

Micro Marketing

There's an old southern story about Jack and Jeb who decided to take a really close look at a sleeping alligator. Jack said to Jeb, "But what do we do if the gator wakes up?"

Jeb said, "We run for it."

Jack said, "But, Jeb, a man can't outrun an alligator."

And Jeb replied, "Well, the way I see it, I don't have to outrun the alligator. I only have to outrun *you!*"

In the printing business, there's a lot to be said for outrunning your competition. And sometimes the best way to do it is one competitor—and one account—at a time.

Micro Marketing

I remember studying both macro and micro-economics back in my college days. I can't tell you that I remember much of what I learned back then, but I do remember the differentiation between the two fields. Macro-economics concerns large economic systems, like an entire nation's economy. Micro-economics concerns smaller systems, like the price-cost relationship within a single company. Just as there are macro and micro considerations in economics, there can be big-system and small-system considerations in marketing.

I will always encourage you to build your understanding of the larger marketing issues, and all of the various "sub-components" of the overall marketing discipline. But I see a lot of opportunity for you in micro-marketing, too. To expand on a common analogy, much of the typical printer's marketing efforts would probably be considered a "shotgun" approach; a more progressive and marketing-oriented printer might employ a more targeted "rifle" approach; in micro-marketing, we're talking about a finely-tuned, competition shooting rifle. We're really talking about an approach to displacing specific competitors at specific accounts.

Starting Point

The starting point in this kind of marketing has to be an understanding of your previous successes. Why do your current customers buy from you? What was it that made them switch to you from the printer they were using before you? (That's something that many printers don't seem to fully understand. Just as all of the people that you're trying to sell to now already have a printer, all of the people that you *are* selling to now had a printer before you. Those customers made a decision to switch and do business with you! The reasoning behind that decision provide you with incredibly important information.)

How do you get the answers to these questions? You ask your customers! But don't let yourself be satisfied with the most obvious answers. "We like your quality," they'll tell you. "We like your service. We like you!" Those aren't good enough answers if you're trying to learn something that will impact your marketing ability. You need to know exactly what it was that you said that convinced them to give you a chance. You need to know exactly what it is that you do that no competitor has been able to do. The more specific the information you gain, the more likely it is that you'll be able to load that "ammunition" into your finely-tuned competition shooting rifle and hit something with it!

The Weakest Competitor

I hope you see the value in learning everything you can about the people you've succeeded with. Another part of this process is to keep track of who you're succeeding *against!* Be on the lookout for a pattern that identifies a particular printer that you seem to have particular success in displacing. That's your weakest competitor, and the next thing I'd do is to go searching for the rest of that printer's customers.

A word of advice here...one of the things that has always drawn me to this business is that printers are such nice people. Most of the printers I know really are! You're the kind of people who have focused your efforts on quality and customer service rather than competition. You're the kind of people who have always said, "There's enough business out there for all of us. There's no need for the kind of cut-throat competition that exists in other industries."

Here's the advice...those days are over! There is not enough business out there for every printer, at least not enough to allow every printer to really prosper. If you want to be one of the lasting success stories in this business, you have to keep your business moving and growing. In order to do that, you have to win business away from other printers.

Remember that *everyone* already has a printer. It's either you already, or someone else is selling them what you'd like to be selling them. The decision to start buying from you has to also include a decision to stop buying from the other guys. The essence of micro-marketing is to lead a targeted prospect to make *both* of those decisions.

Loading The Rifle

As I noted earlier, it's important to keep track of who you're succeeding *against*. That identifies your weakest competitor(s). But remember that you also have to learn what each of your vulnerable competitors has been doing *wrong* in the accounts you've already taken away from them. That's where you find the ammunition for a real rifle-shot approach to displacing that competitor in other accounts.

Let's say that you've recently taken several customers away from XYZ Printing. In asking those new customers why they made the decision to change printers, you learn that each of the customers was perfectly happy with XYZ's quality, but dissatisfied with their service. In each case, it was a couple of late deliveries that soured the customer on the printer they'd been doing business with. Do you see that you'd be way off target if you went out and made presentations to other XYZ customers about your quality?

To develop a rifle-shot presentation against XYZ Printing, I would put together some compelling evidence of my own company's reliability and on-time delivery record. I'd describe our scheduling and job-tracking process. I'd be prepared to talk about the things that my company has done to promote or improve efficiency or productivity. I'd bring testimonial letters which support the promise I'm going to be making...that this prospect can count on me and my company to get his or her jobs delivered on time.

Firing Away

But here's a key point! In making this presentation, I would make no mention of the competitor! I would not start out by asking, "Do you ever have delivery problems with XYZ Printing, like some of the other customers we've taken away from them have had?" I don't think you ever gain much—if anything—by speaking badly of your competitors. I want the prospect to feel like I *instinctively* know what's important to him or to her. I might start out with the question, "How important is on-time delivery to your company?"

The real rifle-shot comes at the end, though. I'd say something like this: "I know that you're doing business with another printer right now, and that you must have at least some level of satisfaction with them. All I would ask you to consider is this...do their service policies and procedures stack up to ours? And do you think they've equipped themselves and committed themselves to always meet your delivery needs? If you have any doubts of that, you really ought to think about giving me a try!"

If this prospect has encountered delivery problems with XYZ Printing in the past, you've almost certainly hit the bulls-eye. You've planted a seed that will cause that prospect to question the reason for continuing to do business with your competitor.

Deeper Issues

Quality and service are the obvious issues, but your rifle-shot might be even more effective if you can uncover and aim at even deeper issues. Here's an example: I once learned that several of my customers had soured on a specific competitor because that printer's invoices were always messed up. The invoices were difficult to figure out, and when these customers did finally figure them out, they often found charges that they weren't expecting. The printer's quality, service, and quoted prices were fine, but every job turned into a wrestling match at the invoice stage.

At that point, our own invoices weren't all that easily understandable (although they were at least generally correct and free from hidden charges.) But we realized that we were onto something that provided the basis for improving our own billing practices, and turning them into a marketing advantage. We asked our current customers to help us develop an invoicing format that gave them all the information they wanted (and needed to help promote prompt payment...certainly a benefit to us!)

Armed with a few samples of our new invoices—and a few testimonials from current customers about the benefits they perceived—I went out to call on some of that printer's other customers. I said, "I know that you have plenty of printers calling on you talking about quality and service and pricing...I'd like to talk to you about something else today."

The results? Three of the four prospects I had targeted told me that I'd given them something to think about. One of them started doing business with us very soon afterward, and turned into a very good customer. Another one never gave me any business, but did drop the printer they'd been dealing with and start doing business with someone else! The third prospect told me that I'd get a chance if my prices were competitive, and as often happens, sometimes they were and sometimes they weren't. I got some work from them but never considered them one of my better customers.

Still, I think you'd agree that any strategy that gains you one very good customer is a pretty good strategy. I think that story is a pretty good example of what micro-marketing can mean to you.