

Online marketing tools can boost your business

Dear Dan: OK, I get it that when the economy is bad, my business needs to market more. But we also have to conserve cash. How do we rev up marketing and be frugal at the same time? — Looking



DANIEL KEHRER

Dear Looking: The squeeze is on for small businesses coast to coast, and the economic noose for many seems to be getting tighter. If you're like most business owners right now, you face a dilemma: How do I conserve cash, but expand efforts to attract new customers and grow sales at the same time?

Fortunately, the two are not mutually exclusive. You can do both, says MaryEllen Tribby, CEO of business publishing firm Early to Rise. Just choose from a variety of simple, inexpensive marketing tools and fire away. Here are some tips and low-cost tactics you can try to cast your net for new customers, and keep those you have:

■ **Try do-it-yourself online PR:** One of the many areas the Internet has changed dramatically for small business is public relations. While PR pros have much to offer, you can also get results yourself online. Whenever you have legitimate news — a new product or service for example — write a press release that includes contact information for your business and links to your Web site.

■ **You can submit through places such as PRWeb.com.** A new site called LowCostPressReleases.com will help write, edit and distribute your re-

leases for low fees. 24-7 Press Release, a low-cost, online press-release-distribution service catering to small business, lets you attach videos or other “rich media” content to your releases as well. Visit www.24-7pressrelease.com.

■ **Use more e-mail marketing:** E-mail marketing services used by small business are seeing record volume as more business owners seek effective, low-cost ways to market. One

good option for small biz is VerticalResponse.com, a self-serve e-mail marketing firm that helps you create, manage and analyze your own campaign. Dotster.com, a domain registrar and Web services provider, offers several low-cost e-mail marketing solutions for small business. EmailBrain.com lets you create, manage, send and track newsletters and e-mail campaigns.

■ **Entice with free shipping:** Offering customers free shipping is a proven way to boost sales. To find out how to coax more orders with free shipping, download a free shipping e-book (it's free, too) at the Web site FreeShipping.org. The e-book offers nuts and bolts on free shipping and details of how to implement a free-shipping program.

■ **Participate in pay-per-click:** PPC advertising is one of the most flexible, cost-effective ways to market online. Set whatever spending level you want, change it anytime and test different messages to your heart's content. “Keep changing your headlines, copy and offer until you find the combination that brings in sales,” said Tribby of Early to Rise. Google AdWords is a great

place to start. For business-to-business listings, the leader is Business.com. In local search, DexKnows.com just revamped its entire site.

■ **Yelp about your biz:** At Yelp.com, customers can rant — or rave — about a business they've used ... maybe your business. Yelp for Business Owners offers free tools and features that will help businesses participate in this word-of-mouth action. Get e-mail alerts when your biz is reviewed; respond to reviewers, update your business info and more. Visit www.yelp.com/business.

■ **Match up with the big guys:** Business Matchmaking is a public/private partnership that sponsors a series of events nationwide in which small-business owners can secure selling opportunities from government agencies and major corporations through face-to-face meetings. The program

started a few years ago and has been a big hit; limited spots go quickly. See the schedule of events at www.businessmatchmaking.com.

■ **Free service biz ads:** Me-her.com is a new site that lets you advertise services free to thousands of potential clients who can browse your profile and schedule appointments online 24/7. Professionals (lawyers, message therapists, tutors, etc.) can display their appointment schedule or personalized calendars.

■ **Use Free Office Live Workspace:** Microsoft still considers its Office Live site in “beta,” but millions have signed up for a free online workspace on the site and are using it to bring people together and share docs with



groups. Office Live Small Business is a terrific, affordable place to build a professional-looking online presence. Visit www.officelive.com.

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