

How to Sell to Businesses: 2009

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1. Why are some firms successful at direct selling into businesses and others not?

The big problem in selling to businesses is that while the business people who will read your advertisements have become increasingly sophisticated in their purchasing, while business systems have become increasingly exotic and high tech, and while some companies have pushed forward and developed modern forms of selling which match the sophistication of the firms to whom they sell, a large number of suppliers have stuck with the traditional approach to selling.

As such, their advertising appears to be somewhat out-of-date to many firms. This is not to say that people are looking at it specifically saying that it is out-of-date, but to them it just feels that way – and so they turn away.

But because these companies generally just see what other firms do, and so often see other adverts that look just like their own, they don't realise quite how far the market has moved on.

There's also another factor. If you have an advertisement that is not particularly modern, but a product that is good, the chances are that you will find that you will get some sales. So it often won't be the fact that sales are non-existent, but rather that they are not as good as you'd like them to be. And that can be a hard problem to resolve. Because you are getting some sales it can be tempting to hold on to the existing format and keep advertising in that way, rather than try anything that is radically different.

What we are not talking about here is the medium – it is not the case that suddenly direct mail is doing worse than it ever did before or that firms are blocking out all emails. Rather we should look at it like this...

- The speed of change in advertising is accelerating, just as the speed of change in IT, social habits, clothing, attitudes, standards and everything else is accelerating.
- In the past six months many firms have utterly changed their attitudes towards financial institutions and those who run them – something that is not reflected by simply saying, “in the current recession...”
- In the past few years fashions and trends in businesses have swung forwards and back, ranging from outsourcing telephone support, to abandoning all telephone contact, to welcoming the caller by answering within two rings...
- Language is also changing ever more quickly. Thirty years ago catch phrases entered the language slowly and stayed for several years. Now they come into force and then become passé within weeks. Using them as a shorthand way of writing a sales pitch can make the product look dated. Thus, writing the phrase “With Christmas nearly upon us” might seem a perfectly reasonable way to open a promotion in November. But if you look at all the other promotions around in November and find that 30% of them also carry the phrase “with Christmas nearly upon us” then suddenly it becomes clear that this phrase is now looking very dated and almost laughable from the viewpoint of the recipient.
- But despite all these changes, the advertising of many firms still has the look and feel of ten years ago. Worse, some firms are using advertising styles that go back twenty years.

Here's another way of looking at this. If you were to see an advert which appeared on TV in 1997, you would (in most cases) find it looked a little old-fashioned or out-of-date. An advert from the 1980s looks quaint, humorous or even preposterous.

So you can imagine what a direct mail advert that has hardly changed from fifteen years ago will look like to a potential customer.

2. So what is the new style of advertising that is appropriate to 2009/10?

In essence, contemporary advertising is based around a very simple idea: all adverts are conversations.

At the start of the digital age, the idea was that we could get rid of conversations and, instead, just tell people what we had and force them to reply on-line. Phone numbers were not displayed, and if you had a question or a complaint the chances are that you would get an automated answer.

Companies put in telephone handling systems that shut people out, customers had to wait an hour to get through to the bank, and even then had to speak to someone whose accent made it hard to understand them.

Then it was realised what a mistake this all was – customers need to be talked to, and the system changed. Want to buy your CDs on-line – no problem, the system is there. Got a problem with an order you placed with play.com? Phone them, and they answer within 5 seconds, and can tell you about your order within 10 seconds. (And I don't have shares in play.com – it's just my experience).

If we take this a step further, the reason why so many companies report that their response rates in selling into education have gone down becomes clearer.

When faced with a potential customer most of us are able to speak in a fairly normal, friendly manner about the benefits of our product, how well it is going, why people buy it, and so on. We smile, look the customer in the eye (although not so much as to make them feel uncomfortable) and, by and large, aim to come across as a friendly sort of person who it is good to do business with.

What we don't do is...

- Bore the customer to death with talk about when our company was formed, the fact that we are a small family business or a vast plc, and the like.
- Use some sort of convoluted double speak such as "This award winning software...." Or some oft repeated phrase such as "I am delighted to hand over a copy of our new catalogue..." (The point here being that if you would not say, "I am delighted to hand over a copy of the catalogue" why would you write, "I am delighted to enclose a copy of the new catalogue.")
- Shout "NEW!" or "DISCOUNT!" in the customer's ear.
- Come up with something that is utterly obvious, such as "Christmas is nearly upon us so..."

In short, when we meet someone we talk to them in a fairly nice, normal way. But somehow a lot of B2B marketing has slipped into strange shorthand phraseology (such as "award-winning") that ultimately becomes meaningless to the reader because it is seen so often.

The advertising that is working and achieving ever higher response rates is written in a way that is appropriate to business people in companies in 2009 – and not to people in business in 1997 or even 1987.

3. Using direct mail

Much direct mail has become divorced from everyday experience – and the perfect example of this is the insistence of many B2B campaigns on focussing on the product and the company selling the product, rather than the benefit to the individual of buying the product.

That benefit is often direct (“it helps you do your job more readily”) but in pitching a campaign in this manner it is common for the company selling the product or service to fail to find a way to differentiate between their own product or service and that of someone else.

A desk diary does indeed help me do my job more easily – but why should I buy your desk diary, rather than the desk diary from ABC Ltd?

Quite often there is no real answer, and so the trick is to find ways of giving a reason as to why one should use this one rather than that one that often has nothing to do with the product.

