

## GUEST COLUMN

### **The Independent's New Secret Weapon**

*by Jay Siff*

Like garden strawberries in June, the independent grocer's opportunities for success have never been riper. After years of struggle against grocery superstore chains with their slick TV image campaigns and endless promotional budgets, independents once again have the means at their disposal to not only win new customers, but also to keep them coming back year after year.

So what has balanced the marketing scales—or perhaps even tipped them in the favor of the locally owned-and-operated grocery? The advent of new direct marketing tools that enable small businesses to inexpensively forge tailored, one-on-one customer relationships. With the host of new tools now available, neighborhood stores can cost-effectively reach out to potential and existing customers like never before.

The onset of modern technologies such as email, the Internet, and customer database programs have changed the marketing playing field forever. No longer does it take millions of advertising dollars to keep customers brand-loyal. In fact, in the battle of mass marketing versus one-on-one, guerrilla-style relationship building, the guerrillas clearly have an edge.

#### **Finding New Customers**

Let's compare how these two disciplines play themselves out in a key sales objective: obtaining new customers. The mass marketing approach ultimately depends on brand switching; that is bombarding people with messages, in hopes that someday they will want to try your store instead. Trouble is, it may take years before these folks have the inclination to make the switch.

Instead, new technologies make it easy to speak one-on-one with consumers who are not tethered by habit and inertia. A great place to look for such prospects is new residents. Most people don't realize that new movers represent a huge market—over 46% of all Americans moved at least once between 1995 and 2000, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures. As people enter a new community, they look for “new favorites”—local businesses that make them feel comfortable and at home. A neighborhood grocery store is the perfect example.

The key to this process is to find such people, then entice them into your store with an offer that is too good to pass up. A well-designed gift certificate sent through the mail for \$25 in free groceries fits the bill. And lest you think this is literally “giving away the store”, consider this: 87% of businesses who have properly applied this approach have rated it successful.

#### **Building Loyalty**

Of course, you have to turn these first-timers into loyal patrons through a great shopping experience. If you do so, you will find you've created brand loyalty where there was none before.

Once you have a customer, you can keep them coming back by fostering an intimate, two-way relationship through the effective use of email. Contrary to what most merchants think, people want to hear from local businesses they enjoy. In fact, they are more than willing to give you their email address—if you're willing to offer them something useful in return.

The next time they come in, have your cashier ask your customers if they would like to receive periodic emails good for giveaways or “dollar-off” coupons. Chances are they'll say yes; the cashier can then ask them to fill out a card listing their email address. This becomes your list of current, active patrons who enjoy your store and plan to return. Provide them periodically with emailed certificates good for buy-one-get-one-free, free dinner from your take-home counter with qualifying purchase, or other attractive offer, and you can generate additional business almost at will.

### **Be Creative**

Your email list can even be used to generate new customers, piggyback on co-op offers, or push new services like cooking classes. Perhaps a local youth group is holding a car wash in your parking lot this Saturday; you can show your civic involvement by supporting the car wash with a “bratwurst and coke” promotion. Email certificates for free samples, along with a variety of cents-off coupons, and you've created a ton of goodwill—and increased business.

Co-op promotions with other locally owned and operated businesses is another good idea. You're only limited by your imagination. By taking advantage of the latest digital and direct response techniques, then combining them with creative promotions that emphasize your community support, you'll have all you need to leverage your new secret weapon—and once again win against your big-name competitors.

### ***About the Author***

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