

**GROWING CUSTOMERS:**  
***CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SMALL ENTERPRISES OWNED BY INDIVIDUALS WITH  
DISABILITIES***

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Over the years it has become more and more evident that some folks are born with the gift of promotion, while others struggle to “sell” themselves and their business to the general public. After years of training job developers and employment specialists it appears that there must be a marketing gene that determines success or failure at sales. Certainly human services attracts a fair number of people who understand promotion and marketing, but few of us will ever know the luxury of a true marketing budget. Still, many non-profits and microenterprises understand how to squeeze attention-getting efforts from their checkbooks. These low-cost/no-cost approaches to self-promotion are critical to the small business start-up, and to any enterprise that needs to expand beyond its initial customer base.

One of the first steps a prospective business owner, or rehabilitation staff offering support, must take is to identify their customers. Typically, a business has both primary and secondary users of their product or service. For instance, most coin-operated carwash patrons use the facility to clean the family sedan. Advertising and promotion is most likely geared to this crowd, with typical approaches being discount coupons, signs on the building or placed along the major routes nearby, and perhaps some local television or radio ads. Once a customer base is established and growth slows, new advertising pushes are needed to battle a new competitor in the market, or to attract those new to car ownership. Another potential income producer often overlooked though by business owners is the secondary customer.

A secondary customer is someone who has a different need or use for the product/service being offered. In the case of the carwash, for instance, secondary customers may be tractor-trailer drivers who need to clean their big rigs. Another secondary user is fleet managers for the local school bus concession, or the police and fire departments, the local cable TV company that owns 30 pickups, the phone or public utility companies that keep a hundred trucks and vans in service around the clock, or even the local cattle ranchers who need to clean out trailers with the high pressure equipment found in car washes. Perhaps boat owners need to wash down their units after a day of fishing on the local lake. Advertising campaigns as simple as the direct mailing of discount coupons to these user-groups is enough to attract new customers. And certainly a lot of business can be done by putting fliers under windshield wipers in the parking lots at cattle auctions and truck stops. A personal visit or a letter of introduction to the local phone company

manager or the Chief of Police might also bear fruit. Marketing is not generally a passive activity. It must be planned and budgeted for and made an essential function of the business operation. A business that is not adding new customers is at risk of dying.

Along these same lines, some examination of peak business times should be undertaken. For instance, if a small town taxi owner is really busy taking people to the grocery stores in the morning and early evening, but idle a good part of the rest of the day, consider who might need a ride mid-day or late at night. A call to local doctor's, dentists, and optometrist's offices might reveal that many patients find it hard to arrange family rides home mid-day. If the health-care personnel know the taxi is an option, perhaps there is a small market available. Also, the bar and nightclub owners can be given cards or fliers to arrange for the "tipsy taxi" to pick up over-indulging patrons late at night. The local police might also help market to this secondary user as well. Perhaps the bar owners might actually pay for this service to avoid the risk of losing their liquor license. A persuasive salesperson can make that sale.

Suppose one of the small businesses locally is a bakery. Many bakeries make their bread and rolls first thing in the morning and their ovens sit empty all afternoon. Is there anyone locally who bakes a specialty product, such as wedding cakes, who might pay to use the equipment in the afternoon one or two days a week? A call to the local Small Business Development Center would readily yield a list of folks in need of bakery or kitchen space for their business.

The key is for the business owner to think about other customers relentlessly. Ask questions of current customers about how they use the product or service, unique ways they adapt it, or other needs they have that might be related. "Jane" in Colorado started a new business teaching computer skills and performing minor repairs in people's homes. There are many new users of computers who cannot or do not want to attend public classes. In discussion with her customer's concerning how they use their machines, she discovered that several folks were writing and formatting club newsletters. She also found that most of her customers did not have time for, enjoy, or have the skills for desktop publishing. She added newsletter production services to her business and now has several well-paying accounts. Word of mouth continues to spread about her business. With the help of Colorado AgrAbility, the Rural Institute, and the local VR office, she was operating in the black in under a year's time. She is growing her business by making sure she connects personally with her customers and keeps seeking related products/services that are consistent with her core interests, but that also expand her operations and profitability. She's marketing and selling as a natural part of her daily job. She has no marketing budget per se; she is a walking advertisement for her business. And, her newsletter business especially provides her the opportunity to add something like, "Designed and Formatted by Jane's Computer Service, (303) 555-6767."

