

How to plan marketing communications?

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What are marketing communications?

1 Introduction

Marketing communications are the tools a company uses to deliver a range of promotional messages to its target markets.

Businesses use a range of marketing communications to promote their companies, their products and their services.

Examples of marketing communications tools include:

- Brochures
- Mailshots
- Websites
- Advertisements
- Sales promotions
- Exhibitions
- Personal selling
- Press publicity campaigns

These tools can be used in isolation, but it's usually more successful to use a blend for maximum impact.

Each element of the mix can be judged against a number of criteria – 'the 4Cs':

Cost

- Is the overall cost of the campaign expensive?
- Will there be much wastage?
- How much will it cost to reach a given number of individuals?
 - A sales promotion of an expensive gift may be costly per unit, but the campaign could be cheap if only a dozen items are mailed
 - An ad campaign may be seen by thousands, but perhaps only a very small percentage of those people are potential customers

Clout

- Can the campaign reach a large number of people?
- Can the message be personalised?

Credibility

- An advert may be viewed with scepticism, whereas a favorable piece of press coverage will be widely accepted as accurate

Control

- Can you target particular audiences?
- Can you adjust the message to suit individuals or as the campaign progresses?

Typically, an evaluation of your campaign alternatives may look like this:

	Advertising	Sales promotion	Public relations	Personal selling	Direct marketing
Clout	Low	Low	Low	High	High
Costs	High	Medium	Low	High	Medium
Credibility	Low	Medium	High	Medium	Medium
Control	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High

The objective of all marketing communications activities is ultimately to achieve sales, so it is important to communicate effectively. Before engaging in any communications programme with customers, you have to decide:

- What you want to say (this should include where possible and relevant):
 - Who (eg Suzanne’s fashion shop)
 - What is happening (is moving to new premises)
 - Why (to allow the shop to stock more ranges)
 - When (next week)
 - Where (the new address)
- Who you want to say it to
- How to present your message
 - How to send your message
- Where to send your message
- When to send your message

You also need to consider the style and tone of your message and the follow-up actions that will be required by you and your staff in order to generate that all-important sale.

2 Why it is important

The purpose of any form of marketing communication is to provide information to your target audience in a way that encourages a positive, or buying, response.

For example, our clothes shop mentioned above is expanding and moving to larger premises. The proprietor needs to communicate this fact to the target audience and has considered the following key elements as part of the marketing communications activity:

- The business is moving and increasing its range of designer clothes
- Both new and existing customers are welcome
- She will make contact with potential customers using direct mail, local press articles and posters
- She plans to contact existing local customers by mail, potential customers from a wider geographical area by press activity, and passing trade by placing posters in the shop window
- The mailings will be sent out two weeks before the opening, press releases one week before, and a press feature is planned for the day of the opening

In terms of the style and tone of the message, her customers are invited to a ‘champagne celebration’ with the opportunity to buy new stock at a special discount on the opening day. As part of her follow-up campaign, she also plans to host a fashion show two months after the opening, offering the proceeds to a local charity. By developing this planned

programme of marketing communications with her customers, the proprietor of this business is providing them with more opportunities to buy. She is not just opening up her new shop and waiting for customers to walk through the door.

3 What you should do

Here are some examples of the simple steps for deciding on, and developing any form of, marketing communications.

Start by deciding your objectives

Do you want to improve general awareness about your business? Are you launching a new product? Are you looking to attract new customers or to encourage existing customers to buy more from you? A successful marketing communications campaign will use a mixture of promotional techniques to get the key messages across to customers. Once you have decided your objectives, consider the various elements of the promotional mix and decide which are the most appropriate at this time.

Set an appropriate budget

If you are concerned about the cost of the campaign, try running a test (perhaps by sending a direct mailing to just a few recipients) before embarking on a larger initiative.

Decide what you want to say about your business or product/service

This is not as easy as it sounds. Are you saying exactly the same as your competitors? Does what you say pass a 'so what?' test? Are the claims you make backed up by the standards you deliver?

Remember 'AIDA' – use your material to:

- Secure your customers' ATTENTION
- Keep them INTERESTED
- Generate a DESIRE
- Encourage them to take ACTION

Select your target audience

Selling office machines is not the same as selling shampoo, and business-to-business customers should not be treated in the same way as business-to-consumer customers.

Business-to-business markets	Consumer markets
Use company money	Use own money
Small number of buyers	Large number of buyers
Decisions made by groups	Decisions made by individuals
Long time to make a decision	Short time to make a decision

However, remember that all purchases are made by people, and always try to appeal to the heart as well as the head.

Different marketing communications will be appropriate in each market.

