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Unusual ways to market emphasize five finalists' brands

MARKETING HAS CHANGED

a lot from the days of solely hanging out a shingle or passing out flyers. The five finalists in the communications and marketing category are using creative ways to grow their business and keep in touch with clients.

Techniques include newsletters, contests and lunch meetings. The tactics have several things in common, including the focus on increasing business by collecting potential client contact information.

A targeted showcase

Bob Lapkin has used several strategies to increase sales at his corporate catering company, including direct calling and advertising in traditional publications.

To some extent it had been working. Golden Valley-based Creative Corporate Catering moved into the Milwaukee market in 2005 and plans to enter St. Louis this year. But in an effort to stand out from the crowd and further grow sales, Lapkin — the company's president — decided the company needed to do something more.

BY ANDREW TELLIJOHN
photograph by john noltner

In 2005, Lapkin created a restaurant marketing showcase that included his clients, prospective customers, and chefs and management contacts from many of 40-plus partner restaurants and bakeries from which he provides food for corporate meetings.

“Our challenge is reaching out to corporate customers and finding the right person who places orders for lunch meetings. It’s a challenge,” he says. “It’s critical for us to get in front of the people that do lunch ordering.”

More than 450 people attended the first Fall Restaurant Showcase at the Hopkins Center of the Arts. The company benefited from the event, though Lapkin says it was difficult to read how much of the increased sales came from the event.

This year the event was held at the

Golden Valley Country Club. A new media partner gave the company more play this year and more than 750 people attended. Sales had been on a steady, 16 percent increase throughout the year, but in August that jumped to 27 percent. After the event in September, the company received an even bigger boost: sales jumped 47 percent.

“Was it effective? Yes,” Lapkin says. “This has been very exciting and worthwhile for us.”

‘In their face’ e-newsletters

In the words of company President Kate Huebsch, High Point Creative is in the business of “providing the right words for your next project.”

In an effort to keep the company’s moniker in front of clients and business partners, and possibly recruit some new business, the company created “On Point,” a monthly electronic newsletter that contains news, trends and tips. The publication also showcases recent projects and invites readers to the company’s Web site.

It shows that St. Paul-based High Point has as much interest and passion

FINALIST RUNDOWN

» **CREATIVE CORPORATE CATERING**, food delivery services to business: hosts an annual restaurant showcase/tasting event for clients and prospects with chefs at 40 restaurants. **Bob Lapkin** is president: 763.512.1212; blapkin@creativecorporat catering.com; www.meetingmeals.com.

» **HIGH POINT CREATIVE**, marketing communications agency: publishes "On Point," a monthly electronic newsletter with news and tips that has led to increased business. **Kate Huebsch** is president: 651.426.4012; kate@highpointcreative.com; www.highpointcreative.com.

» **INGENUITY MARKETING GROUP**, professional services marketing firm: publishes "Ingenius Review," a bimonthly review of principals' best marketing practices. **Wendy Nemitz** is principal: 651.690.3358; wendy@ingenuitymarketing.com; www.ingenuitymarketing.com.

» **LANCET SOFTWARE**, Web development and business intelligence firm: created the Extreme Web Makeover Contest, generating media coverage and doubling monthly division revenue. **Tom Niccum** is president: 952.230.7360; tniccum@lancet-software.com; www.lancet-software.com.

» **VOYAGEUR I.T.**, Web development firm: showcases integrated and authentic branding with canoe logo, holiday gifts of wild rice, and Ladies Voyageur Day canoe outing. **Suzanne McGann** is president: 651.292.8838; suzanne@voyageurit.net; www.voyageurit.net.

about clients' industries as they do, Huebsch says.

The issues are themed. In September, On Point featured "color," playing off of leaves changing colors during the fall. October's is "sweet."

Many of the almost 150 recipients say they look forward to the issue, which will move from monthly to an every-six-weeks schedule next year.

"People say they read every word," she says.

In creating such a marketing tool, it's important that it be seen often enough to keep the company in people's minds, but not so often that it becomes irritating for readers to receive the e-mails.

While balancing that creates some challenges, the payoff has been more than worth it.

"I founded the company before e-newsletters were available, but today, that's one of our favorite mediums," Huebsch says.

An attendee asked how Huebsch decided how frequently to publish. She says that as long as quality is maintained, as infrequently as every other month could work.

"Less frequently wouldn't be enough," she says. "We need to be more in their face."

