

Taking Time To Plan

by Bill Carmody, Chief Marketing Officer, Seismicom

Ask yourself this question: “Who do I work for?”

Seems simple enough. Initially, you might answer, “Myself” or you might name off a person in your company who is higher-up on the corporate food chain. But then, you might think about the question a little bit more and answer, “My customers”.

The truth is that you work for the people who pay your bills. While the paycheck may come from the company itself, the people who truly pay your salary are the same people who buy your products and services. So what happens when you discover that few of these people have any loyalty or preference to your company?

Surviving on Short-Term Gains

In today’s “Hurry-Up-And-Inflate-My-Numbers-For-Wall-Street” mentality (courtesy of your neighborhood dot coms and venture capitalists), I believe that many companies have traded in their long-term plans in exchange for short-term gains. These short-term gains come in many shapes and sizes; they include everything from inflated web traffic and overstated membership numbers to sales figures based on price discounts so deep that they result in a loss for the company.

It’s not difficult to create a free-for-all when you give away your products or pay-off your target audience to become a member of your site. But then what? Smart marketers know that artificially jacking up these measurement criteria in the short-term will only cause more problems later on down the road – and yet they do it anyway. Why?

Much of today’s online marketing and promotions are a direct reflection of the internal chaos that many companies are going through. Brainstorming concepts developed in a Monday morning status meeting are expected to be live by the next week’s status meeting (if not sooner).

Marketers reacting to this kind of demand for immediate results are rarely given the chance to take a step back and build their long-term strategies. There’s a huge difference between flexibility and chaos. Reacting to demand without a well thought-out strategy is like rolling the dice and hoping for the best.

From Chaos To Smart Marketing

The irony of all the internal chaos is that much of it is self-imposed. By not taking the time to build a long-term plan (even for the next 12 to 18 months), you are forced to react to what the competition is doing and to what other people within the company tell you.

As my handyman grandfather used to tell me, “Measure twice. Cut once.” Those four little words are extremely powerful. They boil down all the issues related to not taking the time to plan. If carpenters cut their wood before they were confident of their measurements, they risked wasting more wood and adding their work to the scrap pile.

Marketing (online or offline) is no different. If you don't take time to plan up-front, then you end up wasting a lot of time and money doing things that probably will not work. Without proper plans in place, you might as well be shooting at a moving target. It's extremely difficult to tell what works, because satisfying your immediate objective may actually move you farther away from your long-term goals.

The Right Customer At The Right Price

Creating a 12 to 18 month plan forces you (and your colleagues) to agree upon your long-term goals and the best course of action to accomplish those goals. Moreover, these goals may conflict with your short-term inflation strategies, as giving away your product or paying-off your customers could ultimately be counter-productive in the long-term.

At a recent conference I attended, one of the speakers put up a slide that talked about three different customer acquisition strategies. These strategies included:

1. Any customer at any price.
2. The right customer at any price.
3. The right customer at the right price.

Short-term gains usually fall under the first and second categories of getting customers at any price (be they targeted or not). But to get the right customer at the right price, you must develop a plan that will create awareness, interest, desire and action all for the right cost of acquisition.

Long-Term Benefits of Planning

Once a plan has been developed, it's okay to be flexible – especially when new information has been added or discovered. Building the plan will provide a roadmap that everyone can come back to. This does not mean that you must stay the course, but there should be strong rationale for diversions.

While long-term plans do not provide “quick-fix” results, they have long lasting staying power from which marketers can reap the benefits. Well thought-out marketing and promotions not only capture the attention of the target audience, but they stay rooted in the minds of consumers. They have the best referrals because people actually think about the promotion and tell their friends about it.

The bottom line is, when you take time to plan, it shows. Your programs are more effective because you've had time to think through the various angles and potential problems. When immediate action is needed, the plan provides a well-constructed starting point. But the biggest benefit of planning is the avoidance of costly mistakes and the elimination of counter-productive marketing efforts.

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