Business-to-business markets	Consumer markets
Formal approach appropriate	Informal approach appropriate
Personal selling dominates	Advertising and sales promotion dominate
Greater use of logic and information-based messages	Greater use of emotions and imagery
Sales management a key priority	Brand management a key priority

- Focus on the main benefits that your product offers customers, and use short words and sentences to explain these clearly in any communication. Try not to use too much jargon – and if you do have to use it, explain what it means in simple terms.
- Don't forget to include basic company information such as name, address, contact numbers and website.

- Once you have decided which words and pictures to use, think about the way you want your communications material to look and feel. The design, colours and layout of your brochure, mailing, website, exhibition stand, annual report, etc will create an image of your business in your customers' minds and should reflect what you do. If you are not really sure what you want, check what competitors and other local businesses are doing. This exercise will help decide the things that you like or dislike, and will help to focus your mind so that ideas can be formulated more clearly.
- At this point, unless you have the specialised skills to do it yourself, it may be necessary to talk to a designer, ad agency, etc to develop your ideas into the promotional material you are seeking. If you haven't worked with a designer before, invite at least three different companies to quote for your requirements. It is also helpful to talk to other business colleagues to see if they can recommend someone. Check that the company has solid credentials in the media you plan to use – a company that is expert in producing print material may not have the capabilities to design a complex website.
- Prepare a short written 'brief' for your agency. This ensures that you have your ideas straight and that there will be no misunderstandings in what you are asking them to do. Let them see any existing ideas that you like or dislike, and provide as many texts, photographs, diagrams, maps, etc as you can.
- The designers will usually provide you with a number of 'outline design ideas' from which you can select a favourite for further development. You can amend these as you see fit, but remember that all amendments take time and will therefore add to the cost of the finished material. Most designers work closely with a number of print houses, stand production companies, web tech specialists, etc so they will be able to provide an estimated cost for converting their design ideas into, say, a full-colour A4 brochure or a single-

colour A5 flyer. You can then decide what you can afford and proceed on that basis. Remember – the more planning undertaken at the start of the project, the more cost-effective an exercise this will be.

When you get to the 'final proof' stage, be absolutely sure that the material says everything you want and that the colours, style, paper weight and quantity ordered are agreed before you 'sign it off'. Mistakes at this point can be very costly to change.

- Generally, you will need to allow up to two weeks from 'sign off' of the final proof to delivery of printed material, so allow time for this within your planning calendar.
- Finally, be consistent in your overall promotional approach and measure your success against the original objectives. Don't rely on gut instinct when considering whether to repeat or extend an activity. Check to make sure it really did deliver the sales, raise awareness, encourage new enquiries, etc.

4 Tips for effective marketing communications

To use the marketing communications tools effectively, it helps to follow some rules.

- Different customers have different needs, so your marketing communications activity may be wasted if targeted at the wrong customer group. It is therefore important to tailor promotional messages to meet the needs of each different segment of your audience.
- Your designer will be able to advise on the different layouts that are possible for both websites and printed materials, and which are most cost-effective. Keep in regular contact with the design team throughout the process so that you can provide feedback on their ideas, monitor progress and keep them on track regarding your deadlines and budgets.
- Even when budgets are limited, there are still a lot of different ways to make the most of what you have to spend.

Consider a two-colour brochure rather than a full-colour one, or compare the value that your business would achieve by printing, say, 1,000 posters, compared to having a good press release printed in the local paper.

- Remember that your website can be more than an online brochure. Use it not only to communicate 'to' customers, but also to gather feedback, and even take orders 'from' them.

5 Case study

The London Eye

The London Eye, part of British Airways, wanted to attract new visitors. Its annual marketing budget of £1.5 million was used to increase passenger numbers via focused advertising and other promotional activities.

Londoners were encouraged to take additional flights with the sale of joint tickets offering a trip together with a champagne meal at a nearby restaurant. Overseas visitors were targeted with an online campaign combined with advertisements at key entry points to the UK. Students were offered joint tickets with Tate Britain for the Turner Prize exhibition. This was promoted through student bars and Student Union mailings.

Other initiatives included a 45-minute Thames cruise, the production of guidebooks, the introduction of trained capsule hosts and the re-launch of the website www.londoneye.com

The overseas campaign led to a 5% increase in passenger numbers. Within three months 7,800 Londoners had taken up the 'flight and meal' deal, and there were 300 redemptions of the student tickets. Overall, BA saw an 8% growth in visitor numbers to more than 4 million, and an increase in gross profit of 23%.

While activity on this scale would be beyond the remit of most SMEs, this example does illustrate the benefit of using a selection of different techniques to achieve a specific and clearly defined result.

Finding out more

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www.cim.co.uk/marketingresources

gives more useful advice for small businesses wanting to build on their marketing knowledge.