Home Depot's very successful market positioning strategy is somewhat based on attracting a secondary customer. The traditional hardware store is designed for the weekend-warrior: a man with some do-it-yourself skills. An old style hardware store is not designed for novices or folks with lots of questions or little experience with power

tools. Women do not make up the sales force. Compare this to the Home Depot. Upon entering one's eyes are directed to the brightly lighted model kitchen display, which is right next to the interior design department. Each of these sections has an open help-desk with free computerized design services. Lots of women work at Home Depot and all the sales staff are there to help. There are no stupid questions at Home Depot. There are classes available for novices, and seminars for children so mom and dad can go about their business without interruption. Home Depot guarantees satisfied customers by attracting the whole family.

### **Sales and Marketing Guidelines**

Small businesses grow or die. Profitability is determined by reaching customers, satisfying them, and then attracting more customers. The old rule that 80 percent of a company's business comes from 20 percent of its customers is true, but it's also obvious that the other 80 percent is important too. After assisting well over 200 small businesses owned and operated by individuals with disabilities, it seems that marketing and sales is one of the most difficult concepts to teach and support. Perhaps it is an intuitive skill, but people can learn by following a few rules and by concentrating on on-going customer development.

1. Match the Customer and the Product. Anyone selling a product or service must understand the features and benefits and how those characteristics satisfy the needs of the buyer. The sales person matches the needs of the customer with the product/service.
2. Sales are built on relationships. Customers need to know you care and that you are listening. Helping the customer solve a problem with the product or service is critical.
3. Listen instead of talking. Sales is about smooth listening, not smooth talking. Let the customer tell you what they need.
4. Prospecting never stops. Many large companies attract customers through advertising and product placement. Small companies often rely on meeting and greeting new potential buyers. Building a network of friends and business associates generates new

customers. Surfing the Internet, attending business events such as Chamber luncheons and joining a local service club such as Rotary are all ways to identify new prospects.

5. First impressions matter. “Cold calls” or sales calls made without an appointment are rarely appreciated. A “warm call” approach is more acceptable. A call is warmed up by sending out a letter of introduction, meeting a prospect at a business or social function and following up with a phone call later, or by sending over product literature with a business-style greeting card.

6. Use Marketing Materials. Many products/services should have related printed matter that explains their function, features, and benefits. These are known as “leave behinds.” People enjoy reading about or seeing pictures of products they are interested in. Leave behinds like brochures, fact sheets, or even short video tapes allow customers time to decide to buy without feeling pressured. Make sure the materials indicate a 1-800 number or easy-order process.

7. Handle objections smoothly. Potential customers may doubt a product’s value or usefulness. Endorsements or product comparisons help buyers decide by providing information that anticipates and negates their stated and unstated concerns.

8. Sell Add-Ons. Add-ons are accessories or options for the product/service. At the time of sale is the best opportunity to sell a value-added service or item. A most common add-on is identified by the phrase, “do you want to supersize that for only a dollar extra?” The

customer is buying anyway, so catch their momentum. Floor mats are not standard in many automobiles because dealers know that once a buyer is committing to spend \$10,000 another \$100 (for \$25 worth of mats) is an easy sale. A lawn mowing service might sell gutter clean-out for another \$20, and a bagel shop might add some flavored cream cheese for another fifty cents.

9. Maintain contact. Few sales are final. Contact the customer and ask how they are enjoying their new stereo, or the next time they come in for a sandwich ask them how they enjoyed the last one. Show customers their opinions matter.

10. Just do it. Almost nothing compares to the stress of anticipating a sales call. Selling can be hard and scary work. Jump in, make the calls, nail those brochures, shake the hands. Many successful sales professionals set a quota of calls per day or week and keep a database of prospects with call-back dates. Analyze your style and identify where the sales process is weak and keep practicing.

Very few products or services sell themselves. If a business owner is more interested in managing the business or producing the product and delivering the service, then hire a salesperson or a sales representative, or use the web to sell the item just as 150,000 Ebay-retailers do. Regardless, as the old saying goes, nothing happens until someone sells something.

Cary Griffin and Dave Hammis are the authors of Making Self Employment Work for People With Disabilities, available from Brookes Publishers ([www.brookespublishing.com](http://www.brookespublishing.com)).