

Business Bullet ~ How does a startup find customers? (Part 3 of 3)

What's the hardest thing about starting a business? For many new business owners, the answer is "Finding customers." Having a great product or service that you are sure many people will need isn't good enough. Customers won't find you or your website just because you have started selling a product or service. Indeed, most business owners have to go on regular and frequent fishing trips to find customers and keep new business coming in their doors. But, how do you do that? Here are some suggestions to get you started.

Develop a plan. Consider who would make the ideal customer. If you sell to businesses, consider what department is most likely to buy your products or services, and what individual (what level of responsibility) would be the one to determine the specific purchase requirements. (Make some calls if you don't know!) Then, consider how that individual would normally find products or services like yours. What circles do they travel in? Who are they likely to listen to or where do they look when they want to buy a product or service. Find a way to put your information, or yourself, in their path.

Realize there is no one path to success. Sales often happen because prospective customers hear about your products and services in several different ways and from several different sources. The more often they hear about you, the more likely they are to consider what you have to offer when they are ready to buy.

Work your local newspapers. Daily and weekly newspapers are an incredible source of contact information and leads to potential customers. Watch for names of people who have been promoted, who have won awards, who have opened new businesses, or who in any way may be potential customers. Send those people personalized mailings letting them know the benefits of what you sell. Try to attend meetings they will be at, as well. When you meet them or send mail, let them know you read about them and congratulate them on their success or mention how interesting the article about them was.

Watch for events that may bring your potential market together. Contact the organizers of the event and offer to give away your product or service as a prize during the event in exchange for having the group promote you in their event PR.

Attend meetings and seminars that your prospects might attend. If you've been doing that and haven't made contacts that could lead to sales, look in the newspapers to see what other organizations hold events that might attract your target market and attend some of those meetings.

Follow up after meetings. Contact the people you've met to see if they may be prospects. If they say they don't need your services now, ask when a good time to call them back would be, or if they have business associates who could use what you sell now.

Give a little to get a lot. Give away free samples of your product and ask the recipients to tell their friends if they are pleased. Or, if you are a consultant, give away some free advice. This could be in the form of a newsletter that contains news or tips and hints, or it could be a free consultation during which you provide just enough information to help the client scope out their project and know that you have the ability to handle it.

Work your personal network. Ask your friends if they know of people who can use your services, or people who may know others who could use your services. If your pricing structure will allow it, offer friends and business associates a finder's fee for referrals that turn into jobs.

Study your competition. Advertise where they do. Promote yourself where your competition promotes themselves.

Use multiple small ads instead of one big one. If most people in your type of business advertise to bring in customers, you should do the same. But don't plan on making a big splash with one large ad. Plan smaller ads to run over a long time in the same publications that your competitors advertise in. The repetition will build name recognition. If you advertise in the yellow pages, consider taking out ads in multiple category headings.

Ask for feedback when prospects don't buy. Did they find a product that better served their needs? Did they decide they don't need the product at all? Did they just postpone their buying decision? Did they find it difficult to place an order on your website? Use what you learn to make needed changes and watch your sales start to grow.