Let’s take a simple example – you want a coffee – and you can choose any one of many coffee bars to take it in. If you choose one of the more expensive ones it might well be because of its ambiance, the fact that you can take your time in there, the fact that there are no screaming children in there – in short a lot of reasons that have nothing much to do with coffee.

So, why should I buy your diary, when it is not different from the diary provided elsewhere?

The answer is going to be that you provide a different experience, or a different relationship – in short a different conversation. It feels nice, it looks good, it “says” something about you, it has a logo on the front that you feel at ease with...

Consider Innocent Smoothies. They changed the rule on product design by putting a “conversation” on the packets.

Consider beer – contemporary advertisements highlight the fact that beer can be associated with fun, but they don’t just think the obvious about happy people in a pub. They go into a more surreal phase, and enter a new world - unreal, but with a positive image for the beer.

Considering how this relates to B2B direct mail, we might note these points...

1. Instead of jumping straight in and talking about your product or your

company, you talk about a problem that focuses around the issue. You ask an interesting question about the reason why people have the product.

2. Or, if that doesn't fit, you start writing interesting little background news items to your customers and potential customers, emphasising key reasons and issues surrounding the product.

If we imagine that you are running an employment agency you might just send out a list of "current prospects" on your books. The trouble is, everyone will be doing that. So instead you might start talking in your emails about the problems there are with interview techniques, the way in which everyone asks the same questions and the interviewees have the same answers. But here is one left-field question that really can open the door and give you an insight into the true nature of the interviewee...

An article like that drags the potential buyer of your service towards buying from you. It doesn't make a sale, but it opens the conversation between you and them, and that conversation takes them closer into a relationship with you. They will look at your offerings (rather than those of another firm) first. From that point on it is up to you to close the contract.

In short, one finds ways to talk about the problems the customer faces, not the issues that you face. Of course, you can sell a carpet to a firm with an office block, by saying "70% discount" and showing a range of colours. But you can also sell a carpet by talking about the effect that carpet will have on the workers.

Did you know that the colour of the carpet affects the work rate?

(Actually nor did I, but I am sure I could find some evidence for that somewhere – and if not that story, then at least something else. There are, after all, a million stories out there.)

4. Staying in touch

Email has been the breakthrough for conversations – and yet perversely it is chronically misused by business.

While you can send out emails that open up any and every issue surrounding a business, thus preparing for the sale, what people in business have tried to do is to use email to make the sale itself.

Email can be used in this way – but not alone. Keep sending me sales messages by email, and I will tell you where to go and what you can do with your product.

Send me weekly articles that give interesting insights into the work I am

involved with, and I will look. I might not read every one, but the fact that I stay with you means that subliminally I am taking in the fact that your company is a nice company that I want to deal with.

What this means is that your aim should be to build up a list of email addresses of people who will willingly receive your conversation-orientated emails, and occasionally read them.

This can be done by taking any email list and writing to people. Anyone who doesn't like what you are doing will be able to send you an email saying "remove me from the list" and the software will automatically do it. On a website and in your promotions you can advertise the list, and tell those people who do not receive your news that they are missing out and should really try it.

You finish off the whole process by having a blog that carries the news in a different format. Blogs can reach the parts of the world that you can never reach – and indeed I've been able to set up blogs and get them audiences of up to 60,000 readers a month within a fairly short space of time. It all depends on what you are writing.

5. Does the way you write really make that much difference?

The answer is, certainly it does. By changing the text of an individual email advertisement I have managed to multiply the number of click-throughs four times over. Similar results have been had with direct mail.

But – and this is the big point – it is not all just done with a click of the finger. Experimentation is needed. There will often be false starts. But in the end the result will be bountiful.

Even better is the fact that, because results are not instant and because in our society many people expect success now, most of your competitors will not go down the "selling as conversation" route.

My estimate is that in most industries that use direct marketing the breakdown is something like this...

- Don't try the new approach because it looks a bit odd, a bit different, or because "I need sales now" (a mistaken understanding of the approach, which incorporates a belief that conversations are not about selling). (About 40% of companies fall into this trap)
- Try the new approach but because it does not generate instant success, abandon it and go back to the old way. (About 40% of companies again go down this route).

- Do it, and make it work, (only about 20% of companies).

What this means is that the companies that do persevere, have the huge advantage of marking themselves out as different from the rest.

This does not mean that you then automatically clean up and take on every customer going. You won't, but you will pick up some companies that you had never worked with before.

6. More help and information

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Or email Sales@hamilton-house.com

Or visit...

For direct mail: www.directmail.org.uk

For email: www.yesmail.org.uk

For more on email, webs and blogs as forms of advertising

www.mailing.org.uk

For insights into the ways in which direct mail can be made to work

www.theory.bz

To receive regular emails about the creative side of direct mail and email selling send an email to creativedirect-subscribe@yahoogroups.com - you'll get a confirmation email back. Just click reply, and you will receive the emails five days a week. If you want to stop receiving them, there's a message at the foot of each email telling you how to do this.

Having read this report, if you would like me to take a look at your brochure, letter, leaflet or email, and give you our thoughts on how it might be changed in order to enhance sales, just send a copy of the item as a pdf file to Tony@hamilton-house.com along with your phone number. I'll take a look, and then call you back.

This service is completely free, is undertaken in complete confidence, and is without any obligation. If you would like to talk before you send the item for comment, just call me on 01536 399 000.

Tony Attwood

Chairman, Hamilton House Mailings plc