



Business Mentors

Marketing Ideas That Work (or Don't)

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Marketing has always involved a certain amount of trial and error. Strategies that have worked successfully in one venue, may not translate well to another. In the cleaning and restoration industry, marketing approaches that may work for carpet and upholstery cleaners (e.g., discount coupons) wouldn't even be considered by companies specializing in fire or water damage restoration because their target markets are completely different.

Cleaning & Restoration contacted a number of industry leaders around the globe who are involved in every aspect of the industry to get their "best and worst" marketing ideas for their areas of the industry. We asked two simple questions:

1. What has been your most successful method/idea for marketing your business/services?
2. What has been your least successful marketing campaign/idea?

Here's what we found . . .

Ideas that work

- **Be distinctively different.**

"Our most successful marketing idea involves doing something distinctively different," says Cliff Zlotnik, CR, CMH, WLS, with Unsmoke/Microban in Pittsburgh, Pa. "For marketing restoration services to adjusters, we chose to be different. Rather than saying the same things as our competitors (i.e., "we are the biggest," "we are the best" or "we are the cheapest"), we used an entirely different approach called 'diagnostic marketing.'"

Since many adjusters have long-term relationships with their favorite companies, this can be a difficult obstacle for a company to overcome. "We were self confident in our ability to find creative solutions to technical problems, and we also knew that in all probability these adjusters also had 'problem claims' that were technical in nature. We asked if they had any problem claims and offered to look at them for free. The adjuster had nothing to lose and we had much to gain by solving the problem. Once we solved a problem for an adjuster, he typically began to give us business."



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- **Hire an expert to handle your market research.**

"Our best marketing idea involves hiring a quality marketing company to do market research and prepare feasibility studies on our market and niche," explains Ben Yanker, CR, WLS, of Buffalo Restoration, Inc. in Montana. "They helped us with a budget to accomplish our goals and laid out the strategy and tactics to make it happen. They control the monthly stuff and we don't have to think about it all the time once the annual theme and budget are determined."

- **Never underestimate the value of a solid reputation. Let your good work (and referrals!) speak for you.**

For an established business, referrals and your reputation literally speak volumes. "That's how we get the bulk of our new business," says Ellen Amirkhan, CRS, of the Oriental Rug Cleaning Co., Inc. in Dallas, Texas.

Some of Ellen's other "small budget" suggestions for reaching their target market include speaking at ladies' luncheons, antique or garden club meetings. This is also an excellent way to establish your credibility in the community.

"Frankly, our main source of successful marketing is our solid reputation," says Damon Gersh, CR, of Maxons Restorations, Inc., in New York, NY. "In a service business, you have nothing but your good name. We find that paying attention to the details, hiring the right people and taking care of the work we have one day at a time has led to a long track record for quality work, which everyone in our intimate niche market is well aware of."

"Demonstrating that you honestly care about the customer and less about the money has always worked for me," says Jim Pearson, CMH, of Americlean Corporation in Billings, Montana. "I operate a large (for my market) service business in a very small market. Our motto is "We Can Doer," which is farmer talk for we can handle just about anything...we have to!"

"Word spreads fast here and fly-by-night work, \$99 specials on duct cleaning and \$19.95 per room carpet cleaning don't have much of an impact in this do-it-yourself community. That's why putting the goodwill of the customer first seems to work best. These folks will be here a long time and everyone knows everyone, [so reputations are important]."



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- **Presentations or training seminars for the insurance industry**

According to Bill Lakin, CR, of DRL in Stafford, England, making personal presentations to groups in the insurance industry provides several benefits. "It gives them an insight and understanding of what we do," he explains. "It also gives me an opportunity to answer questions and put a face to my company's efforts in the field. A client who understands what you do and why you do it is much more likely to use your services."

Art Johnson, CR, WLS, of CR Restorations, Ltd. (a division of Canstar) in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, agrees that the personal approach yields great results. "Teaching seminars to agents, brokers, adjusters and property managers has been phenomenally successful. People who attended courses last year still comment on the value of the information. Also, the trainer is recognized as the expert."

"There's an old rule," says Johnson, "the number one marketing secret is still, seeing people, and everything is based on relationships."

