



## Marketing Services in an Amazon World

By Michael Bernard, AIA

When a nationally-known organic food market arrived in my neighborhood, I was very excited. The store radiated an idiosyncratic “crunchy granola” vibe. Fresh flowers, a coffee bar, and a shoeshine station situated at the store entrance communicated the message that this market would be unlike any other. The youthful, hip staff seemed enthusiastic about their work, making eye contact and small talk at the register. I felt cool and trendy buying organic and largely local products. I was only too happy to stop shopping at the generic local branch of a major national supermarket chain just across the street.

Over time, though, the vibe of the new market began to diminish and so did its allure. The shoeshine bench disappeared, as did the fresh flower stand. The aisles and entrances were soon jammed with online order employees, who were oblivious to the walk-in clientele. Gradually, the store shed its cool ethos. The company had strategically changed its business model, and the store became more of a food warehouse, promoting convenience and lower cost. The customer experience that initially drew me in, driven more by community than low cost, now existed only as a memory. Many of the products I sought were available, but the shopping experience had changed.

So I walked back across the street to the major chain supermarket. What did I find? The management had seized the opportunity to compete and began stocking many of the same products as the new store. There is more, though; I had known the staff at the supermarket for over 25 years – often by name. When the organic food market moved in, the lure of novelty distracted me from the familiarity and reliability of the ordinary supermarket. I reconnected with the community I had left behind.

The business model for each company had gradually changed, revealing different goals and intentions. For some customers, the convenience of low-cost, online grocery shopping is of paramount importance; no human contact, just make sure apples and milk are in my food locker by 5 PM. However, my preferences for connection and relationship were more important than lowest possible cost and convenience. Recognition and prioritization of these fundamental values brought me back to my familiar supermarket.

Both stores have business models that respond to customer trends and values. My experience

of evolving customer needs in the grocery store stimulated my thinking about how to strategically market consulting services in an age where convenient, impersonal transactions are on the rise. A friend calls this “The Amazon World.” When we circumvent the need for relationships, do we also lose a sense of the importance of value? How do we market when we think we are to compete on price alone?

Maintaining awareness of the *value* of your service offerings and how they meet evolving customer needs is essential. It is very easy to get caught up in the competition to win on price alone, offering more service for less fee and fighting to the bottom. The best way of staying on top of this dynamic challenge is to establish and strengthen personal relationships. In the context of ANY challenge (technology, delivery method, price, etc.), it is the only way

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to reliably ensure your client base is more likely to be aware of what you offer and why this is important to them – and to stick around.

Creating awareness of the content and value of what we sell, not just its cost, can and should be seen as the means to get people to pick up the phone. This creates the pretext for conversation, where the real relationship-based sales process can begin. Create the context that gives a prospective client enough motivation and curiosity to call to ask you more about what you do. Once you connect with them, WOW them with person-to-person interaction. Do not rely on email alone to communicate; pick up the phone. Make a personal connection.

Of course, the question then becomes: what do you put out there as the lure to get them to make the call? What, outside of cost, makes your offering unique and worth the pursuit? Before contacting a prospect, develop a clear outline and understanding of your process. Avoid jargon. Be authentic. Avoid reliance on canned phrases. Listen to your prospect and understand their needs. Hold off jumping in immediately with solutions. Start this outreach with the people that you find are easiest with whom to communicate. Hone your pitch as you increase the challenge of your outreach.

What are the key things to do to make your relationships “sticky”? If your repeat clients love working with you, trust and rely on you, they will be far less likely to look for random options acquired online to meet their needs. Create a case study for each of your repeat clients. In each instance, identify the catalyst that transformed a transaction into a durable professional relationship.

Make a habit of integrating up-to-date post-completion feedback into your evolving pitch to prospective clients. Internalize what others tell you that makes your professional relationship valuable. Share that information internally with your entire team, from top to bottom; you never know which of your employees will find themselves in a situation where they can nurture a potential client relationship.

It is really a question of how you provide service in a manner that distinguishes you and your firm such that people do not want to work with anyone else. How do you communicate it?

Finally, all of this points to a longer conversation about identifying and communicating the value you deliver. Start with the intention of making contact. Learn what prospective clients want. Try to avoid an early impulse to merely make a sale. First, focus on building relationships that eventually lead to sales – and to repeat clients.

In the tale of two grocery stores, one company places a higher value on convenience and made significant changes affecting customers without communicating that message to the clientele. The actual customer experience, driven now by online sales and lack of personal connection, is inconsistent with the original mission of the company – and sales are down. The other company looked inward, made adaptability part of its mission, and communicated that change clearly, both internally and externally. In fact, they never really deviated from the initial message of community and value – they are again drawing crowds. Which would you rather be? ■

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