

MARKETING

Showcase Qualities to Build Your Brand When You Are the Brand

Many sole proprietors and small business owners, especially service providers who deliver much of their work themselves, become intrinsically tied to their brands as individuals.

When your name becomes synonymous with the qualities you want to showcase – leadership, creativity or innovation, for example – you gain valuable traction in the marketplace. Likewise, when your name becomes linked to less desirable attributes, like insincerity or lack of professionalism, it can derail your business success.

By learning how to present your business and yourself in the best possible light – and to avoid shining a negative light on yourself – you receive tangible business rewards. Here are seven practices you can adopt today.

1. Network effectively since strategic relationship networking is the best way to build a positive brand when you are the brand. Think about the strategic alliances you'd like to form with complementary businesses. Think about the circles your customers travel in. And consider the industry you work in.

Create a networking plan that incorporates these types of groups but avoids your spreading yourself too thin. Remember that your goal at a networking event is to set the stage for a relationship, not to close a deal by shoving your business card at dozens of people. Give your card only to people who ask and follow up with the individuals you find a connection with. It's at the follow-up lunches and coffees that your networking will flourish.

2. Get involved in leadership positions within your business and networking organizations. Once you identify the best networking circles to travel in, get involved in the groups. You'll gain valuable visibility by becoming a leader within the organization. Your name will typically be announced at events, highlighted on the group's Web site or in the newsletter and give you instant



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credibility with new members and guests at events, who will quickly see who the "players" are.

3. Create a brand and then walk the walk and talk the talk. A corporate identity is the best investment you can make as a business owner. Your corporate identity clarifies for your prospects, clients and colleagues that you are committed to your business. It also levels the playing field when you're competing with larger companies by showcasing your skills and expertise.

Your brand, however, goes beyond your logo and print materials. It is reflected in every interaction someone has with you or your company. Creating and communicating a consistent, professional image – including sending e-mail messages without typos, dressing appropriately for meetings and networking events, and answering the phone professionally – can either reinforce or weaken your company brand.

4. Use the best type of marketing collateral and track its success with each sales situation. It's not enough to create marketing materials. You have to select the right piece to deliver in each sales situation. For example, your retail location may benefit from a direct mail postcard sent to targeted consumers in the area. Your clients may respond

to a 3D promotion that makes a splash. Think about your audience and goals, and make sure to track the success of each campaign.

5. Keep in touch with clients via a compelling electronic and/or print company newsletter. Newsletters are an excellent tool for leveraging your client relationships and staying in front of prospects, suspects and colleagues. They work best when they are visually appealing and contain relevant, readable copy. You'll build a strong brand if you stick to a publication schedule. Too many companies send a message that they can't commit to a project when they launch a newsletter and then fail to publish regularly.

6. Publish articles in trade and business publications to highlight your expertise. You'll gain third-party credibility every time a trade or business publication publishes an article you've written. You'll gain even more success if you leverage the coverage by securing reprints to post on your Web site, send to clients and hand out in sales calls.

7. Conduct seminars or speak publicly to share your expertise. If you present a topic of interest to your target audience in a way that delivers immediate value and showcases your expertise, you'll build a reputation in the marketplace as an expert. When you strategically follow up after a presentation with issues of your newsletter or a supplemental handout, you maintain the momentum of your talk and turn audience members into loyal customers.

You have many opportunities to build a successful brand for you and your business. Ask yourself what words you'd like people to think of when they hear your company name, and then create plan to achieve that result.

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