

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

August 2002

Industry Veterans Discuss Innovative Marketing Ideas: Marketing on a Shoestring by Brigit Frank

No matter the size or budget of a company, it is possible to leave a lasting impression on customers. Some industry veterans have used P. T. Barnum-like events to educate customers and help gain acceptance for their products. Their ideas were creative and effective despite their lack of time, money or a background in marketing. They used common sense and an understanding of their customers to build their businesses in this industry.

BACK IN THE DAY

During January's meeting with component industry veterans, Abner Yoder of Stark Truss remembered a plan he used to get the builders in his area to consider using trusses in the early days of his company. "When I first started in the business, the biggest challenge was just getting people to believe in trusses....I did things to promote trusses....It was slow in the winter and I didn't have use for one of my trucks, so I set up 30-foot trusses, three-foot on center and put regular sheathing on them. I set the truck on top of the trusses and the truck sat there all winter. People were so intrigued with that display that it did marvelous things... it was almost the talk of the town."

To educate big contractors and organizations like HUD, Don Hershey of the Imperial Group would take a



demonstration to them. "We would take four or five trusses to a jobsite.... We'd build a test rack, load it with cement block, and show them the load they would take. We'd do that to prove to them that they could take the load and to get the order."

Roy Schiferl of Woodinville Lumber found that by responding to the tests of skeptical engineers and specifiers he was able to open up new areas of business. "For us, the early challenges involved marketing. We did some crazy things," remembered Schiferl. "[There was a contract for] navy housing, around 260 units, and we were pretty young in the business so that was a huge contract.... The contractor needed to get approval from the Federal Government to use trusses. The Federal Government had us take two trusses, 32-foot spans, and sheathe them—just two—and stack them up with concrete...they were 80 pound bags and we had them stacked about six-feet high on these trusses. They had steel wires on the bottom and they didn't deflect. Then they said that we had to leave them set for 60 days. They still hadn't deflected after 60 days, so finally they said okay."

Good marketing can be summed up as the amount of belief a company has in its products. Staton Douthit, of Douthit Consulting Services and Timber Tech Engineered Products, believed so much in his products that he would go above and beyond the call of duty to make a sale. "I remember a builder who built small apartments. He said that he believed what I was saying, but that he still didn't know. I said that if he bought the trusses, I'd come over and help put them up. And I did."

TODAY'S CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Obviously, component manufacturers today don't face quite the same marketing challenges as when the industry was in its infancy, but the need to educate and inform still exists, making marketing a necessary part of every company. Like these pioneers, however, your marketing



Start-up companies wait for the day that they can begin their own marketing campaigns. However, there is no reason to wait to start what companies would consider a "traditional" marketing program. This view of marketing is too narrow. A better way for companies of all sizes to think of marketing is not as a formal program, but as part of everything that a company does—every product completed, every letter written, and every phone call returned.

The opportunity to market a company is always present; the challenge is seizing these opportunities. Marketing serves a lot of purposes: it informs customers about your company, educates them about your products, and lets them know about changes to your business. In short, marketing is how a company presents itself to the world, so it's important to constantly manage this impression and not wait for a formal occasion to tell people who you are and what you do.

program doesn't have to break the bank.

Following are ten suggestions that can be used by any company and don't require a great deal of time, money or experience. Your company may already be doing some of these things. Tying several of these ideas together to send a simple, consistent message may make it possible to get your company to the next level of success.

1. **Plan Toolbox Lunches:** Set an appointment, buy some pizzas, and go to your customers' jobsites. This lets them get to know you, your company and your commitment to quality. This also allows you to make decisions about your products and your company's direction based on the questions and problems that your end-users are having. Need a topic? WTCA's Truss Technology in Building and STCA's Steel Components in Construction documents cover a variety of basic issues that are important for framing crews to understand. And they make great visual aids.
2. **Create a Database of Customer Information (and contact them):** Send newsletters, monthly mailers with product information or clippings of articles that mention your company's work. This will help keep your name in front of potential customers and can give a salesperson a foot in the door.
3. **Develop a Web Site:** This doesn't have to be an expensive project. A basic summary of products, contact information and a place to send email for sales and information requests may create sales leads and will provide a convenience to your existing customers.
4. **Expand Public Relations:** Get involved in community service and publicize it to existing and potential customers. They will appreciate your commitment to your community and will remember your name more easily when jobs are available.
5. **Remember the Small Touches:** There are as many possibilities in this category as your imagination will allow. You can make business thank you cards, have your employees and salespeople wear shirts with your logo on them, put inserts in invoices, send holiday cards, have a recording that gives information about your company while people are on hold, etc.
6. **Network, Network, Network:** Attend tradeshow, like BCMC, and educational conferences. You will learn a lot, and better yet, meet peers and customers. This will give you a chance to compare notes and find solutions to problems. It will also let you find ways to improve your business and learn about new technology. Likewise, exhibiting at tradeshow and events that would be attended by your customer base is another great way to get your name out there.
7. **Generate Special Attractions:** Like our industry veterans, put your creativity to work to make something that will build interest in the community. Put the truck on top of the trusses!
8. **Provide First-time Customer Programs:** Have a member of your staff help customers install their first order of components. This gives you the chance to ensure that your customers know the best way to handle and install your products. This company representative can also go through your jobsite package and WTCA or STCA safety documents to stress the need for safety on the jobsite.
9. **Offer Contests and Giveaways:** Hold contests inside your organization for the crewmember with the best safety record, the crew with the greatest production in one day or the truck driver with the happiest customers due to great deliveries. Hold contests outside your organization for customers with the biggest increase in business for the year or the most creative use of your products or services. This is one way to show your company's gratitude and build loyalty both among employees and customers.

10.Focus on Customer Service: Providing consistently excellent customer service is better than any marketing program you could devise. Personally follow up with your customers and ask them questions about how they think the project went and how your company served their needs. Remember to treat customers the way that you would want to be treated in the same situation and you will be amazed by the results.

The industry veterans with whom we spoke all placed an emphasis on customer service when discussing marketing. They all mentioned that they have personally helped customers install trusses after hours to make sales and build relationships. To further this point, they had other suggestions, like getting a cell phone for customers to contact you with any problems, which showed their dedication to serving customers.

A company cannot win the battle of the lowest prices every time, but if it can offer unmatched service it will always be a leading contender for business. Customers will remember the order that was rushed and delivered ahead of schedule, the question that was answered, and the call that was returned in a timely manner, and use these things in their decision making.

Rip Rogers, recently retired from Trussway, sees mastering this type of service and adapting to customer needs as the key to a bright future for component manufacturers. "I think the successful fabricators are going to be the ones who are going to learn how to respond to customers' needs more quickly," Rogers declared. "We'll drive past a service station today where you have to go inside to pay for gas, and we'll pay more money down the street to stick a credit card in a gas pump." Rogers continued, "We'll sit and drum our fingers on our desks while we wait for a computer to spit something out in 30 seconds that used to take three days to get done. Our customers are way ahead of us on some of these things. We have got to be able to respond more quickly to their needs."

Your industry associations possess the know-how and the tools to help you build an effective marketing program. For more information, please visit their respective web sites at www.woodtruss.com, www.steeltruss.org and www.scdainfo.com, or call staff to find out what others in the industry have done successfully.

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