Experts who are fun, too

Another St. Paul-based professional services marketing firm, Ingenuity Marketing Group, also publishes a bi-monthly e-newsletter that has helped the company keep clients informed about what's going on.

If done well, such a venue can be inexpensive with a high cost-to-benefit ratio, says Wendy Nemitz, principal.

The Ingenius Review is comprised of several "how-to" and "why-to" articles aimed at both local and national markets; each issue published has brought at least one new client or an existing customer asking for new services.

The PDF-newsletter is also fun, with one reporter focusing most of her energy on writing quirky, humorous articles such as "Dateline Nylons," a story about corporate dress codes. That personality seems to be important to her clientele, largely made up of accountants, lawyers and other professional services providers known for being sober, staid and credible.

"They want us to be bright, optimistic, creative and full of ideas," Nemitz says. "We've really been able to generate a lively community."

In addition to the newsletter being a valuable business recruiting tool, Nemitz says the company reuses the content on its Web site, in press releases, in articles published in other publications and in Ingenuity Marketing

Toolkit TACTICS

MANAGEMENT: How to get a project to done. Here are three ideas for managing your next project more efficiently. 1. An ideal project team is four to six people. If the project is large, break it up into pieces tackled by teams of four to six. 2. Don't let meetings create more work. If you have the decision makers together in a huddle and a decision needs to be made, make it! 3. Napoleon said, "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon." Recognition results in heroic acts.

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OPERATIONS: How to communicate more effectively. When conflicts come up in discussion, most professionals try to sidestep further conflict. But avoidance is one of the factors that contributes to the problem. Observe your own reactions, and introduce them into the conversation. For example, say: "You know, I think you lost me there." Watch for the reactions of others, such as an angry face. As tough as these issues can be, taking the time to deal with and solve communication barriers indicates that you care about your employees and your customers.

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LAW: Increase traffic to your business blog the legal way. The most successful business bloggers are prolific linkers to news, articles, Web sites and even other blogs relative to the topic of discussion. Yet, there is a right way and a wrong way to hyperlink. Most Web sites are happy to have other sites link to them to drive traffic. However, some retailers oppose the practice of "deep linking," a link that leads a surfer directly to a specific page on a site rather than to the site's homepage. A business blogger can feel comfortable recounting short news items, as long as the items are properly attributed to the original author and work, and as long as the blogger doesn't rely too heavily on cut and paste.

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WINNER'S ADVICE

» "You want to set the contest up so that it serves a purpose other than giving something away," says Tom Niccum, president of Lancet Software, the winner for Best Practices in Communications & Marketing.

» "It can clearly generate publicity if it's kind of crazy like ours. It serves as a lead generator because in order to win something they have to give you their contact information."

» "It really has to be something honestly of value. I don't want to insult anybody, but I see a lot of the fishbowls at a restaurant and it's a financial adviser saying, 'Win a free lunch if you listen to my pitch.' I think people are turned off by that," Niccum says.

» "When you do a contest of any sort, you really have to check with an attorney. We had an attorney draw up the contest entry rules. You have to be cautious that you aren't setting yourself up for some kind of a problem."

training programs.

"It's been a tremendously effective way to build a network of people that see us as both experts and fun and personable people," she says.

When asked how to determine the frequency of such a newsletter, Nemitz replies that the more important issues are timeliness and quality.

"I only want to talk about things that are interesting and fun to write about," she says. "We have to be driven by generating fresh, useful articles."

This contest doesn't stink

Burnsville-based Lancet Software was the communications and marketing winner in the 2005 Upsize Business Builder Awards for creating the first pre-paid consulting card for Web design, maintenance and hosting. The Web development and hosting company followed that up in 2006 with an effort to strengthen the card's brand identity.

Lancet, following in the footsteps of reality television, created the Extreme Web Makeover Contest, a contest that

solicited entries and explanations from companies about why their Web sites stink.

A corresponding marketing campaign promoting the contest included television, print media, direct mail, e-mail, collateral and telemarketing. The company created a memorable news release and advertising package that featured a businessman sitting at a computer wearing a gasmask.

Two winners were chosen to receive a Web site makeover using \$2,800 worth of LancetCard hours.

