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Smart Marketing in a Down Economy

by Mick Morrissey
April 29, 2009

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Pursuing the right marketing strategies can position your firm for increased success.

As the nation's economy continues to teeter, the impact on the surveying and mapping industry is becoming clearer each day--and it resembles a tale of two cities. In general, firms that serve traditional development-driven, private-sector clients are seeing major drops in revenues and earnings with no end in sight, while firms that specialize in public infrastructure (transportation, water/wastewater, etc.) or have connections with alternative energy and health care appear to be weathering the storm or even thriving depending on what region of the country they're in.



In either case, the temptation for surveying and mapping firms to scale back on marketing investments can be strong. Now that the feast of work that many firms experienced over recent years has turned to leftovers--and, in some cases, outright famine--slashing marketing budgets might be seen as the only rational course to take. However, it's the wrong route.

Here's my suggestion: First, if you are among the fortunate firms that continue to grow, then recommit to marketing and step hard on the gas pedal. This economy is going to continue to shudder, and the recovery will be slow and painful, so wresting market share away from the competition should be your primary focus for the next 36 months. Your priority is to protect your position, and a critical element of success will be successful marketing and selling. If, on the other hand, you are among the have-nots, you need to retool your business to do more with public sector clients--that's where the dollars will be under the current administration. You need to do everything you can to make your marketing efforts hyperefficient and effective, and search for other opportunities to cut costs. If your plan is to wait it out, you'll take a beating.

Whether your business is growing, retreating or somewhere in between, here are a few marketing suggestions to consider.

Centralize Client Information to Build Your Brand



There are plenty of options available for firms of all sizes to consolidate and build up their client intelligence bank. These tools range from integrated software solutions like Deltek, Clearview, BST Global and Axiom to hosted customer relationship management (CRM) solutions like ConnectWise and Salesforce. Given the available technology today, there really is no reason to have client information scattered about in Rolodex files, individual Outlook databases or--worst of all--people's memories.

Having all of these critical data in one place allows you to share your brand message in a cost-effective manner with the widest possible audience.

Go Green--Use E-Marketing

E-marketing is cost-effective (no printing or postage costs), easy to track and easier on the environment than traditional paper-based strategies such as direct mail. Without the expense of printing and posting, your return on investment will be higher. Online list management services like Constant Contact, Campaigner, iBuilder and LISTSERV Maestro allow you to customize targeted e-marketing campaigns. You can also generate reports on critical statistics such as how many clients view your marketing messages, who they are, which pages they visit on your Web site and how long they view your content.



You should also leverage the power of professional networking sites such as LinkedIn to deepen knowledge of existing clients and build information on prospective clients. This kind of intelligence can help you figure out which marketing tactics are effective and which ones are missing the mark so you can tailor your message to yield work.

Ramp up Personal Connections

The previous two points notwithstanding, this business is still based on relationships. Building them requires personal outreach, whether it's staying in touch with past clients or introducing your firm to potential clients.

To do this effectively, make it a point to bring value to every encounter. Turn cold calls into warm calls by first writing a personal letter to your network of contacts with your thoughts and opinions on what matters most to them and their business. Or simply e-mail articles of interest to your clients to let them know you are watching out for them. And certainly equip yourself for any phone or in-person meeting with information, expertise and insights that a past or prospective client can use in their business. This is a far more effective approach than reciting a laundry list of what your firm does and following up with the obligatory question: "So, do you have any work for us?" Ultimately, you want to become a valuable resource for any prospect--a connection they will actively seek and value.

Enhance the Client Experience

The first rule of professional services marketing is "Sell more of the same services to the same clients." The second rule is "Sell new services to existing clients." Why? Because they already know and trust you. So creating a superb experience for existing clients is just another form of marketing. And in just about every client perception study we've done for surveying and mapping firms, we find that their clients are always receptive to doing more work with trusted and reliable firms.

One very simple and effective way to enhance your current relationships is to manage client expectations throughout a project by providing weekly project status updates to the client. A brief e-mail that summarizes the project progress to date, new goals for the upcoming week and any issues the client should know about is a great way to improve the client experience. Doing this will set you apart from your competition, and your clients will appreciate and value this level of communication.

Smart marketing can either dig you out of a hole or help you gain momentum in the right direction. Don't neglect marketing in this difficult economy--embrace it.

