

FROM OBSCURITY TO PROMINENCE

*Promoting your business
cheaply and effectively*

A free report from

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The logo for Word Wizard, featuring the words "Word Wizard" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font with a white outline and a slight drop shadow effect.

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How to promote your business cheaply and effectively

Building your business depends hugely on who you know and who knows you. In other words, it's about relationships. This is especially so in New Zealand where our business community is very small, relative to other countries.

The effect of this is that you often don't or can't do business with people until you get to know them and they get to know and trust you. This relationship may be a direct, personal one or it may be through a third party who recommends you to someone they work or do business with.

Whichever way it falls, being invisible will hamper your ability to expand your business. This report is about improving your visibility in ways which are inexpensive but not down-market. For instance, I don't recommend you photocopy a zillion cheap and nasty little flyers or messages that get heaved into people's letterboxes. This would be a complete waste of your money.

Instead, what follows is a range of ideas that will get your name in front of your target market. But, to blatantly plagiarise the Mainland Cheese phrase: *Good things take time*. So don't expect to see miraculous results overnight. Like your personal friendships, business friendships and relationships evolve over time. People need to get to know you, to like you, and to trust you before they will choose to spend their money with you. Using these techniques, you can put together a realistic plan, based on what you want to achieve. Some techniques, for whatever reason, may not be suitable or feasible for your business. Others may take a little work, planning, or money, or all three. Begin with an idea that appeals to you, that you would like to do and that is within your ability, resources and budget to produce.

Once you have one promotion idea in place, move on to another because these techniques work best when you use more than one of them. That's because they are not all direct. Some, like media releases, are indirect and have advantages that direct

methods do not. It's a bit like advertising: often you'll see more than one advert in more than one medium – in a magazine and on the radio, perhaps. That's because the more people are exposed to your message, the more likely they are to take it on board and, when it comes to choosing a supplier your name will be the one that springs to mind.

Much of the information which goes into these different methods can be used more than once. For example, the information contained in your media release could go into a magazine article; or the tips in your fact sheet could form the basis of a sales letter. Make your communications work hard, make them multi-task as much as possible. Not only will this save you time and money, but it will ensure that the key messages you are trying to get across to your customers and potential customers are consistent across all forms of communication.

The techniques in this report are arranged alphabetically so you are easily able to refer to them when you need them.

Advertorials

Advertorials are advertisements written to look like articles. You see them in magazines and newspapers and often don't even know it. Unless they carry a tag which says "advertisement" you, the reader, are led to believe they are editorially independent features, and it is this that makes them extremely powerful.

Unfortunately, advertorials are not usually free. Unless, that is, there's such good, gutsy information in them that the publication's editor can immediately see how useful it will be to the readers.

Example: Pick up any magazine or newspaper you have lying around. Flick past the news sections and look for any article or story which has contact details for a company listed at the end. That's a sure-fire way of knowing if something has been paid for. I recently came across a great two-page advertorial, smack in the middle of an American clothing catalogue. It looked exactly like a magazine article, complete with photos and writer's by-line, and stood out because it was so unlike the rest of the catalogue.

Brochures

Many companies, both large and small, have a brochure to advertise their products or services. At the top of the range these will have many pages, and be glossy, colourful creations, that scream “We spent zillions on this”.

At the other end of the scale are photocopied DLE (envelope size) or smaller flyers which shriek, “We have spent almost no money on this”.

You want to be somewhere in the middle. You want a brochure which quietly says, “We’re not extravagant. We value money. We know you’re not going to be swayed by the fancy bells and whistles of swanky brochures. We just want to tell you how we can make your life easier or solve your problems, in a pleasant, non-threatening, easy-to-read way.”

A brochure need not be expensive. In fact, if you have a reasonable printer, you can even print them yourself. But it will need to be attractively designed and it will need to be well written. This means making sure there are no mistakes. If your copy is riddled with errors, your image will take a steep nose dive. People will not trust you because they will rationalise that if you can’t produce a piece of communication about your own business properly, how can they trust you with their business?

