



# Four Keys to Better Marketing

by Leanna Haffton

**M**arketing is a mystery to many construction company owners. You might be one of them, especially if you find yourself making all sorts of excuses about why you don't have a marketing budget. Maybe you think your company is too small, or that marketing is just too expensive. Perhaps you associate marketing with a slick advertising campaign that rubs you the wrong way. Or maybe you simply believe that your business is doing okay without marketing.

But whether you admit it or not, you already promote your company, though perhaps not in ways you think of as true "marketing." If you have business cards printed with your company logo, you're marketing every time you hand one out. The same is true of the company name and logo painted on the side of your truck, the job signs you set up in clients' front yards, and the company T-shirts you and your employees wear on the job.

Everything you do that puts your company in the public eye is marketing. The problem is, unless you have a marketing plan, you may be wasting money on ineffective marketing measures. Worse still, you may be unaware of how parts of your routine company operations are creating a negative company image.

## SWOT Team

The first step in developing a marketing plan is to perform a four-part SWOT analysis: Determine your company's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

**Strengths.** The main goal of marketing is to set you and your company apart from the competition. To do this, you need to know what your company does best. For example, our clients tell us over and over how much they appreciate the way our crews clean up the job site every day. To a double-income family with children, this courtesy goes a long way toward making their workday easier during a remodeling project.

Often, it's just as important as the way the drywall looks or how tight the trim joints are.

It helps to know what others think. At the end of each job, take time to find out what your clients think about the services your company provides. Also ask the employees who worked on the job which part of the work went most smoothly, and what kind of comments the owners made.

Once you have this kind of outside information, look for positive comments that keep recurring. That's where your company's strengths lie, and that's where you should focus your marketing efforts.

**Weaknesses.** Business owners often lose their objectivity when it comes to their shortcomings. So it's even more important to get outside opinions about your company's weaknesses. Otherwise, you will tend to make excuses and never get to the root of the problem. Again, ask your clients and employees for feedback, and pay close attention to what they tell you. If what you discover seems unimportant to you, look for a deeper message. A client who tells you, for instance, that your company truck looks tacky is actually communicating that your company is not projecting a professional image. A coat of paint may be all it takes to distinguish yourself from every other guy working out of the back of his truck. Examine all of the materials you use to keep your company in the public eye. Your business cards, your logo, even your business name influence how people think about your company.

Also discuss the ideas your employees have for improving your company's image. Employees have the most contact with clients, and can usually offer special insight into how to meet clients' needs. Employees can also give you feedback on which steps are working and which aren't.

**Opportunity.** Combine knowledge of your company's strengths and weaknesses to take advantage of unique

marketing opportunities. If your company is well known for kitchen and bath remodels, but has trouble with window replacement work or re-siding jobs, use that information as a chance to focus on a market "niche." You could target homes, for example, that are more than 20 years old, since these homes are often in need of a kitchen and bathroom upgrade. On the other hand, if your community has many new homes with unfinished basements, you might want to focus your marketing on basement remodels. The point is to seek out opportunities instead of simply waiting for the phone to ring.

There are other ways your company can create marketing opportunities. For instance, your local newspaper or Sunday supplement magazine may be looking for home-improvement stories. Take advantage of that need for copy by providing photographs and time for an interview. It's inexpensive and it keeps your company in the public eye. Send press releases when you hire a new employee, complete construction of a downtown storefront, or win a design award. All of these promotional tactics help you win jobs and should be a part of your marketing plan.

**Threats.** It's important to know how your company is most vulnerable. In our market, for example, we are worried about how a large discount home center entering our community will affect our business. By identifying the threat early, we can design marketing strategies to combat it.

Learn as much about your competition as possible. When you lose a job to another builder, ask the owner what made the difference. If you can't always compete on price, this kind of information may help you discover how best to market your more expensive services.

Also pay attention to what your competition is doing right. Do they offer something you don't — in-house design or evening sales appointments? Do they have a showroom? Once you know which of these services poses the greatest threat to your company, you can design marketing strategies to counter their effect. ■

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