



Targeting Customers

Ten smart strategies for marketing
in today's tumultuous economy

In a tough economy, organizations reconsider budgets and look for ways to cut. At first glance, marketing appears to be a safe place to cut. But they fail to consider that a depressed economy will likely shrink the target market of potential guests.

"You cut marketing and think it will help you. But you've shot yourself in the foot," says Jay Kennedy, director of ministry development at Oregon's Canby Grove. "You lose revenue. It doesn't happen instantly, but it happens."

Camp and conference leaders should not only maintain their marketing efforts, but also view tough times as an opportunity to grab new market share and increase sales. Why? This is a time when

cut services during tough times, but I believe this is the worst time to cut services," says Mark P. Fisher, president and head innovation coach of Sandy Cove Ministries in Maryland. "Do people need to get away and connect with God and each other during difficult times? Yes, they do. Our hope is to keep them coming back instead of cutting corners in such a way that we lose them."

Tap into what your potential guests long for and need, identify how you can uniquely meet those needs, promise your guests that you will do so, and keep your promises when they arrive. Freely cut things they don't want or need, and make changes to satisfy what they desire.

that have had a reasonable opportunity to succeed, but don't seem to be desired or needed, may need to go.

"Dramatically change or stop running the programs that aren't performing," says Barry McLeish, international vice president of the consulting firm McConkey/Johnston, Inc. "Use your analytics to help guide you in making decisions to expand programs that are performing well, and eliminate or change those that aren't."

This year, Camp Berea staff re-branded its men's retreat weekends, giving them a more youthful feel.

"The age group from 18-30 [increased] dramatically as many men brought their sons," Ward says.

Keep Customers

Finding and satisfying new customers is far more costly than keeping existing ones. When times are uncertain, it is more critical than ever that you let these customers know they are important.

Remind them of the reasons why they trust you. Reward them with incentives and special privileges.

Build on the relationships you have formed with customers by keeping lines of communication open, informing them of improvements, new activities, and anything exciting that God is doing in people's lives. Consider a monthly mailing or using an e-mail service such as Constant Contact to send monthly updates.

If group sales are a part of your ministry, few things are as effective in

others will likely make the mistake of reducing marketing efforts. It is also an opportunity to learn to squeeze more impact out of your dollars.

Consider ten principles, based on successful ministries' experiences and proven strategies, for making the most of marketing your camp in today's struggling economy.

Satisfy Guests

Ensuring guests are happy is foundational to successful marketing.

"It is very normal for nonprofits to

Ron Ward, executive director of Camp Berea in New Hampshire, emphasizes the importance of guest satisfaction with the program.

"The program is the single most important thing for good marketing to be successful," he says. "Change is instrumental for growth. By constantly taking the program to a higher level, campers have to come back or risk missing the 'best program ever.' And they refer others. As a result, we are anticipating major growth for our winter programs."

In contrast, programs and services

In CCCA's Store

■ *Beyond the Core: Expand Your Market without Abandoning Your Roots* by Chris Zook

■ *The Copywriter's Handbook: A Step-By-Step Guide to Writing Copy That Sells* by Robert W. Bly

■ *Publicity Power* by Charles Mallory

■ *Selling the Invisible* by Harry Beckwith

■ *The Ultimate Marketing Toolkit: Ads That Attract Customers, Brochures That Create Buzz, Websites That Wow* by Paula Peters

On the Internet

■ *Sound Word's CCCA audio recordings, "Connecting with Your Customers," "Drawing Attention to Yourself," "The Irresistible Camp," "Maximize Your Marketing," and "Websites That Work for a Living"* www.soundword.com

Related Resources

building relationships with group leaders as personal calls and visits.

"What really makes a difference are the visits to their ministries or homes," says Nate Parks, Berea's camp director of program and operations. "Even though they are the most expensive, we never cut those because we find they pay off the most."

Also, go through your files to find former customers who know about your ministry and likely had a good experience at your place. Start a conversation that helps you learn why they stopped coming back, and then offer them an incentive to return.

Kennedy helped his Canby Grove staff take advantage of downtime and put this principle into action.

"We provided our registrar with a call list of last year's campers who didn't sign up this year," he says. "When she wasn't taking calls, she reached out to these former guests and left them a message. It worked great!"

Get Referrals

Current customers are also invaluable for helping you reach out to people unfamiliar with your ministry. Canby Grove sends its current customers referral requests, complete with extra brochures and other material.

Pick up the phone and ask for introductions and referrals to other ministries, churches, or groups that might enjoy your camp or conference center. Many people are happy to recommend a trusted organization to their friends and colleagues.

Then, when you make a call, you can feel more confident, assuring the potential camp customer of a trusted associate's reference. This immediately establishes common ground and provides a natural starting point for a productive conversation.

Communicate Value

It's essential that both returning and new customers understand your ministry. No doubt you believe your services are a

wise investment. You know that getting away from a familiar environment for an extended time to seek God amidst creation breeds spiritual renewal.

Strive to prove that every day; communicate your services with increasing depth and clarity.

"Typically, more happens in a kid's life during a retreat or a week of camp than during months of attending church. When money is an issue, I encourage parents that coming to camp will help their child grow closer to God," says Canby Grove's Kennedy. "I suggest to them that they help their child earn the money with chores or other options."