Your copy must also be written in terms of the benefits your clients will receive rather than the features of your product or service. In other words, put yourself in your client’s shoes and write it from their point of view, rather than your own. Keep this in mind, no matter what you’re writing.

Cards

Have you noticed that almost no-one writes personal, handwritten notes or letters any more? It used to be quite common but with technology now driving virtually everything we do, they have become like the moa. Extinct.

But doesn’t receiving a card from someone make you feel good? Kind of special somehow? Provided you’re not left with the feeling that you’re only being sent the card in order to make up numbers, it makes you feel warm inside to think that someone would take the time to hand-write a note or card to you.

Which means that if you send a card or a handwritten note to a business contact, you'll immediately stand out from the crowd. At the very least it will get opened and read. Whether it is acted on depends on the quality of the contents and what you're offering. Cards are cheap to buy if you get them in bulk from stationery stores. I get mine colour photocopied with my logo on them.

Client or business advisories

A client or business advisory is an update on events relating to your business which you send to your clients and people you would like to do business with. It is sometimes associated with events in the news so must be timely and relevant. By which I mean whenever an issue arises on which you are qualified to comment and make recommendations, you must respond quickly. Writing client advisories positions you as an expert in the minds of your clients, making you the obvious person to contact when they need the services or products you provide.

Advisories are very useful if you are in the sort of business where change is constant. For example, if you are a recruitment company, there's often value to be gained from letting your clients know about planned law changes or how an issue currently in the news affects them.

A client of mine recently used this technique to gain publicity when the media was running stories about the large number of employees seeking legal redress against their employers. Not only did he send his advisory to his clients, he also sent it to the media, which resulted in lots of top-level publicity for him and his business.

Keep an eye open for opportunities to inform your clients about developments in your area of expertise.

Company profile

If you are trying to promote yourself, having a company profile is an excellent idea, no matter what business you are in. It has many, many uses. For instance, you can:

- § Send it to someone who is enquiring about your product or service.
- § Include it with your press release when seeking media exposure.
- § Place it on your website.
- § Use it as the basis of a brochure.

A company profile is your story. It tells how your business came about, what makes it special or unique, who you are, and your background and experience. It should contain a statement about your intentions, and what you do. This might be a mission statement

but, as these are usually couched in formal and often meaningless language, I recommend you choose something more meaningful and personal, that you feel would make an impact on the person reading it.

E-books

E-books are a relatively new form of marketing and have yet to reach their full potential in New Zealand. But overseas, sales of e-books are booming.

Businesses take their area of expertise and turn one aspect of it into an e-book which they either sell or give away. E-books are generally shorter than printed books and therefore require less effort to produce.

The key to a successful e-book is to write about a topic people want to know about. If you are in real estate, for example, write about how to present your home for sale; if you are in recruitment, write about the 10 most important things to do at an interview; or if you are in the car business, write about what to look for when buying a new car.

Almost every business can use this form of marketing and you can distribute your e-book in almost limitless ways: through your website, as a gift to clients, or as an enticement to draw traffic to your trade show stand.

Email marketing campaigns

It's highly likely you yourself have received email marketing messages. Many businesses are now using them to target their customers directly because it's an excellent way to ensure your message gets to the right person. Of course, you have to have their email address in order to do so, but most people are more than happy to give it to you, if you ask.

Some email marketing messages are exceedingly complex – full of graphics and links – while others are very plain. The complex ones look great, no question, but they can be time-consuming to download and some of your clients' computer systems won't be set up to receive such messages and will bounce them. And most likely you will not even know.

An advantage of simpler email messages is that you can easily do it yourself. You don't need to involve a web company or anyone else with technical knowledge. But you do need to ensure your emails are well written and conform to basic principles. For instance, if you're doing a group email, you need to ensure that the email addresses of your recipients are hidden from each other.

After the “from” line, the next most frequently read line in any email is the subject line. This means it needs to be sufficiently interesting that it stands out from all the spam emails your clients receive.

