

More than just surviving

Lessons in thriving from the nonprofit sector

When the economy slumps, nonprofits are hit hard. They have to go the extra mile to stand out from the competition and gain the kind of support they need to stay afloat.

In the for-profit world, the need to differentiate your business is just as crucial when times are tough. Being strategic and creative with marketing efforts and devoting more resources to standing out in the marketplace are the keys to capturing customers' attention and staying ahead of the curve in a down market.

A second look

With all the competition among nonprofits to secure contributions, every piece used in marketing materials to reach out to potential donors has to create visual interest. An organization only has a few seconds to catch a recipient's attention through a save-the-date postcard or invitation for a fundraiser. Here, eye-catching graphic design that incorporates a unique message could be the difference between a mailing that is tossed aside and one that's saved and even elicits a response.

Getting creative with collateral often means spending more but also spending wisely to get more bang for your buck. If a typical mailing usually only garners a 2 percent response rate and a dynamic visual approach that costs a little more produces a 4 or 5 percent response rate, it can be a gamble worth taking. Working with an experienced marketing firm that knows where to invest extra attention and creative initiative improves the chances that each piece of communication delivers that return on investment.

Give to get

Whether your organization is soliciting potential new customers or participants for a fundraising event, nothing captures their attention like an offer for prizes, discounts or free products. For example, a lottery ticket-style scratch-off card is not only visually interesting but also engages the recipient and guarantees that they'll keep the item in hand at least long enough to see if/what they might "win."

The offerings themselves don't necessarily have to break the bank. It could be a discount on the registration for a charity event

or a free T-shirt that can only be collected by visiting a store. The concept is all about giving customers something more than what a competitor might and driving them to act.

Back for more

It's far less expensive to retain an existing customer than to find a new one, which begs the question: Why might an organi-

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zation lose a customer in the first place? Those willing and able to research customer preferences and adapt to meet their needs will be a step ahead, regardless of the state of the economy.

A marketing solution that truly adds value to the process of getting an organization's message out there will take the time to understand what that organization's strengths, weaknesses and missions are at every level. If a nonprofit typically loses 50 percent of its participants at an annual walk every year, a high-quality marketing solution will work to find out why that 50 percent chose not to return and identify changes that can be made to the processes that may have been driving them away. In the same vein, a for-profit company that invests in the research to root out unsuccessful marketing initiatives and ineffective customer service practices not only becomes more adept at retaining the customers they have during a recession, but creates a more customer-centric business model that will serve to differentiate its business when the economy turns and those customers have more money to spend.

Now more than ever, business leaders must exemplify the kind of flexibility, open-mindedness and creative thinking that empowers an organization to do much more than just survive.



With more than 25 years of experience, The Shamrock Companies specializes in building brands with integrated marketing solutions.

Case study:

A chapter of a national nonprofit organization sought to increase new registration numbers for a bike ride event. The Shamrock Companies proposed a marketing plan that would create awareness of the organization and its mission among groups of people most likely to register.

Once Shamrock profiled the event's average participant, further research revealed that there were more than 70,000 people within the region that met these criteria. A direct mail piece was sent to a targeted 10,000 recipients. The colorful postcard incorporated scratch-off areas, where recipients could win prizes or free registration for the event — a concept intended to retain their attention, create excitement and interaction, and hopefully urge the recipient to register.

Research shows that the average response to a typical direct mail solicitation is less than 1.5 percent. The postcard, mailed out three weeks prior to the event, yielded close to a 2.6 percent response. This not only covered the cost of the direct mail solicitation but also helped the chapter reach its goal for the fundraiser.



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