

A Slow Boil: Marketing's Long Game

Olga Peters

You want to sell more product. Right. That means marketing. Right? And marketing means snazzy logos and colorful labels. Right. And a Facebook page. Okay. And...

Stop. Put down the clip art. Walk away from the social media.

Marketing is a long game. It starts before customers open their wallets.

Tools like Facebook, market research, and advertisements are jigsaw pieces. Marketing is the picture on the puzzle box.

A common marketing mistake is starting with the tools: social media, labels, or logos. Instead, marketing starts with: the business story, business goals, and identifying customers.

The why and the where to

Before starting a marketing plan, answer:

- Who are you?
- What do you want to accomplish?
- Who/what is your market?
- How do customers view your brand?
- Which tools will connect customers to your product?

Marketing is about “building an awareness of an affinity of your brand,” says Luke Stafford, founder of Mondo Media Works. Based in Brattleboro, Vermont, Mondo Media Works specializes in digital marketing. Stafford says marketing and selling are separate processes. Selling starts once the customer decides to buy a product.

Good marketing pays off over time,

according to Stafford. His company rarely signs a contract for less than a year.

Stafford recommends starting by pinning down the businesses’ story and establishing its goals – specifically revenue goals. Once these cornerstones are set, other tasks become easier such as identifying ideal customers or calculating a return on investment on a new purchase.

Long-term goals and revenue targets also help reverse engineer how different marketing tools – Instagram, advertising, logos, and others – will connect products with customers, Stafford says.

Relying on word of mouth instead of an active marketing plan is a big mistake Peter Case of Fishhook Communications in Brattleboro, Vermont sees businesses make. “Don’t be afraid to talk about yourself,” he says.

Remember the old adage, Case says. If people like a product, they’ll tell one person. If they’ve had a bad experience, they’ll tell 50.

Telling a story

Stafford, a hobbyist sugar maker, taps approximately 30 trees on his property in Southern Vermont. It’s enough to produce eight gallons, he says. Enough for his two little girls and a few Christmas gifts.

Stafford describes “branding” as how customers feel about a company and its products.

Understanding the company’s passion, or reason, for making maple prod-

ucts helps sugar makers identify ideal customers.

It's important to narrow your market, Stafford says. "If you try to be everything to everyone, it dilutes your budget."

Take a minute and describe yourself and your business. For example: a 6th generation sugar maker who uses maple syrup instead of cane sugar because of maple's health benefits. You love sugar making because you love being outdoors and teaching your kids about maple. It's likely your ideal customers are also health conscious, have families, and are outdoorsy.

Stafford recommends combining the your story with market research.

Meeting expectations and then expanding horizons

Case reminds producers to look at their products through customers' eyes.

Sugarmakers live close to their products. They know the blood, sweat, and tears that went into each jug of syrup, Case says. Customers, however, just want syrup on their pancakes.

Avoid using industry jargon in marketing, advised Case. Customers don't care about reverse osmosis. They care how the syrup tastes.

When crafting a marketing strategy, producers must first know what their customers expect from their products. Meet that expectation and then expand on it, Case added.

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As an example, run a series of photos on Instagram such as “100 uses for maple syrup.” The first image have someone pouring syrup on pancakes. Next, waffles. Then French toast. Once the basics are covered, highlight maple’s other uses, Case suggested.

Case advocates for thinking in visuals whenever possible. Images and videos convey a lot of information. This is true for online and print. He recommends looking at YouTube or Lifehack.org for examples.

Building connections

Marketing budgets vary depending on goals and the level of competition. Stafford recommends budgeting 3-12% of a company’s revenue as a starting point.

Stafford noted that print, radio, TV, and online advertising have pros and cons, he says. Television and terrestrial radio ads reach a lot of people, especially during sports events. But they are expensive. Facebook has great targeting abilities to match ads with customers. But, consumers are migrating to Instagram. Print “took a dive,” but it’s coming back.

Other avenues exist for marketing that could cost a producer less than buying ads.

Consider cross promotions and partnerships with other companies. Partner with a restaurant to make everything from cocktails to BBQ sauce. In exchange for maple syrup, the restaurant puts your sugarhouse logo on their menu.

“Social media influencers” can expand a product’s reach, too, he says. Companies pay an influencer to tout

their products on the influencer’s social media platform. “It’s very effective in the food space.”

Content marketing happens when a company combines their business with information or personality. Examples include emails with recipes, or videos showing how sap is collected.

Connecting with customers builds affinity and loyalty, Stafford says. “Always have a way to capture customers’ email addresses.”