Email newsletters (ezines)

These differ from email marketing messages by virtue of being information-based rather than sales-based. This makes them exceedingly valuable because it gives you the opportunity to show your clients your depth of knowledge without appearing to try to sell to them. In other words, you are giving rather than receiving.

Of course, you may decide to carry advertisements of your own or other people’s products in your ezine, but the prime reason for writing a regular newsletter is so that clients remember who you are and what you do. You are top-of-mind when they need your product or service.

Ezines are such a very powerful form of communication that every business should have one. But the majority still do not which makes them an excellent tool for promoting your business.

The frequency with which you send out your ezine is your call – it depends on how much time you wish to devote to it (if you’re writing and distributing it yourself), how much information you have to give to your clients, and what sort of business you are in. If people are regularly unsubscribing, it’s a strong signal that you have got one element of the mix wrong.

Flyers

Flyers are similar to brochures but tend to be more specific. For example, they usually advertise a particular product or service rather than your overall business, like brochures do.

Flyers can be delivered to letterboxes and post office boxes, or sent out with your regular mailings. They usually contain a call to action, something particular you want your reader to do. It may be to visit your website, order your product or come to your trade show stand.

Because they are specific, flyers usually have a limited life. Their principal advantage is that they don’t have to be flash and glossy, like brochures often are, so you can whip them out on your own printer. This makes them pretty cheap to produce, although they

do need to have a bit of class. Generally, the cheaper something looks, the less effective it is.

Magazine articles

It may seem odd to include magazine articles in this list but they're much more effective than you might think. The reason is an article appears to the reader to be editorially independent, in that it has been written by a journalist rather than a copywriter. This gives articles much more credibility than advertisements, so they are much more effective in getting your business noticed.

Because of this, they're harder to get into print. But if you are positioning yourself as an expert in your field, the media will contact you and ask you to be involved, especially if they are writing a feature on a particular area of interest to their readers. For example, I when I recently wrote an article for a lifestyle magazine on adventure travel among older people, and another on driver training courses for an automotive publication, I contacted "experts" in the field to solicit their comments. Everyone quoted in the article is there because they have something relevant and interesting to add to the topic. No-one is paying to be included. You need to be one of those people the media will contact in such situations.

However, you don't have to wait for the media to contact you, you can always pitch an article to them based on your area of specialisation. Sometimes they will even run an article you supply. If they agree to this, make sure that it is well written and interesting, that you follow their style, and that you present it in a format they can use.

Media releases

Media releases are a close cousin of the magazine article. Often the contents of a release will be used in an article, either as a stand-alone piece or as part of a longer feature.

Many businesses write press releases about their products or services and hope they will be used, but they are most often not. There are many reasons for this. One is that it might not be considered newsworthy (just because something is new, doesn't make it newsworthy.) Another is that you haven't come up with a strong enough angle to be relevant to the publication's readers. Or, there simply may be too much news and not enough space.

One of the disadvantages of news releases is that you have no control over what is printed. Or when. In other words: don't depend on a media release to be either

published or published in the form you want or provided. Do bear in mind that the more controversial you are prepared to be, the better your chances are of getting into print.

Having your news release published is a great way to get noticed by a wider audience than your client base. As such, it increases your profile which in turn, leads to more business. But again, it doesn't happen overnight. An isolated press release isn't particularly effective, but it works really well as part of a wider strategy.

Newsletters

Newsletters are the best way to get into print because you are able to control the content, the format and the distribution. You can also decide how often you want to send out your newsletter, which puts you in charge of frequency, too.

Those are the advantages. The downside is that there is a cost associated with producing a printed newsletter. If you are a competent writer, are handy with graphics software and have a reasonable printer, you can produce your own. However, you will want to ensure that the finished product enhances your business rather than detracts from it, which is what will happen if your standards are not high. You may be better to outsource this.

Reviews

Most people don't know about this technique and consequently it is not used much. But it is a great way of getting your product or service seen in the best possible light.

