

The Shoestring

The budget is tight. The budget is always tight. Advertising and marketing are an afterthought. Don't fret. This is a common theme with Main Street merchants. But even if you don't have a lot of money to spend, you can still market yourself effectively.

How? **Spend TIME.**

Time equals money. If you don't have one, you have to spend the other.

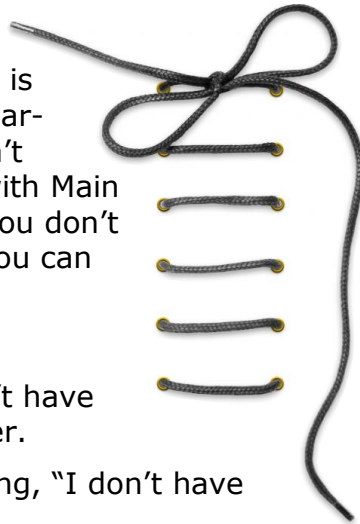
Of course, right now you're saying, "I don't have time, either." That's okay, too.

The seven methods here – **Word-of-Mouth, Social Media, Networking, Collaboration, Cause Marketing, Fixed-Return Marketing** and **Classes** require either just a little time each day or are something you're already doing, but here's a better way to do them.

The Message

Before you begin marketing you have to know what to say. **What is your message?** What makes you a worthy destination for customers?

The answer is simpler than you think. Just ask your current customer base why they shop with you. The reasons they give can be boiled down into one or two points. Just pick one of those points, preferably the one that speaks most to the heart, and that becomes your message.



Speak to the Heart



Why the heart? Because emotions are always stronger at getting people to act than logic or information. We use logic to justify what the heart has already decided. This is the essence of all persuasion (and branding).

Find that message, that emotional reason why customers already come to your business, and you'll have a message for your marketing. The cool thing is that for every customer who comes to you for that reason there are a dozen more who would act for the very same reason if they only knew you.

#1 Word-of-Mouth

We all know word-of-mouth is the best form of advertising. But to get someone to talk about you, you have to give them something remarkable to talk about.



Every business thinks they have great customer service, a fabulous selection, and competitive prices. These things don't stir your customers into action.

To garner WOM you have to do one of 4 things:

- ◆ Create **Stark Raving Fans** out of your regular customers by making them *feel special*
- ◆ Have an **Over-the-Top Design** element in your store that everyone *has to see*
- ◆ Have **Over-the-Top Interactions** so spectacular they *write books* about it.
- ◆ Have **Over-the-Top Generosity** that brings them back, but this time *with their friends*.

Make Them Feel Special: You need to cultivate the relationship you have with your customers the same way you would with your BFF's.

How? By making them feel **Important** and **Special**.

Think about your circle of friends. What makes them your friends? How do you treat them differently than other people you know?

You probably know more about them. You know their likes and dislikes. You share your inner most secrets with them. You know how to make them feel better.

Have you tried to get to know your customers this way?



Insider Information: One way to make your customers feel special is to share your secrets with them. Draw them into the inner circle of your business by telling them a little bit more than you would tell a complete stranger. Give them news or info that no one else has such as the "why" behind the products you sell, the decision process you made to bring in a certain line of products, the history behind your business and your suppliers.



Secrets make us feel special. When someone shares something with us we feel a closer bond with them. Best of all, most of us are lousy at keeping secrets. We want to share them because it feeds our ego and helps us draw people into our own inner circles.



This is an especially effective way to empower your customers to feel closer to you and be more likely to talk about you to others.

Over-the-Top Customer Service: Pike's Place Fish Market in Seattle has such an incredible level of customer service that it actually becomes a show. Not only do people stop by to shop for seafood, they come for the excitement of the lively interactions between employees and customers, employees and employees, and employees and the fish.



No one leaves unhappy (and few leave empty handed).

In fact, their service is so legendary, a best-selling book and training program was launched about it. If you haven't read the book "**FISH!**", you should.

How can you change your policies, procedures or attitudes to create a new, fresh experience that customers won't ever find in a big-box discounter, department store or mall? How can you raise the bar so high they have to talk about you?

