

## INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES



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### Marketing Your Business Today

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Al Schwartz | Aug 05, 2019

First, let's define what 'marketing' is. Here's the American Marketing Association's definition:

*Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.*

Seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? How do you market your business? Do you advertise in the local shopper's paper? Radio ads? TV spots? Social Media? All of the foregoing? Or do you rely solely on word of mouth and past reputation? Service shops have always made the effort to stand out from their competition by doing various creative things. Sometimes they worked, more often they have fallen flat and sent their creators back to the drawing board.

Providing stickers that get applied to appliances you service is still one of the best ways to get repeat business, and one of the cheapest. Giving away pens, pads, refrigerator magnets and the like are also common methods of marketing for service companies. They may be considered passé, but they work, and have for many years. Want to know why? You're already in the clients' home, right? Any good salesman will tell you that getting in the door is the hardest part of selling. So the true aim of marketing, no matter the product or service, is to get you in the door.

Unfortunately, in the first quarter of the twenty first century, that is proving to be a bit more difficult than it sounds. Giving away little trinkets is just not good enough any more. Connecting to your client base has never been easier thanks to the internet and social media. Conversely, it has never been more dangerous. Ever hear of Yelp? One bad review, deserved or not, can really dent your customer relations program, especially if you are a new or relatively new shop.

Navigating what has become the "minefield" of social media is a very tricky thing to do, especially given the sensitivity of some of your clients. It is now almost a certainty that no matter what you post on social media, someone, somewhere, will take offense. Rightly or wrongly, trying to prove or disprove a negative is impossible and such a situation will never end well for you. Even something as innocuous as a "buy one get one free" offer can go south for any number of reasons... none of them good.

So, what can you do to get your brand out there and recognized? As the internet has gained ground, so have entrepreneurs. The advent of "one size fits all" referral services for homeowners, like Angie's List and Home Adviser have come on the

scene to supposedly take the guesswork out of hiring a contractor. Ostensibly, these services provide screening for the service personnel that they refer by checking things like licensing, insurance and such. As well, they assure their subscribers that the referred contractors are the best available.

Admittedly, I know very little about these companies. Online research doesn't provide answers to things like, How do you get your business on Angie's List? How much does it cost to be there? and How do they evaluate your fitness as a service company? My gut tells me that if you pay the fees, you're on the list, sort of like those specialist doctors in airline magazines. I could be wrong, and I'm sure that there will be a response or two setting me straight, but that's my guess anyway.

One thing my research online did show was, that even these marketing specialists cannot escape the vagaries of social media any more than you or I can. I found that there have been a few major "oopsies" involving subscription pricing by them and, as predicted, a flurry of negative posts and articles.

Also, there have been a few unscrupulous contractors who've tagged along on these lists. They get weeded out pretty quickly, but the damage is done before they exit. How these marketing companies deal with these pitfalls might bear some investigation because you've still got to get your name and company out on the digital street, whether or not you use an Angie's List to boost your visibility.

One factor in deciding how and who to market with is your area of operation. What is your target demographic? What is the population density of your primary and secondary areas of operation? What are you looking to do with your company? Are you going to be doing service and repair exclusively? Remodeling, new construction? A combination of all or a little of one or the other?

Knowing as much about your target clientele—such as mean income, present and past real estate markets, trends in housing such as any areas where gentrification is taking place, remodeling and upgrading statistics—will inform you of what areas you will need to reach out to in your marketing program.

A very knowledgeable industry insider recently told me that the days of a plumber hanging out his shingle and starting a new company are over. It's all about the big guys consolidating all the trades under one umbrella. That may be, but if a guy can master the nuances of digital marketing, is good at his trade and conducts himself with honesty and integrity, I'd say he's got a pretty good shot at succeeding.

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