The company may have given away that time, but Lancet has made up that cost many times over. KMSP-TV, the Pioneer Press, the Star Tribune, the Business Journal, and several other media outlets covered the contest, and then followed up with coverage on the makeover winners, giving Lancet oodles of publicity for the contest and its services. Perhaps more importantly, all the entries submitted contact information that Lancet is still following up on months later, says Tom Niccum,

Toolkit TACTICS

ACCOUNTING: Look at your business day by day. Often when discussing a business owner's financial situation and challenges, the owner likes to roll up to an annual number: "We do \$1 million in revenue." These summary numbers often don't tell the daily grind or challenge of a small business. Look at your business from a daily perspective. That \$1 million business could also be said to be a \$2,740 daily number (including weekends and holidays) that the owner needs to be either invoicing or collecting every day to reach the objective.

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OPERATIONS: How to determine core vs. non-core functions. Business owners often struggle when deciding whether a business function is "core" or "non-core." One simple litmus test is to ask yourself the question, "Does my customer care about _____?" Fill in the blanks with payroll, bank reconciliations, sales-tax compliance, depreciation, and so on through various functions. If the answer is "no," then it's clearly a non-core function and open to outsourcing.

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MARKETING: How to get customers to listen up. Many business owners are trying to reach customers through podcasts, those audio segments that listeners can select and hear via their portable listening device. The medium of audio allows people to be more productive. Podcasts can be listened to on the daily commute, while working out, or while walking the dog. Here are good things to include in a podcast: How-to information; changing factors such as market conditions; real-life stories from customers; best-practice methodology your firm uses or recommends; news issues that affect your prospect or customer base.

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president. "We face the task of educating our clients about our services," he says.

"Most of our potential customers already have a service provider. We really needed a low-cost way to drive a wedge into that relationship."

It's been so successful that Niccum told attendees that Lancet would probably undertake a follow-up or similar contest in 2007.

Authentic branding

Voyageur I.T. was founded by owners who love the outdoors. The Web development firm has used that heritage as a tool for maintaining relationships with current clients and adding new ones through marketing events as well.

"Voyageurs were known for great skills," says Suzanne McGann, Voyageur I.T.'s president. "Their ability to portage for hundreds of miles with several pounds of gear on their back is legendary."

The St. Paul-based company decided to use these ties to showcase its own skills. A branding campaign emphasizes many of those outdoor qualities through holiday gifts of wild rice in burlap bags, thank-you packages of "Northwoods" sugar cookies and a canoe logo.

And many clients have been wooed by McGann on Ladies Voyageur Day when she takes "my favorite women for paddling and networking," she says, comparing the journey to when men meet on the golf course to do business.

"Being in a canoe with them for four hours gives you plenty of time to talk about your business strategies," she says. "Significant clients have come to Voyageur through that program."

An additional bonus is that the event has created some unintended but welcomed publicity. "Those things become newsworthy. It allows us a little more intrigue in everything we do. It's been fun."

McGann acknowledges that it's hard to determine how much the marketing efforts have contributed to growth. However, first quarter 2006 gross revenue exceeded ambitious growth plans and was 54 percent higher than during the same period in 2005.

"Somehow it works," she says.

[expert tips]

1 Finalists for Best Practices in Communications & Marketing are dedicated to "living their brand," says Elin Raymond, president of The Sage Group in Minneapolis and a marketing expert.

2 "Marketing certainly has evolved," she says. "These are people that aren't doing it by the book and they are having fun. Isn't that what our livelihood is all about?"

3 Newsletters, such as those published by Ingenuity Marketing Group and High Point Creative, can serve many purposes, she says.

4 They go out to customers as marketing tools, but they can be re-used as content for press releases or on Web sites. And they can be produced for a fraction of the cost of more traditional direct mail projects.

5 "They are using their products to sell themselves," she says. "You get serendipitous business the more you are in touch with your customers."

6 Events and contests, such as those utilized by Creative Corporate Catering, Voyageur I.T., and Lancet Software, can gain legs and life-spans far beyond the initial contact with customers.

7 She suggests that when companies use these guerrilla marketing techniques they always collect contact information, specifically e-mail addresses, as that is the fast-growing mode of communication in the business world these days.

8 "What you are doing is generating leads," she says. "It's all about building quality lead lists."

9 Taking those lists a step further, Raymond suggests that in their customer databases, companies track how clients found out about them so they can determine what brings the best return on investment.

10 Finally, she reiterates that having fun is great, but that it's also important to remember to keep living and breathing the message through both internal and external "touch points."

11 "Your brand is not your brand," she says. "It's how your customer perceives your brand."



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