

USING Television Advertising

TV ads can be
surprisingly
affordable
and effective

When developing a marketing plan, most remodeling contractors probably don't consider television advertising. But a TV ad campaign can be a powerful and surprisingly affordable marketing tool.

by Susan Cosentini

When a remodeling company grows to the point that it is no longer simply an extension of its owner, it needs a well-conceived marketing strategy. Marketing is the way you let your customers know that you want their business. If you don't ask for their business, you're not likely to get it.

Many remodelers ignore marketing, assuming that if they do a good job, the good jobs will come. Some jobs will indeed come your way, but will they be the jobs you are looking for, the jobs that will pay for your overhead and then some? Will the jobs keep coming, even in lean times? Good marketing can also increase the value of a company, which is very useful when the owner is developing an exit strategy.

At Cosentini Construction, we allocate 1.4% of our gross receipts to marketing. In the past, our marketing consisted of conscientious attention to callbacks, direct mailing, job-site signs, and vehicle signs. While we still employ all of these tactics, we recently added a professional brochure and a 30-second TV ad.

New changes in broadcasting and cable technology have lowered the cost

of producing a professional-looking ad, and allow local advertising to be inserted seamlessly into national programming. Our local ad, for instance, appears on A&E, CNBC, CNN, ESPN, and HGTV (Home & Garden Television).

Creating a Clear Message

Before embarking on our advertising campaign, we had to decide what message we wanted to convey. We found it helpful to step back and consider what we are trying to sell, and to whom.

Contractors tend to be practical people, more concerned with technical issues than paint colors. Yet in the eyes of the customer, a remodeler is providing not just a kitchen or a bath, but an improvement in the quality of their life. The typical customer has a strong emotional connection to their home; they want to remodel because they want to improve their lives.

This emotional message is hard to convey. We decided that one of the fastest and most effective means of communicating our message would be to show an image of an improved space on TV. Television is a powerful tool for conveying images and impressions. The best ads hook people quickly and have an emotional impact.

It Starts with Photos

Our TV ad is very simple. It consists of still photos of completed projects, with our logo superimposed onto each one. As the photos fade in and out, you hear a testimonial from a satisfied customer.

We used mostly interior shots for our ad, because interiors have a much greater emotional impact on viewers than exteriors. It's not the exterior of a house, but the interior — where people live — that has the greatest effect on quality of life.

Getting our photos is easy. After we have completed a project, we usually ask the customer if we can send a photographer to take shots of the job for our portfolio or for TV. Our clients always say yes; most people like the idea that their home might be on TV. We make sure the client knows that photo shoots take some time (an hour is average), and that we may

have to move some furniture or other objects. (Of course, we're always careful to put everything back). For clients who have a cleaning service, I ask which day they have their house cleaned and schedule the photo shoot accordingly.

I think one of the main reasons that many remodelers don't get photos of their projects is they think it takes too much time. The key is to hire a professional photographer. We try to choose a photographer with an amicable personality, so they can chat with the client as necessary. That way I don't have to be

- For indoor shots, use a wide-angle lens.
- Take lots of shots, because you never know what will work.
- Make sure the lighting is adequate (use a good flash or professional photo lights).
- Always bring a small stepladder, since a higher angle on tight shots makes the composition look more dramatic and the room look bigger.

Creating the Ad

Having the company's logo superimposed onto each photo makes the shots

in our TV commercial, so that the public associates the logo with the positive emotions evoked by the ad.

Taping the Voice-Over

When it came time to design our ad, I told the producers at the TV station that we wanted to avoid the predictable, formulaic language that appears in most TV ads. They suggested that we use a testimonial from a satisfied customer as the voice-over. I asked one of our most enthusiastic, articulate customers if she would be willing to provide a testimo-



I initially learned about Sue Cosentini's company because I had seen some of the work they did for friends of mine. When I began to investigate the possibility of renovating my house, I set up an appointment with Sue Cosentini, and she spent a huge amount of time going over every little thing with us, because she knew that was important to me. And I think the results speak for themselves. If I were to do it again, and if I ever do it again, I would definitely call them.

present to make the introductions; I just call in advance and set it up.

A professional photographer doesn't have to be high-priced. I often use young photographers who are just starting out. Shooting a job costs us from \$100 to \$200.

I ask the photographer to shoot for drama, not for the technical aspects of the remodeling work. I want the photos to convey hearth and home and comfort.

Here are some basic requirements:

more effective as marketing devices. Good logos are very simple graphic images that can easily be reproduced on a photocopy or fax. The Nike and Reebok logos are classic examples of distinctive, simple graphic images that most consumers now recognize.