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Sidebar: The Big Picture

Marketing isn't just about selling your brand and services --even the best marketing program won't help you sell a service that no one wants. Instead, marketing should be part of an overall strategy that requires stepping back and evaluating your business model in relation to the needs of the market and then adapting your efforts accordingly.

When Coastal Engineering Co. Inc. went through a management change several years ago, the Cape Cod (Orleans), Mass.-based engineering, surveying and mapping firm took the opportunity to develop a growth-oriented business plan. The firm began culling trend information from society newsletters, trade magazines and personal interactions at conferences and trade shows. From that information, Coastal Engineering developed a simple strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis that provided a map for the firm's future direction.

"2007 was a banner year for us, but we started getting reverberations that the situation was changing so we knew strategic planning would be important," notes CEO John A. Bologna, PE. "We distilled our SWOT analysis down to the key markets that we thought had the most potential for growth. We identified those markets by going to all the different division managers, then did our own strategizing and created a matrix internally so that we would know where to focus our efforts."

For example, the firm noticed that demand for the traditional land surveying approach to projects in the mapping industry was rapidly becoming obsolete as new GIS users entered the market and more resource information was made available in the public domain. "We had just started getting into that end of the business, so we knew that was an important area where we needed to expand our services," Bologna says. The firm also began strategically positioning itself to gain more public sector contracts by ensuring that all of the necessary government procurement forms were updated, and it became more deliberate in monitoring industry news services and advertising to identify potential opportunities.

At the same time, Coastal Engineering began actively marketing its capabilities through various channels. According to Bologna, the firm's first step was to update its Web site to highlight its experience in the areas it had identified as potential growth opportunities. "A lot of work is being done off the Internet these days, whether it's looking for specific information or just doing a Web search for a local company that provides a specific service," Bologna says. "We wanted to get that exposure, so we added a portfolio of projects showcasing anything that we felt might have a tie-in to those growing fields."

The firm also launched several active marketing campaigns--focusing on e-mail rather than direct mail as a way to both better manage its marketing dollars and embrace a more environmentally friendly "paperless" approach. "One of our business strategies was in sustainable design and environmental assessments, so we wanted to incorporate sustainability into our corporate culture," Bologna explains.

Perhaps most importantly, the firm redoubled its efforts to strengthen relationships with existing clients. "I have a very simple philosophy that people are people, and if they like you, they'll give you the benefit of the doubt. So we stay in constant contact with people we already have relationships with," Bologna says. "That's meant a lot more face time and phone calls. I might just go out for a cup of coffee with a client to catch up and commiserate. This kind of relationship building is important in these challenging times, but it's really just part of good business whether we're in a good economy or a bad economy."

The firm's efforts have paid off. While the company has downsized slightly--dropping from 35 employees in 2007 to 30 currently through attrition and a few layoffs--its workload has remained fairly steady. And Bologna is confident that the firm is poised for growth when the economy rebounds.

"Ultimately, we can't just sit there and wait for the apple to fall into our lap. Nothing in life happens that way. We're only going to get what we go after, so we need to put the effort into it," Bologna says. "Marketing gets us in the orchard, but then we have to take the time to cultivate the relationships. It's the old principal of sowing and reaping; if we make the effort to cultivate the relationships, in due season we will reap the rewards of those efforts."

For more information about Coastal Engineering Co. Inc., visit www.coastalengineeringcompany.com.

Sidebar: A Business Development Focus

A firm that has been in business for a while and has established a good reputation might be tempted to rest on its laurels. Not so for Andregg Geomatics. Headquartered in Auburn, Calif., with two other offices in Northern California and Reno, Nev., the 60-year-old surveying and mapping firm decided a year ago to branch out in a new direction by becoming a business development advocate for its clients. "We've always been very conscious about nurturing our relationships with our clients, but we decided to begin searching for opportunities on their behalf that they might not be aware of," explains Annie Mager, director of marketing. "We felt like we had to do something proactive and not just sit and wait for the phone to ring."

Mager and the rest of the Andregg team members scour news headlines, subscribe to e-mail news services and rely on a network of contacts to gather information about potential projects that might otherwise fall under the radar of their existing clients. Their clients appreciate the extra effort and have rewarded the firm with repeat business and referrals.

"Instead of seeing Andregg as merely a service provider, our clients view us as valuable business partners," Mager says. "Through these efforts, we've been able to maintain our level of business and even grow, despite the challenging economy."

For more information about Andregg Geomatics, visit www.andregg.com.

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