Over-the-Top Generosity: Here are two examples of over-the-top generosity to show you what I mean.

Free Dessert: You're out to eat at a fancy restaurant. All night you see beautiful desserts roll by. The dessert menu is on the table, but the prices are high. Your dinner guests suggest maybe splitting one among the table.



Just then the waiter approaches and says, "You guys have been a great table tonight. I'd like to buy all of you your own dessert. What would you like?"

Not only will it be one of the best desserts you ever had, you'll be talking about it for years.

Months later when your friends say, "Where do you want to eat?" You'll say, "How about so-and-so's? The last three times I got a free dessert!"

For the price of sugar and flour, the restaurant is buying some incredible loyalty and creating stark raving fans.

Free Watch Battery: Your watch has died. You take it to the local jewelry shop to get a new battery. The shop keeper takes your watch into the back room while you stare at all the shiny, beautiful rings, earrings, and necklaces in front of you.



A few minutes later he returns with your watch.

You ask, "How much?"

"It's on the house," he replies with a smile.

For the price of a battery (he probably bought in bulk) and two minutes of time, he just bought a whole bunch of praise and word-of-mouth. Plus, he got you to stand there looking at his merchandise for a few minutes with nothing else to do—a jeweler's dream!

Is there something you could do that would be over-the-top, unexpected generosity? The key here is unexpected. Don't announce it. Just do it. Then let your customers announce it for you.

#2 Using Social Media



Facebook is FREE. Twitter is FREE. LinkedIn is FREE. Most Social Media platforms are free for you to use – at least in terms of *money*.

The truth is that everything in life costs either time or money. Social Media costs you time.

It takes time to gather a huge following of people interested in your business. It takes time to build a relationship with your fan base. It takes time to learn how to post, where to post, what to post. It takes time because you have to post daily if not more often.

But if you don't have the money, spend the time and you will get results. Not right away – that takes time, too. But to paraphrase a Chinese Proverb... The best time to start using Social Media is five years ago. The next best time is today.

Just remember that it is called "social" media, not "scream-at-them" media. For your social media to be effective you have to think of it as a tool for creating re-

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relationships, those same BFF kind of relationships you use to get word-of-mouth.

Use your social media for sharing secrets, for getting to know your customers better. Ask and listen to your customers. It is all about the conversation, and mostly about what **they** say, not what you say.

#3 Network Your Way to Increased Traffic



Attend Chamber of Commerce functions, Service Group luncheons, open board meetings, any place that has movers and shakers in your town.

Practice people's names by using them as often as possible in conversation. People love being known. Practice **listening skills** by asking questions about other people's businesses more than you talk about your own.

The goal is not to sell yourself – that turns people off – but to make contacts with people who will remember you positively for your attentiveness and friendliness.

Don't spread yourself too thin. At each event make it a goal to meet and get to know only one or two people. Any more than that and you won't have time to make a lasting impression or know anyone well. And always send a thank you note to each person who gives you the time of day. They *will* remember you if you do.

#4 Collaboration

If you're downtown, you're not alone. There are other shops with the same limited budgets for advertising, with whom you can partner and assist.

Here are two ways to tap into these resources.

The Downtown Scavenger

Hunt: You already have a captive audience downtown inside all those office buildings, other shops and restaurants. But many of them haven't set foot in your store.



Photo by Sommer Engelter

One way to bring them in is to have each business create a team of employees and have a competition to see which team can visit the most businesses in a month or season. Encourage teams to take fun, creative photos at each location and award prizes to the team with the most visits and the team with the most creative photos.

The Local Businesses Connected Night:



Photo by Linda Hays

Invite all your fellow downtown retailers to bring their laptops and join you one night at the local wi-fi hotspot.

Then spend the next few hours online creating Facebook Fan Pages, Google Accounts, Yelp Profiles, etc. Those who are more computer savvy can help the others navigate their way around.

You can write reviews for each other, join their fan clubs, comment on their sites and help each other draw interest.

