

Client Focused Marketing - the Route to Long Term Success

Marketing Guild member company, Retail Answers, shows how adapting your skills to the changing world can help to grow a sustainable business.

Exciting as high profile marketing campaigns can be, growing a client base isn't all about bells and whistles.

Shouting a message from the rooftops in the direction of anyone who might be interested can be a great way of getting your name known quickly. But, without a focus on what the customer gets out of the deal, the campaign might find itself lacking something very important.

A fundamental element of successful marketing is down to building trust and loyalty. If you can win the trust of potential clients, and the loyalty of existing ones, you've cracked it.

Which is why the story of Retail Answers, a software development consultancy based in Surrey, is so interesting.

Its Managing Director, Mike Eaton, admits that he hasn't gone all out for superfast growth over the thirteen years he's been in business. Instead, he's been content to build the consultancy at a speed that enabled him to keep providing his clients with a service they

wanted to come back for.

That's not to say he's done no direct marketing. It's just that the vast majority of his marketing effort has centred on two key factors:



1. Spotting the gap in his clients' capabilities and filling it.
2. Making a conscious effort to stay in touch with past clients and remind them he was there.

It's all about poise

No, I'm not suggesting you start walking round your office with a book on your head, although that might be amusing... No, poise doesn't just mean good posture. It also means balance, and the ability to look around you, influenced by what you see but not swayed by whim.

It's a wonderful ability to have.

It enables you to see what the marketplace is up to, what the competition is doing, what the critics are saying, and so on and so on.

Then, it allows you to make a sensible decision about who's got a point, who hasn't,

and what, if anything, you need to do about it.

It gives you the chance to make changes where changes are needed, but the confidence to know that you don't have to change for the sake of change.

To be honest, I doubt Mike Eaton would see it this way. He's been in business for thirteen years, providing IT consultancy services, retail systems, and advanced intranet and extranet systems to companies ranging from medium sized fashion houses like Kookai to large retail chains such as Threshers.

The way he sees it, opportunities presented themselves, and he took them.

But let's look at his story

Thirteen years ago, having been made redundant from large software companies three times in two years, Mike was looking around for something to do. A finance director he had worked with was looking for a project manager to come and sort out a stock control mess. He took the project, and while doing that job found two more contacts who needed the same type of work. So when that project ended, he immediately had something else to go to.

He realised that many of the second tier of retailers were in desperate need of stock control systems. The bigger players had already done it, but these second tier companies were an untapped market. They were crying out for help, but they simply couldn't put the resource into it that the larger retailers had already managed to do.

He had a ready made market - he just needed to tap into it.

Then, as he was project managing for these companies, he gradually found they were asking for more and more, and his role was turning more towards consultancy.

Four years of freelance consulting later, and he set up Retail Answers. He took on

a graduate to do much of the information gathering that his clients desperately needed - management reporting and the like. And the two of them worked closely together, both client facing and building the business at the same time.

This approach served them very well over the next nine years. The company has now moved into its own premises in Surrey, and there are 7 employees. Mike admits that this is rare - 'A company is usually much bigger than this after nine years, or it's gone bust.' He admits he hasn't worked so hard on building up the business, because he enjoys consultancy so much. But then, that's probably why the business has kept going so well. His enjoyment shows through, and his clients know they are benefiting from a service driven by enthusiasm and energy.

A focus on marketing

When you think of marketing, you generally imagine a high profile push to get noticed. Mike's approach is rather different. He and his team do a lot of marketing in their day to day routine. They just don't think of it like that.

His low-key approach to marketing has centred on word of mouth and cold calling. His most high profile marketing to date has been the recently started company newsletter, which is sent out to his contact list of around 1000 companies.

Other than this, he has made very good use of the contacts he has already.

Systems, systems

It helps that Mike's business is systems, because the key to this approach is keeping on top of everything.

The need to keep the contact list up to date is crucial. Mike puts special emphasis on keeping in touch with people - especially as they move jobs.

'You build a relationship with somebody, and you do a good job for them. Then you go away and work for

someone else, and you come back to that client and the guy's gone. And you think well, how do I find him again? And if you don't do it quickly you lose all the contacts within the organisations.'

So what does any of this have to do with poise?

Many companies don't stay in touch with past clients in this way.

Perhaps they have a fixed idea that marketing is all about gathering in new contacts. Perhaps they are so busy they simply don't have the time. Perhaps they don't have faith in the job that they've done, and the reception they will get.

All of these things indicate a lack of poise. If they don't steady themselves and look around, stopping the fixations on day to day concerns for a minute or two, they could lose the most valuable market of all - the returning customer and all his potential referrals.