According to Stafford, customers must be exposed to a product multiple times before they recall it in their minds. Studies vary, he says, from between 12 to 50 exposures.

Breaking out of beige

Logos and other graphics are considered a company’s visual identity. In the maple industry, this visual identity is “literally beige,” Stafford jokes. Maple producers have an opportunity to stand out with color.

If contracting with a marketing or graphic design firm is cost prohibitive, Stafford recommends checking out online resources such as 99designs.com, or Fiverr.com.

YouTube is a place to go for education, Stafford says. There you can learn everything from how to turn on an iPhone, to drafting a five-year marketing strategy.

Stafford says the biggest marketing mistake he sees is when businesses do the steps in the wrong order.

Strategy and reflection first, he stresses. A flashy logo does little good if the business owner lacks a customer base.

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Being the trendsetter

What about companies who want to add a new service such as shipping or expanding into an international market?

Stafford's advice: 1) Plan ahead. 2) Contact the local sugarmakers' association for research materials such as white papers or access to databases. 3) Talk to the sugarmakers who have already done what you hope to do. Learn

from them.

Finally, Stafford recommends patience. Ultimately, good marketing builds trust and connections with repeat customers, he says. Loyalty takes time.

Effective marketing strategies balance consistency with surprise, Case says. Still, the easiest way to keep an eye on a product's market is to control it. "Be the trendsetter," he says.

Marketing Advice from Sugarmakers

"Marketing is not random, it's intentional."

Amy Fideldy, TimberSweet Maple, Cohasset, MN

This husband and wife team sells maple products, apples, and pick-your-own blueberries. They set 3,000 taps. They sell direct to customers from the farm, farmers markets, and craft shows. They do very little shipping. Their tips:

- Know yourself. The Fideldys don't ship a lot of product because it's their least favorite thing to do. They only produce as much syrup as they can on their own without having to hire help.
- Don't hide behind texts and emails. Get out. Speak directly to people.
- Evolve your approach as your goals and the market change.

"Different venues bring in different types of customers."

Michael and Jen Bryant, Hilltop Boilers, Newfield, ME

Hilltop is operated by Jen, her husband Michael, and his brother. They

have between 1,200 and 1,500 taps. Michael is committed to customer service and selling product online. Recently, Hilltop joined a program called Farm Drop. Farm Drop connects farmers with local customers. Weekly, farmers post their product on Farm Drop's website. Customers submit orders. Then, the farmers drop the orders off at a central location.

- Partnering with organizations like Farm Drop can expand a producer's reach. Farm Drop promotes the products on behalf of participants.
- Keep your marketing materials current. Michael constantly updates the farm's website. He edits text so the site triggers the algorithms of search engines like Google.
- Experiment with different tools: Jen uses Facebook to post photos and videos. Through pictures of boiling or haying, customers experience the farm "vicariously." Michael finds that advertising on the radio is great for special events but he uses glossy magazine ads to attract corporate customers.

- Review businesses outside the maple industry to see how they market products.

“Whatever you do, pay attention to details.”

Pam Green, Green’s Sugar House, Poultney, VT

Green chairs the Vermont Sugar Makers’ Association. She is also the vice-president of the International Maple Syrup Institute. Green and her husband’s sugaring operation has approximately 5,000 taps. They retail all their product from the farm, at craft shows, and online sales through their website.

- Quality: Pretty jugs and labels attract customers – once. Quality syrup brings them back.
- Details make the difference. Consider every aspect of your business that customers see from the colors of your logo to the shelving the syrup sits on.
- If you’re a small operation, keep your early investments small.
- Don’t have your own logo? No problem. Most maple associations have logos or seals for members to use.
- Plan at least five years ahead. Jumping in without planning costs more money.

Bascom Family Farms, New Hampshire & Vermont

Coombs is the director of sales and marketing at Bascom’s, one of the largest maple companies in the U.S. For years, Coombs’ customers asked “What’s new in maple?” Recently, Coombs Family Farms introduced a sprayable maple syrup. The patented container produces a stream of pure syrup. No propellents or other additives are used. At the time of printing, Coombs had shipped approximately 20,000 units.

- Be clear about goals. Ask: Why am I doing this? What do I want to accomplish with this effort? How will this sell more maple?
- Conduct an ROI – return on investment – on everything you do. Remember to factor in the cost of your own labor.
- Let visuals tell a story. Use text to reinforce them.
- Make customers part of your marketing plan. Ask questions. Listen.
- Customers know when you’re hustling them. Don’t. Be authentic.
- “There are no home runs in marketing. It’s all bunts and singles.”

“See the vision, then draw the picture.”

Arnold Coombs, Coombs Family Farms /