

Fifteen Promotional Ideas

Every successful company uses some sort of promotion to influence certain audiences, usually customers or prospects, by informing or persuading them. Reasons for promoting a business include: increasing visibility; adding credibility to you or your company; enhancing or improving your image and bringing in new business. The following cost-effective, easy-to-execute ideas have the power to increase sales in a way that conventional advertising cannot. The key is to find the methods that are appropriate for your business, marketplace and professional style.

1. Contests

As one example, a cookware store decided to sponsor cooking contests. After sending out a press release announcing a competition for the best cookie or chocolate cake, a mailing went out to the store's customers soliciting entries. Food editors, professional chefs and cooking teachers were invited to be judges. Both the winners and the winning recipes were publicized. Essay and design contests are also possibilities, such as a furniture store establishing a prize for student furniture design. Pie-eating, pancake-flipping, oyster-shucking and grape-stomping contests make sense for restaurants. Dentists can hold smile contests, while video rental stores can stage movie trivia quizzes.

2. Newsletters

Another good way to promote, particularly for brokers, banks and business consultants, is through newsletters. Newsletter articles demonstrate how much you know about your field and do so in a low-key, informative way. They also help keep your company high in the consciousness of your prospects.

3. Demonstrations

Demonstrations are an option to attract people to your place of business, to show them how to best use your product and to establish your credibility. A retail-wholesale fish outlet holds cooking demonstrations twice a week, featuring a different restaurant chef each time and attracting substantial crowds. Recipe cards are even given out. Wallpaper demonstrations, fashion shows, gift wrapping, refinishing and computer demonstrations have all worked well for retailers who were selling products associated with them.

4. Seminars

Often more appropriate for business-to-business marketing, seminars are the commercial side of demonstrations. If you hold a seminar, follow these rules for success:

- a. Schedule the event at a time that is convenient to most attendees.
- b. Be specific in the invitation about when the event begins and ends, who will be there and what the agenda is.
- c. Follow up the invitations with personal phone calls.
- d. Charge for seminar entrance to give it a higher perceived value.
- e. Follow up after the event to get people's reactions.

5. Premiums

Also called an advertising specialty, a premium is a gift of some kind that reminds your customer of you and your service. There are thousands of premiums from which you

can choose: key chains, coffee mugs, refrigerator magnets, baseball caps, paperweights—just about anything that can be engraved, imprinted, silk-screened or embroidered with your company name and phone number.

6. Speeches

Depending on your topic and your market, you might want to speak before chambers of commerce, trade associations, parent groups, senior citizens or other local organizations.

7. Articles

Another possibility is to write an article for a trade journal, reprint it and mail it off to your friends, customers and prospects. Well-crafted articles position you as an expert and are a particularly good way to promote a consulting business.

8. Bonuses

If you have a restaurant, give away a glass of wine with dinner to introduce a new menu. If you sell to retailers, give them a display fixture with the order of a gross. If you sell office supplies, give away a new pen with a sizeable purchase. If you're in the cosmetics business, offer customers a free sample blusher when they buy mascara and lipstick.

9. Coupons

For best results, the price break should be significant—at least 15 percent. Coupons are one of the least expensive ways to develop new trade and are an excellent tool for evaluating advertising. However, one theory holds that coupons draw people who only buy discount and never become regular customers, so be sure to monitor the results.

10. Donations

Donating your product or service to a charitable cause often results in positive exposure to community leaders, charity board members, PTAs and civic groups. While consumer products are desired most, many organizations also look for donations of professional service time. If you have a restaurant or a large meeting facility, consider hosting an event for a charitable organization. This strategy works best if volunteers for that charity are potential customers.

11. Samples

No matter what you do to promote your business, giving potential customers a sample is an excellent way to attract attention and make a positive impression. In many cases, it makes just as much sense to spend your marketing and advertising dollars on giving out your own products instead of buying advertisements—especially if cash is tight. The key is to give samples to the audience you want to reach (i.e., software packages to computer user groups or nutritious snacks to health-oriented consumers). In the food arena, where one taste is worth a thousand words, firms now exist that test market new products for large and small companies alike through in-store demonstrations. A good demonstration company not only keeps track of how much of your product was given away but also submits detailed reports on what people said about the product and how much of it was purchased.

12. Free Trials

If your product is too big or expensive to give away outright, why not offer a free trial to qualified customers? Try shipping it out to prospects with no strings attached. Most people will appreciate the opportunity to try the product, and many will like it enough to buy it.

13. Free Services

If you can't afford to give away products, offering your services as a way of generating new business can also pay off. For example, if you own a retail clothing business, send out a flyer offering customers a free fashion consultation to draw them into the store.

14. Special Benefits, Rates or Notices

Smart organizations go out of their way to make customers feel important and appreciated. Frequent flyer clubs are the most pervasive example of loyalty-building benefits for customers only that are now being adapted by many kinds of businesses. Most software companies sell program updates to customers at discounted prices. And advance notices about sales or other changes or opportunities can help cement customer ties.

15. Say "Thanks"

One of the best ways to let customers know you value their business, and to simultaneously encourage their continued patronage, is also one of the easiest. It boils down to saying "thank you" in letters, mailers, surveys, statement stuffers, receipts and invoices, and in person.