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[BizWise] Marketing

Message mogul

Marketer gets word out on multiple concepts

BY JONATHAN MAZE

Chris Hurn loves attention. Or at least he loves it when his businesses get attention, because attention frequently translates into sales.

So over the years, the marketing pieces he's sent to prospective customers of his lending company, Mercantile Commercial Capital, have included prescription bottles, fake wallets, bank bags and even sealed popcorn bags. "All to basically get my message out," Hurn said. "Whatever your message is, it doesn't matter if it doesn't get read." The point: As outlandish as they can seem, attention-getting packages at least ensure that a message is read.

So it's not entirely surprising that Hurn has brought this marketing sensibility to his franchise, Kennedy's All-American Barber Club. Hurn and his partners have been aggressive in marketing the hair care membership concept despite an economy that would seemingly make any perceived luxury a difficult sell.

That marketing plan is highlighted by a big, black box that the company sends to all serious candidates. Inside the box is a straight razor - without the blade - a shaving brush, DVD of

company information, a booklet, a copy of the company's FDD and a plaque with the prospect's name on it. "That's our piece that competes against (most companies') two-pocket folder that may or may not have a DVD in it," Hurn said. "That's the push-them-over-the-edge piece."

Hurn has a simple, yet shrewd reason for what he calls his "shock-and-awe box," which easily takes up a large chunk of space on whatever platform on which it is resting. "What usually happens if you don't want to do the two-pocket folder franchise, you just throw that folder in the garbage," Hurn said. "But that box is difficult to throw away. It's a nice looking piece. It's going to sit on your desk a while, staring back at you.

"It gives us a better chance to work with them. They might even give us another look because we went to that extent."

Marketing is a vital component in a franchise's growth prospects, but with so many franchises out there looking for owners it can be difficult to stand out. But whether flashy or eye-catching marketing strategies work has generally

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been a matter of debate.

Hurn, however, says that such promotional materials should be part of a broad marketing strategy that takes advantage of numerous mediums. When a company has a strong marketing plan, he said, it could often be difficult to measure the different components. "Sometimes it's a cumulative effect," he said. "You're not sure what one thing tipped them over. If you're creative, disciplined and send things regularly through different multimedia, it's difficult to track the one thing that worked. And it's probably not one thing, but the accumulation of all the things that you do."

Despite that, Hurn said, marketing should be viewed as an investment. Perhaps the response rate may not seem good, but the item you're selling is big enough that price paid for a market-

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ing campaign would still have a strong return. Hurn added that, when something works, companies shouldn't limit themselves to budget constraints.

"Say you budget 9 percent of revenue for marketing," Hurn said. "But you've found something that really works and has a really strong return on investment. Are you going to say that once you hit your 9 percent of revenue, you're done? Of course not. You're going to keep doing it. That's what a smart business person does."

Hurn said that franchisors have generally been good at franchise sales, but not so much when it comes to marketing. "If you can't make people walk in the door, you don't have much of a business," he said.

He spends 80 percent of his time at his businesses on marketing matters. "I guess I'm a banker," he said, "but I tell people that I market our commercial lending services. That's what I do."

"I could be the world's greatest banker, but if I didn't have the ability to tell people about my specialized knowledge and skills, it wouldn't matter. There are plenty of broke geniuses out there who have no idea how to market their abilities and talents. The same thing applies in the business world."

Marketing 101

Given the steady stream of interesting marketing ideas coming from the offices of Mercantile Commercial Capital, we figured that its CEO, Chris Hurn, would have some tips. He did. The bigger question is whether we have enough room in the magazine to fit them all.

What are they thinking about?

Some of the best marketing pieces take advantage of what people are thinking about at a given time. So a direct-mail piece from Mercantile late last fall -

amid discussions about how to rescue banks - was designed to look like a wallet with a "note" that said, "In this wallet you'll find your financial rescue plan."

Tell people the benefits

Many marketing pieces focus on a business talking about how great it is, Hurn said. The message should be the other way around. "What do I care if 80 percent of the Fortune 500 are your clients?" Hurn said. "What's in it for me? You've got to convert the message into how it's a benefit for me."

Personalize your marketing

Yes, a marketing piece with a lot of personality may turn some people off, but it'll turn others on. "And the people you attract will be your rabid fans," Hurn said.

More information, please

Remember: Not everybody does e-mail. And some people - gasp! - don't even like the Internet. So include multiple methods of communication in an ad or marketing piece, including phone number, address, fax and, yes, the Web site.

Differentiate yourself

Many prospects look at multiple brands and get inundated with mailings, many of which look similar. And a lot of direct mail pieces are little more than a single-page letter in an envelope. Do something with that piece to stand above the clutter. "You can send four pages in an envelope with the same, 42-cent stamp," Hurn said. "Use them."

Be consistent

Marketing should be consistent and steady. But not everybody has the patience or wherewithal to do it. "If you arrive in someone's mailbox every



Kennedy's prospects get this box from the franchise in part because it's tough to throw away.

month like clockwork, pretty soon they'll come to expect it," Hurn said. Yes, it might take you time for the message to work, but in the end it'll be worth it.

Variety helps

Don't limit yourself to a single medium. Use ads, TV, radio, the Internet, e-mail, DVDs, publications. And don't forget newsletters, which many businesses don't do even though they are highly successful at getting a message across. And direct mail also works. "You can't do just one thing and expect it to work," Hurn said. "You've got to do lots of things." ■