It's about knowing that you have done, and can do, a good job. If you stand on a firm basis - your belief in your expertise - you can look around you and adapt to the situation. You can spot that next gap.

Mike and his team have watched a number of other companies join this market over the years. It has become more competitive, but still Retail Answers has grown steadily.

He's always known what he was good at, but he's been able to adapt that to the changing needs of his customers. And as a result, a series of new challenges and new markets have opened up to him.

First there was the need for stock control. As Mike describes it, this was particularly crucial for companies like small fashion boutiques in London.

He then added related skills, adapting what he was already offering. So the company started to design intranet and extranet systems that enable branches to link directly into the head office. They got involved in Chip and Pin. And now,

to supplement their traditional business in retail, an opportunity has emerged to adapt their skills to a whole *new* market - insurance.

A new challenge

'One of the reasons we're interested in the insurance side of things is we've written a travel insurance policy sales system for a client of ours, which is being deployed to high street brokers and over the internet to consumers. We delivered it to the client in January. It's been live in call centres since then. It's now being put live as a web based operation for one of their clients. We've basically been an R&D house, so it's an unusual project for us.'

'It's been very interesting and we've learnt a lot about the travel insurance marketplace, and we feel that those skills are replicable, which is why we're working with Peter (Crossley) on how to get to this insurance marketplace and how to go forward on that.'

It may seem a long way away from retail, but insurance is a very good fit for Mike and his team.

Head offices and brokers are geographically dispersed, like most retailers. The insurance market is also highly paper driven, and any system that can reduce that will bring enormous benefits to the clients and *their* customers.

The trick is now to communicate that to the insurance market, when most of the experience has so far been gained in the retail area. But Mike has realised that it's all about communicating the benefit, so in fact the retail track record will set him in good stead.

He has vast experience in linking up branches and head offices, and reducing the paper trail. It hasn't really been done yet in insurance. So he simply needs to communicate that. Because it hasn't been done here, the experience elsewhere will be taken seriously, and he

can begin to build up another track record in the insurance industry, where this enormous market of underwriters, brokers, agents, etc, selling all sorts of insurance for homes, contents, travel, motor, etc, etc, is waiting to have its pain magically taken away.

The various members of the insurance industry could live a paperless existence, where decisions are made much more quickly, where information is available at the click of a mouse, where being away from the central office causes no problems at all, because they are all linked in. They could be working more efficiently, for fewer hours and less effort. They could be selling products which are more appropriate to their client base because they have the tools to do the research that feeds into the product development.

They could be doing a lot of things better. They just don't know it yet.

But, if Mike and his team have anything to do with it, through a few more cold calls and a lot more networking, they will. Very soon, they will. And Retail Answers will be there, poised and ready to adapt with them.

Marketing In Action is the 'members' ideas' newsletter from the Marketing Guild for marketing advisers in professional businesses and client companies. It offers new and practical insights across the full range of marketing disciplines and complements *Strategic Marketing*, *Marketing Insider* and other publications from the Marketing Guild. It is available exclusively to Guild members.

The Marketing Guild is an international network of company directors and principals in every sector of trade and industry who have personal responsibility for marketing services or products. It provides:

- A variety of resource materials
- MAGIC™, the unique computerised database of 40,000+ profitable marketing ideas, strategies and templates
- A personally manned HelpLine
- A Member Referral Service
- Regular events for member-to-member contact

HelpLine: 01904 520888 **Fax:** 01904 520899

Email: help@marketing-guild.com

Website: www.marketing-guild.com

Poise and your marketing

There's a very simple technique you can use to bring this sort of adaptability into your own marketing. Just ask, "Where's the pain?"

Improvements to a product or service aren't always obvious, until you know how the customer is *suffering*.

So here, Mike has seen that the paper trail is a pain for insurers and their customers, and he has found a way to save them from it.

Find out what annoys your customers, or bothers them, or makes their lives difficult. Then, think about what you can do differently that will ease that pain. If you can adapt your offering like that, to meet your customers needs and ease their pain, you will show that you take their needs seriously. And if they feel like that, your reputation will spread of its own accord.

If you would like to talk to Mike about your own systems, call him on 01372 272 800, or have a look at his website:
www.retailanswers.co.uk.

Marketing InAction

The Marketing Guild Ltd

Regency House, Westminster Place,
York Business Park, York YO26 6RW

While every care is taken in compiling this publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

The advice is general and should be adapted to suit your particular circumstances. Information and ideas from the Marketing Guild are given in good faith but readers apply them at their own risk and discretion.

Editor: Sarah Roskrow

Managing Director: Jamie Austin

Printed by Jiffy Print, 9 King St, Luton LU1 2DW

© 2005 The Marketing Guild Ltd.

All rights reserved.

No reproduction by any means is permitted.