Not only will this help you all get a better presence online, you'll also get to know your fellow business owners better, including the services they offer that you might not have known about.

Who knows? All this collaboration might lead to more opportunities for cross-marketing promotions, too.

#5 Cause Marketing

You probably get dozens of requests for donations every month. And every charity promises you big exposure. Yeah, right. You've already learned that the only benefit to you is if you give away a gift certificate. At least you get one person to step inside your door. But what if you got 30% of that group's fan base to give you their business even if only for one night? It's easy to do.

The next time a charity or non-profit approaches you for money, tell them that you'll set up one special day just for them (*or night or whatever works best for you*).



All they have to do is promote to their members that for every dollar they spend, you'll donate 5% to their organization.

This way you get the exposure and traffic first. Then they get their money in an equal proportion to the business they gave you. Think of it as a guaranteed return on your charitable donation.

It's a win-win-win scenario. You win because you attract new customers that they send you. They win because they get money and publicity for their group. Their supporters win because they get to "donate" just by shopping for what they already need.

#6 Fixed-Return Marketing

If your shoestring is a little bit longer, you may consider doing traditional advertising. One of the biggest problems with traditional advertising, however, is measuring the return-on-investment. You would like to know that if you spend X dollars on advertising you'll get Y dollars in business. Unfortunately, traditional advertising just doesn't work that way.

But there is a surefire way to draw more traffic where your cost is fixed, **where you know exactly how much you will spend per customer gained**. And best of all, you don't have to pay that cost until the customer makes her first purchase.

Intrigued?

Here is how it works (and it is so simple).

Print up a whole bunch of gift certificates for \$5.00 each. Carry them with you wherever you go. Hand them out freely and unannounced every time you meet someone new, telling them how much you would appreciate it if they gave your business a try.



Take them with you at Networking events. It leaves a lasting impression on someone whom you have just met. Take them on public outings. You never know when you might meet a new customer.

As for your costs... You only have to "pay" for the ones that are redeemed. And if your markup is keystone, the cost per customer is only \$2.50 out of your pocket (the cost of the goods sold). And for every \$2.50 you spend

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you have a new happy customer who has made a purchase *in your store* (probably for far more than the \$5 value of the gift certificate)!

Sure, you might give some away to existing customers. Sure, you might have some customers get two or three. That's perfectly okay. Think of those gift certificates as over-the-top generosity.



The rest are marketing expenses that bring you new customers for only \$2.50 each.

Note: I didn't say coupons. Don't give out coupons. You won't get as much of a draw and you won't get any of that over-the-top generosity word-of-mouth from it. Stick to gift certificates, unannounced, and given from the heart. Your return and your WOM will be better!

If your average ticket is much larger because of the price of your goods (such as a jeweler or bike shop), you can make the amount of the gift certificate larger. Just keep it within reason so that your ROI is worth it for the new business it brings you.

#7 Classes

You're already an expert in your field. Otherwise you wouldn't be trying to make it as an independent retailer. Without passion for the product, you probably wouldn't be in the business you're in.



Why not get people to pay you for your expertise?

You do that by **offering classes in your store.**

If you're a crafter, have craft classes. Charge for the cost of the goods, set up tables and teach people simple crafts that they can do at home—with supplies from your store!

If you are a frame shop, have a class on colors. If you are a hair salon have a class on curling irons or new techniques they can do at home. If you are a jeweler have a class on identifying gems. If you are a shoe store have a class on walking/running safely. If you are a clothing store have a class on New York fashions.

Make the class free or a nominal fee to cover the cost of materials. Your return comes from repeat business and word-of-mouth.

No matter what your specialty, you can come up with a creative way to teach what you know to your would-be customers. And when you do, you turn those people into insiders, you give them something remarkable to talk about, and you get them back into your store time and time again.

Spend the Time

Marketing is far more than simply buying ads in print or on the air. And most marketing won't cost you an arm and a leg. If you are willing to spend the time, you will definitely see the results. And remember... When you don't have the money, you have to spend the time.



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