Rethink Pricing

Even if they understand the value of camp, the reality is that many customers in the midst of a difficult economy are focused a little bit more than usual on the bottom line. Parents don't necessarily want to tell Tommy and Talia that they won't be going to camp this summer—but they are increasingly interested in the best value for their camper fees.

Take this opportunity to rethink your pricing. Are you competitive with alternatives? Can you offer different combinations of service and price levels? You might even consider jump-starting the season with early bird discounts and special-event pricing.

Use this strategy wisely, because you can inadvertently compromise the value you provide. Remember that the objectives are to differentiate your organization from the competition, and to inspire a commitment from the customer.

Evaluate Efforts

You'll also want to evaluate your current advertising and get a handle on which methods and messages are generating positive results and which ones aren't. You might have used a similar tactic to ensure effectiveness of programs and services.

Gather data on each response so you can identify what motivated the person

to call. Then analyze the data to understand how each promotion performed. Use this information to shift your spending to the most effective advertising.

Use Free Options

Supplementing your marketing with free or near-free promotion is an excellent way to stretch any advertising budget.

"We ask local stores for permission to leave brochures near the checkout stand or in their magazine racks," Kennedy says. "Also, we offer former customers an incentive—such as a complimentary service during their next visit—in exchange for handing out fliers in their school or neighborhood, or for planting a sign in their front yard. We attend community events, and we hang banners on fences along popular commuter routes."

Other ideas include contacting your local weekly newspapers for coverage at your next special event, or providing local reporters with a special-interest story to bolster a warm, welcoming reputation.

You can also creatively market future programs while guests are enjoying their current visit.

"Our goal is to make the programing so good that everyone signs up for next year before they leave," says Ward of Camp Berea. "Plus, 80 percent of our winter market does not attend our summer market. Consequently, we run summer video promotions during the winter events. Then, we offer a limited period in which they can sign up for the summer at a 33 percent discount if they are from a church that used us during that winter. This mindset can be used with every program you run."

Be sure to include the Internet in your marketing strategy. Starting a blog is a fun way to keep your website fresh and relevant. Keep your customers engaged and connected with you by inviting them to leave comments and even submit content.

Take advantage of social networking sites such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, especially if your camp's target

market includes teens and young adults.

"We make an increasing number of fun and wacky videos that every kid wants to show to his or her family, neighbors, and friends," Ward says. "These are spreading like wildfire across the Internet."

Trim Wisely

Even after analyzing your spending and using free and low-cost promotions, you may need to tighten your marketing budget. Be judicious about what you cut. One camp, for example, eliminated print advertising entirely to rely solely on e-mail and the Web, only to suffer disastrous results. Exercise caution, make incremental changes, and test the results.

One way Camp Berea has managed its marketing expenses is by creating brochures that are 50 to 60 percent smaller than other camps' brochures, and mailing them to more people. While camps with larger brochures were experiencing little to no growth, Berea tripled in growth.

An experienced marketing professional can recommend alternative print and mailing strategies to maintain the effectiveness of your advertising while adjusting to today's market realities.

Plan Carefully

Last year at this time, few would have predicted the current economic situation. As we are all now well aware, it is critical that budgets reflect contingency plans should events not go as planned.

One option, which Ward employs at Camp Berea, is to "set revenue goals 10 percent lower than last year, while adding 10 percent to the expenses incurred in the year past. This provides a 20 percent cushion to work with if the marketing people cannot bring the numbers up."

Encourage Staff

In the midst of efforts to maximize marketing success, don't ignore your camp and conference team. Take the time to remind them—and yourself—why you do what you do.

"Our staff is encouraged by our guests... seeing them having an enjoyable experience, and hearing their gratitude," says Chip Sherer, executive director of Bonclarken Conference Center in North Carolina. "Our guest services director passes along their comments to our staff by e-mail and with notes."

To encourage his staff and remind them that God is at work, Ward's team at Berea "collects all their 'God sightings' and e-mails them to one staff member who publishes them to everyone before leaving Sunday afternoon. They are a tremendous source of inspiration to us all."

Reward staff members when their efforts get results. An enthusiastic, upbeat sales person can transform someone making a casual phone inquiry into a group leader who can't wait to show up at your door. Berea leaders set objectives and provide bonuses for staff members as they are 25, 50, 75, and 100 percent of the way toward their goals.

"We consider these bonuses [to be] investments, not expenses," Ward says. "They always provide far more funds than are expended."

While these are uncertain times when firm answers seem evasive, the ten principles above have contributed to the success of several highly effective ministries. As you trust God's plan for the future and diligently implement these strategies in your marketing efforts, you will very likely experience equal or greater results. ■



Bob is the founder of FullCamp. During the last decade, he has helped numerous CCCA members with their marketing planning, advertising, and websites. You can e-mail him at b.passman@verizon.net.



José, a database marketing consultant, has decades of success in response-oriented marketing. He's provided project management and system design services to many firms. E-mail him at joseroig@roigconsulting.com.

In the midst of efforts to maximize marketing success, don't ignore your camp and conference team. Take the time to remind them—and yourself—why you do what you do.