed ops business can remain very, very much alive.

About the Author

JAY SIFF is CEO of Loyal Rewards (www.loyalrewards.com), a Perkasie, Pennsylvania-based company that helps retailers expand their customer base and encourage repeat visits through its unique, email-based business marketing system. The company's strategic business partner, Moving Targets (www.movingtargets.com), is a provider of new resident direct marketing programs. Loyal Rewards and Moving Targets have served over 20,000 merchants nationwide. Jay can be reached at 800-926-2451 or jay@movingtargets.com.

#