



[HOME](#) > [COLUMNS/BLOGS](#) > [MARKETING INSIGHT](#)

Seven ideas for smarter marketing

Don't just look at what you're doing; think about why you're doing it

WANDA KENTON SMITH • DEC 21, 2017

As we all welcome 2018 and head into a new year filled with new windows of opportunity, I'm challenging you to join me in considering the relevancy of your marketing activities.

Start by listing all of your marketing deliverables, and then study that list. Are you doing the exact same things you've always done? Just how relevant and useful is the marketing program you're championing?

And here's the million-dollar question: Do you really know the answer to my previous question?

In other words, is what you're doing today making a positive difference for your company? Is there a quantifiable, measurable impact? Or are you going through the motions and doing the same things you've always done because it's easier to navigate and cruise in familiar waters?

If you're not growing professionally as a marketer and you're not constantly testing and trying new initiatives, then you're doing yourself and your company a major disservice. Good marketers are bold! Great marketers are willing to push the envelope to lead their company forward. There is no time to sit back and rest on your laurels unless, of course, you're purposely inviting the competition to eat your lunch.

Consider how you can improve your marketing activities. Yikes: That word "improve" strikes fear in the heart of many who consider it an insult or who think it suggests that what we're doing isn't good enough. For 2018 the word improve is my mantra, my calling card and 100 percent my focus. In every single marketing scenario I'm working on ways to improve.

Here's a case in point: In my marketing role at Freedom Boat Club I have the fortune to work with smart franchise owners and operators from throughout North America. A few years ago I also launched a national marketing advisory council of top franchise marketers who provide valuable input to our corporate team and to me.

I've learned that our franchises desire stronger marketing support from our corporate headquarters, so my goal is to understand exactly how my team and I can improve our efforts and deliverables. I'm not threatened by this request; instead I'm excited by the opportunity to ramp up

our deliverables and to help strategize new ideas. Ultimately each franchise's success is my company's success, so improving our support is simply a win-win proposition.

It would be easy to develop a few new ideas and deploy them. However, improvement is not about easy; it's about real, lasting, long-term impact. My initial strategy is to call every franchise owner in our network to discuss our support program so I understand what is valued, what is not and what new support functions are needed or desired. This personal investment of time should result in new ideas that will allow my team and me to develop and direct our marketing support improvements.

Here are seven areas of marketing improvement worthy of your consideration.

Tap your team or stakeholders. Above I shared a strategy I'm employing to improve marketing support to my customers. Think about your business. What areas of marketing need improvement?

Consider your stakeholders and invite their participation in this critical dialogue. You won't be perceived as weak if you ask for input. You'll be seen as proactive.

When you reach out, have a genuine willingness to listen. Don't be afraid of criticisms, but embrace and learn from them. The best marketers I know readily admit that many of the best ideas come from other people, and through active collaboration. Always give credit where credit is due and spotlight those who offer great new ideas.

You may hear a recommendation about something you know nothing or little about. That's perfectly OK; take notes and then educate yourself. There's likely someone in your internal or external organization who can teach you a thing or two. There also are plenty of books, white papers and YouTube videos on all of the hottest marketing topics. The more you know, the more effective you become.

Improve internal and external communications. Does anyone ever complain about your company's communications? Are people who need to know what's going on actually in the know?

If your company suffers from poor communications, it's time to develop a written marketing-communications strategy. Appoint a communications expert who is the official go-to person when it's time to formulate and distribute a message. Identify the communication channels and methodologies. Enlist full support from the C-suite and train the staff and leadership team so everyone understands the new protocols.

A strong and effective communications program can make an amazing difference. Everyone appreciates being in the loop, so improve things if this is a weak link.

Verify return on investment. Many marketers shoot from the hip on their marketing activities without ever fully understanding what works and what doesn't. Marketers should be conscientious stewards of their company's funds and should clearly understand and communicate which activities yield real returns. CEOs, likewise, should ask for reports and have sincere interest in marketing activities and the results they generate.

Tracking your campaigns against defined goals and measuring specific KPIs (key performance indicators) should be standard operating procedure. With the advantages that digital and Web analytics offer, there is simply no excuse for failing to quantify the ROI of your marketing activities. If you can't measure a program, you should seriously question doing it.

Have strong social media strategies. I'm not asking whether your company is on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. I'm asking whether you have a written social media strategy. What are your social media goals and measurement metrics? How is your company engaging with customers and prospects to motivate them to share and spread the company's message?

What social media platforms are you using? Is there sufficient content and frequency? Is the ROI justifiable for the investment? Are other platforms better suited to your business and culture?

Engage in mobile marketing. Observe crowd behavior on the trains, in restaurants or at your local Starbucks. Smartphones are everywhere. Are you tapping into today's technology through mobile-marketing messaging? Is your website mobile-friendly?

Benchmark the competition. Many marketers fail to track the competition's activities. Always be aware of what's happening in your space. Having an eye on the competition allows you to respond quickly to potential threats and changing conditions. With today's tools, there is no excuse to be blindsided.

Regularly view and analyze competitor website metrics and social media platforms. Watch for press announcements through Google Alerts or other monitoring programs. Track where competitors are spending their media dollars, along with the programs, products and messages they are advertising and promoting.

Embrace content marketing. My personal new marketing initiative in 2017 was the launch of a dynamic content marketing program. Our team educated ourselves and then established an aggressive action plan. We came on the scene like content ninjas and — wow — has it ever paid off in measurable dividends. Our content is robust and has driven significant organic search to our website. Best of all, we track the conversions and have generated measurable sales results.

Do you have a content-marketing strategy and program? Are you updating and adding new content frequently? Do you know which types of content best attract your audience and keep them actively engaged on your site? Do you have conversion and tracking mechanisms to measure results?

When it comes to marketing-improvement strategies for 2018, there are countless areas for improvement in addition to the seven I've suggested. Figure out what will have the greatest impact on your organization, and then get busy.

And speaking of improvements, I'm always looking for new ideas to make this column more relevant and useful to you. If there's something you'd like me to research, send it my way. I'd love to hear from you.

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