Here's how it works. You ask someone who is familiar with your product or service to write a review of it for you. Naturally, they will say only positive things because you have chosen your reviewer wisely. You then distribute the review by whichever means you have at your disposal: in your newsletter, direct to your trade media, as part of your ezine, as a flyer at trade shows, placed on your website or added to your sales portfolio. Some products lend themselves well to reviews. Books and information products are excellent for this type of treatment. But be open to possible ways to get reviews of your product or service published elsewhere.

Sales letters

Although technology has largely overshadowed the traditional ways of doing things, it doesn't pay to neglect the "oldies but goodies". Sales letters fall into this category. Relatively inexpensive to produce, a well-written sales letter can really help boost your sales, particularly if you already have a strong relationship with your reader. They are

less successful if they come out of the blue, and the reader neither knows your company, nor needs your product. It must therefore be targeted to your readers' interests and needs.

A well-crafted sales letter always comes from the readers' viewpoint. It is written in terminology they understand, it provides a solution to their problems, and it makes them feel as though you understand their needs. It should be as long as is needed to adequately explain the product or service from a benefits viewpoint.

A sales letter always has a call to action – something you want the reader to do. This might be to visit your website, call your office, or fill in a form. Whatever the call to action is, it should be both clearly stated and easy to do.

Sponsorship or social responsibility

Charities, schools and other not-for-profit organisations are always seeking assistance. Providing sponsorship for events or giving products or services which can be sold or raffled is a win-win for everyone. Your company gets the kudos for having helped, and often positive publicity as well, while the organisation is better off financially.

Tip or fact sheets

Tip sheets or fact sheets are another under-utilised form of promotion which have many uses. They are usually one page or less in bullet point format. This makes them look attractive and both quick and easy to read.

Rather like the e-book, you take a subject in which you are an expert and come up with a number of tips to help people solve a problem. Here are a few examples (in bullet form):

- § How to save dollars on your [taxes]
- § Seven ways to avoid being ripped off when you buy a new [car]
- § What you should consider when choosing an [accountant]
- § Why most [network marketing programmes] don't work
- § How to choose a [diet] that works for you.

Tip sheets can be handed out to clients, sent to prospective clients as part of your relationship building, included in newsletters – pretty much anywhere you can find an interested audience. You might even try sending them to relevant media.

A word of warning: a tip sheet must have benefits for the reader, it should not be a thinly disguised attempt to solicit business.

Trade publication articles

Trade publications exist for pretty much every industry. Make the most of them as they are often crying out for good editorial. (Be aware though that you are more than likely to be approached for advertising support. If you don't want to pay for a separate advertisement – and editorial placed alongside an ad doesn't work – say, no.) If your content is timely, relevant and shows a depth of knowledge not often available, any editor worth their salt will jump at the chance to include your material.

Before you submit an article, read the publication to see what sort of information it publishes. Then come up with something that fits their criteria. Check that it fits the publication's style, is well-written, error-free and succinct.

Websites

No business which is serious about having an impact in the market can afford to be without a website. And think what you get out of it. Credibility. An online business card. Somewhere to refer customers to. A place to display your products. A vehicle for telling your story.

A website doesn't have to be full of bells and whistles, in fact many of the most successful ones are not. That's because most people go to business websites in order to find information. If they want entertainment, they go to entertainment sites. If you want to effectively promote your business, you need a website. End of story.

White papers / reports

This document is a report or a white paper. Again, this is an under-utilised way of attracting business. A report is a way for you to add value by giving your clients information they might not be able to find elsewhere. Information that genuinely helps them improve their businesses is always welcome.

You can give people the option of requesting it or you can send it to those you know will be interested in your ideas.

Like the other forms of communication suggested in this report, it should be free of waffle and packed full of useable information that helps your customers improve their business relationships, thereby increasing their business.

Summary

Promoting your business to your clients and prospective clients is an important element of any marketing you do. There are many ways to do it, quite a few of which are listed in these pages. But there are many more and you are only limited by your imagination. Take these ideas, think about how you could make them work for you in your business and run with them. But above all, have a bit of fun. The difference that makes will help you stand out from the competition.