I consulted an artist, a graphic designer, and an architect while designing our company logo. With their help, we ended up with a compelling graphic image. We feature our logo prominently

in our TV commercial, and she readily agreed.

Before the "audio shoot" (as the producers called it), I gave her a list of talking points to get her rolling. The shoot was conducted in her home, where she felt most comfortable. Because she was sitting in the remodeled space, she had ready access to her emotions concerning our work and the rooms we had helped create. Although we needed only 30 seconds of audio, we taped much more (just as we took

more photos than necessary). We ended up with 10 minutes of taped testimonial, which we edited down to 30 seconds. We sent our new “voice personality” a bottle of wine to express our gratitude.

Production work. When it came time to put together the ad, we picked photos that are dramatic and readily understandable. The studio scanned the photos into the video. (If necessary, they can even edit them: A snowy yard can be transformed into green grass, for instance, or a piece of litter can be digitally removed.) The producer assembled the still photos in sequence and superimposed our logo in one corner of each photo. Then he added background music and the voice-over.

Running the Ad

Because the ad is distributed by cable, rather than being broadcast, the television company is able to target specific geographic regions. I chose to restrict our ad to cable customers in the area we serve.

The salespeople at the cable station gave helpful guidance concerning when and where to run the ad (that is, which programs and times to choose). They were able to provide us with demographic profiles of the viewers of various shows. Their regular market research includes the survey question “Are you planning any remodeling projects?” They used that survey information to provide a demographic profile of the type of television viewer who is most likely to consider remodeling — and the information was specific to our county.

We chose to run our ad on selected channels at different times, within our monthly budget. We also chose to “go deep” (target a specific program) on one show that I believe is well watched by our target market.

We track our leads; when a lead mentions seeing our TV ad, we ask what channel they saw it on. Several leads saw our ad on the local news show, which surprised me because the local news is not the most interesting program. It also happens to be the least

expensive slot for the ad.

The frequency of the ad depends on two factors: our budget and our desire to avoid showing the ad so often that it becomes annoying. During the first few weeks our ad was on the air, a friend called and said that she loved the ad but thought it was running too often and it was getting a little irritating. I immediately called the station and had the ad frequency reduced.

We have received very favorable reactions to our ad. When it first appeared, clients, friends, and acquaintances weighed in with how tasteful and attractive they thought it was. Recent clients have started asking, “So when is my house going to be on TV?”

We have run the ad for about a year now, and I recently pulled it while we create a new one. I feel that if the ad is off the air for a while, the new one will have greater impact when we launch it. The new ad will follow exactly the same format: beautiful shots and an informative voice-over. This time we hope to use a husband and wife team for the testimonial.

An ad that is informative and understated can probably run for a year without getting stale. That’s what I like about TV advertising: Once we have created the ad, we can just leave it for months. All we have to do is pay monthly for the service, and the ad continues to work for us, without fail, and without further input. Even though our TV ad had a low up-front cost and low maintenance requirements, it’s still a high-impact way to promote our company.

Cost

Our ad runs 40 times per month. The station named a nominal fee (\$200) to produce the ad and then waived that fee once we bought our air time. Of course, the station distributes the cost of making the ad across its total billing. In all, our first year of television advertising cost us \$6,500 — about \$540 a month.

The cable company lets us structure our payment plan any way we want. I have the cable company bill me more in the summer months, for obvious rea-

sons, even though the ad runs less frequently during those months.

The first year we ran the ad, it generated 6 out of a total of 66 leads. Even though this is a small percentage of our leads, the quality of these leads was very high. Of the six leads, two of these didn’t pursue any other remodeling companies. The ad alone secured their commitment to our company. One of these projects was our best performing project all year.

Our total number of leads increased significantly over the year, and I believe the increase is directly attributable to our TV presence. Although most of these leads are acquaintances or referrals from friends, recognition of our name from the TV ads gave them the reassurance they needed to call us.

There is no question that television has a legitimizing effect. Although there may not always be an immediate benefit from a marketing plan, these efforts can be described as consciousness raising. Over the long term, we are increasing our name recognition and building a general understanding of the capabilities and value of our company. This doesn’t happen overnight.

Our ad is like a foot in the door with potential customers. Many people find calling a contractor intimidating; they hesitate because they’re afraid of being rebuffed. But our ad makes our company more approachable. Once they’ve seen the ad, people feel they know us, so they feel much more comfortable about calling.

Our proactive promotion strategy has also had a few benefits I didn’t predict, including our ability to attract and keep qualified employees. Our employees find it much more fulfilling to be part of an organization that takes pride in what they do and promotes that pride to the community. Developing a positive presence in the community creates a sense that we’re part of something bigger than just the pursuit of the almighty dollar. 

Susan Cosentini is a builder and remodeler in Ithaca, N.Y.