Phil Rosebrook, Sr., of Business Mentors in Eugene, Oregon offers another perspective on education. "I find that when companies perform education sessions for agents and adjusters, they focus mainly on the agents since they need CE credits to maintain their license. I taught a series of classes specifically designed for adjusters called a 'discussion on restoration.' They were conversational and interactive, but with substance. They contained more technical information than most agent classes, and dealt with the how and why restoration contractors do what they do. I encouraged them to challenge any restoration and billing practices performed by restoration contractors. This series of classes had a large and immediate impact."

- **Generating media interest**

"Never underestimate the value of creating media attention regarding the issues about the business you're in," says John Terranova, CMH, WLS, with TerranovaMold.com in Las Vegas, Nevada. Why? "It's FREE!" It's also another way to establish your business and yourself as an expert in a particular area.

- **Use the proper marketing techniques to reach your audience.**

Each facet of the restoration industry is different and requires a unique approach. Bill Warne, CR, of Action Cleaning & Restoration in Austin, Texas, identifies the methods that have worked well for the different specialties their firm.



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Fire damage: Direct marketing to adjusters and claims managers

Water Damage: Direct marketing to agents

Commercial Carpet Cleaning: Direct marketing to building managers, carpet retailers and janitorial firms

Residential Carpet Cleaning: Word of mouth, specials, Yellow Pages

Mold Remediation: They seek out our firm

Jim Pearson echoes the importance of matching your marketing approach to the target audience. "It depends on which service line I am marketing (and the decade). I think telemarketing for free carpet-cleaning estimates in the early eighties was quite successful, controllable and effective, but times have changed. Today, restoration marketing is best achieved by serving the adjusters through working with them...making adjustments where possible and showing them you are truly interested in making them look good. Of course maintaining high quality and taking care of problems goes without saying."

Back to the drawing board . . .

Each of our experts had different ideas that haven't worked for them, but two specific options stood out — direct mail promotions and advertising in the regional telephone directory (affectionately known as the "Yellow Pages.")

The concerns were the same regardless of where the companies were located. Direct mail failed in its "return on investment" with the cost for development and postage superceding the number of jobs obtained. While it may be used as just one aspect of a multi-prong marketing approach, it is usually less successful than other methods used in the industry.

Reactions to advertising in the telephone directories were mixed too. The very reasons for being there (because that's where everyone is) were the same reasons given for why it didn't work well (too much competition). Many believed that the cost to run an ad in the Yellow Pages rarely yielded results that made the investment worthwhile, but they couldn't afford to not be in the directory. Also, if you're marketing to claims adjusters, there are better ways to reach them.

Another tactic that hasn't worked well traditionally for those in the industry is radio advertising. Some companies have had mixed results with television, especially since cable options allow them to market to specific market segments. Participating in a radio or television interviews can help to establish you and your company as experts in a specific aspect of the industry, but be careful not to be typecast in one area if your company provides a variety of services.

"A big marketing mistake we made was allowing ourselves to be 'typecast,'" says Cliff Zlotnik. "Our company worked hard to develop a great reputation in the fire restoration field. In the



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minds of our clients, we became the 'experts and go to guys' for fire damage restoration. Even though we were the first restoration firm to take water restoration work seriously in our marketplace, to our dismay we learned that our customers were giving these claims to our competitors."

"I distinctly remember asking one of our adjuster clients why he wasn't using us for water claims and he responded, 'After all, you are the experts in fire, what do you know about water?' We learned our lesson, and responded in rapid and dramatic fashion with a company name change and development of specific marketing materials."

Repetition is a key aspect to the success of any marketing plan — multiple contacts through a variety of means are critical. "Agent route marketing that is inconsistent with only one or two contacts per year doesn't work well," explains Phil Rosebrook. "The agents are called on all day long by other restoration contractors, glass companies and other marketing reps. It takes several contacts in a short period of time to make an impression."

And once you've made your impression and captured the customer, your focus should shift to retaining him or her, but that's a topic for another issue. However, we will leave you with this thought — it costs five times as much to get a new customer as it does to retain an existing one, so consider how that expense will impact your marketing budget!

Patricia L. Harman is the editor of Cleaning & Restoration.