

Does It Still Pay To Advertise?

Karen Hall (*QP's* Managing Editor) forwarded an e-mail to me today, a request from a reader for an article on advertising strategy. "What works?" the reader asked, and specifically "What will work in this economic climate?" I think you'll agree that those are good questions!

The Purpose Of Advertising

As a starting point, let's consider the purpose of advertising. I think most printers approach advertising with the goal of keeping their name in front of their customers. I'd state that a little differently, though, and say that the capabilities of advertising include *keeping* your name in front of current customers and *putting* your name in front of potential customers. To me, that's an important distinction, especially considering that most printers have a greater need to develop new customers than to simply stay in front of old ones. I have written before that such things as newsletters have some value in keeping your name in front of current customers, but they don't do as much as most printers hope they will toward developing new ones. Your advertising strategy should be driven by your specific business goals, and if new customers are your goal, a tactic that works best on established customers isn't likely to get you where you're hoping to go.

How important is it, though, that *you* gain new customers? If you can grow your business by selling more to current customers, isn't that just as good? Sure it is! But how does just "keeping your name in front of" those customers help you to accomplish that? That answer is that it probably won't, unless you recognize and take advantage of another important capability of advertising—the ability to educate both customers and potential customers by telling them exactly what they could be buying from you! In other words, you'll have more success with your advertising if your goal is to keep both your name *and* your product line in front of all those people!

A Huge Canvas

There are many ways to advertise, and most of them work to at least some degree. If I were you, though, the core of my advertising program would be my website. Why? Because a website has nearly unlimited capability to tell your story. To further explain that, let's compare a website and a postcard. The postcard has limited "real estate" on which to place words and/or images. A website, on the other hand, can be a huge canvas to carry a wide range of words and images—including spoken words and moving images! I've been to hundreds of websites that integrate audio and video, although sadly, not too many of them belong to printers. And at the other end of the spectrum, I've been to hundreds of printers' websites that don't even take full advantage of the pages built into the template or standard design that they bought. What do I mean by that? For one thing, if your website doesn't include photos and bios of your staff, you're missing a *huge* opportunity. More importantly, if your website doesn't include a comprehensive listing/description of your products and services, you're not taking advantage of that ability to educate!

OK, hopefully you'll spend some time and money on your website, turning it into a great story-telling tool. Now the issue becomes pulling or driving people to it! You *pull* people to your website through Search Engine Optimization, using keywords and other strategies to increase the likelihood that your name will come up in their search. You *drive* people to your website by putting your name and product line and website address in front of them, frequently and creatively. And while I'm all for putting some of your resources into *pulling*, I think you'll have greater success with *driving* strategies, because you have more control over them. You can't know that someone will search on "printing, brochures, cary nc" every day, but you can invite people to visit your website every day.

Let's go back to the comparison between a postcard and a website. The postcard doesn't have enough "real estate" to tell your whole story, but it has more than enough to invite a visit to your website! Do you see how you can use one medium to drive people to another one?

Now, let's consider what has to happen in order to make this strategy successful. First, the postcard has to get to the person who buys the printing. A prerequisite to an effective *driving* strategy is to develop a real database, and you're kidding yourself if you think that list you bought from one of the commercial list suppliers has all—or even most!—of the right names in it. Make some phone calls and turn that mailing list into a real database!

Next, the postcard has to be visually stimulating, catching and holding your target's attention long enough for him/her to get the message: *Visit Our Website!*

Third, your target has to take a physical step and type your URL into his/her browser. Assuming that you met the first two challenges, a lot of *driving* strategies fail at this physical obstacle. So is there a way to minimize it? Yes, an e-mail with a one-click link has a greater likelihood of delivering your customer or prospect to your website. This is not a guarantee by any means, and we may only be talking about the difference between a 2% response and a

5% response. Still, when you add in consideration of the relative cost of a postcard and an e-mail, I think you'll agree that an e-mail *driving* strategy makes a lot of sense.

I am not talking about spam, though, and that's important. I think you'll be much better off with a program that starts with a phone call: "I'd like to send you an invitation to visit our website. I'm going to e-mail it to you, so all you'll have to do is click the link." Obviously, if you don't have the individual's e-mail address, you could ask for it on this phone call. In fact, if you don't even have the name of the person who orders the printing, you could ask for *that* on a phone call: "I'd like to send a link to our website to the person who orders the printing for your company. Can you tell me who that is, and also give me his/her e-mail address?"

Selling or Advertising?

OK, I can hear some of you thinking: "Wait a minute, this started out about *advertising*, but now he's talking about calling people on the phone. Isn't that *selling*?" Sure, it's all selling, or more correctly, it's all marketing. Remember, the original question was: "What will work in this economic climate?" This is a strategy that will work!