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Marketing On The Cheap: Join The What?

By Floyd Snyder

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Your local Chamber of Commerce.

Now before you stop reading, I assure you this really works, and no, this is not an advertisement for the Chamber of Commerce although it may read like one.

What seems now like a hundred years ago I owned and operated a company that was made up of three components: a monthly magazine that we converted over to the Internet (<http://WWW.SBMag.org>); a graphic art studio; and an advertising agency. While we were in our infant stages, one of the tools I used to build a client base was a one hour consultation for new business start-ups on how to get business with little or no advertising budget.

This program was very successful, and we ended up with a number of excellent clients that stayed with us for years. Most, if not everything that I suggested in that one hour session many years back, is still valid today.

The first thing I would recommend for a new business owner was to become a joiner. If your business is a mama-papa business, you should both join an organization or two, but not the same ones. Spread it out.

The first organization I always recommended joining was the local Chamber of Commerce. Your Chamber of Commerce should be the number one advocate for business of all sizes in your community. Most are structured about the same way with a variety of committees that deal with specific issues related to different aspects that make up your community. Make sure you become active in the committee that has the closest relationship to your business. If you are a retailer, join the retail merchants committee; if you are a contractor, you may want to join the government affairs committee or the transportation and traffic committee, etc., etc. If the opportunity presents itself, you may also want to consider chairing one of these committees or gaining a seat on the board of directors. This will add instant credibility and more exposure to you and your business. But be selective and don't take on more responsibilities than you want to do or, worse yet, than you can do. Failing here can create negative public relations, the direct opposite of why you are there to begin with.

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Most Chambers also sponsor any number of different networking opportunities ranging from mixers to field trips. Attend as many of these functions as you can, and always make sure you wear a nametag and have plenty of business cards with you. My favorites were the mixers. However, don't be obnoxious about it. I have seen people attending chamber events and simply walking around and sticking their business cards in people's faces and launching into some sort of sales pitch. This won't get it done. In fact, all it will do is tick people off. Remember, you are only there to meet and greet people and make friends and contacts, not sell them something right then and there.

Also remember that most, if not all, people in attendance are probably there for the same reason you are. Quite often I found it more beneficial to listen more than talk. People that have something to say are appreciative of those that are willing to listen. I can remember incidences where someone would

say to me later that I really made a great impression on so-and-so, and that they thought what a great guy I was. In reality, I hardly said more than 20 words to so-and-so, but I did spend a half hour listening to him.

Some Chambers will arrange a ribbon cutting ceremony for you when you first join, assuming yours is a new business. If your business is not all that new, they may be willing to do something similar in the way of announcing you as a new member to the Chamber.

Most Chambers have a monthly newsletter and accept press releases. Some also sell advertising at very reasonable price. Also keep in mind that if you are an active member and maybe even a committee chairperson or board member, you may have your own column in the newsletter or at least a listing as a committee chair or member of the board. This listing usually will include the name of your business.

If your committee is dealing with important issues and or events, there may also be additional benefits in the way of local media coverage. I always made sure I chaired at least one or two events a year, and I picked the ones that were most likely to effect a large segment of the community "in a positive way". This becomes important. For instance, you may want to think twice about chairing a committee to recall the local mayor and opt instead to take over the Christmas Parade.

A lot of Chambers sponsor trade shows. If promoted right, these events will offer an excellent opportunity for you to showcase your business. The trade shows are sometimes limited to a specific type of business. An example may be an electronics show or a fashion show. Obviously, if you sell running shoes, setting up a booth among nothing but big screen TVs and laptop computers may not be the place for you. On the other hand if you sell insurance, this may be the place for you to pitch homeowners insurance to people with a lot of high priced electronic gadgets. You have to pick and choose the right place at the right time.

Another function some, if not most, Chambers sponsor are seminars. Don't miss the opportunity to present yourself as an expert in your field. Explore the possibility of becoming a presenter at a seminar being offered.

Don't over look the possibility of selling your goods or services directly to the Chamber itself. It's a fairly

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good bet that, with little exception, they are not going outside their own membership to purchase anything unless they absolutely have to. If you do get a chance to do business with them, make sure you give them the best service and the best prices you can. The last thing you want to do is over charge or under serve what is probably the largest and most influential business organization in your area.

The list of possible exposure via your chamber is endless -- web site listings, yearly directories both on line and hard copy, referral services, business card racks, local maps and on and on. I can't possibly cover all the advantages of membership. There will be many other opportunities that your involvement will create for you. Yet, not all of the benefits can be, nor should they be, measured in dollars and cents. One of the greatest benefits of being a member will be in the overall pride and satisfaction that you will get, knowing you are a leader working to make your community a better place to live. You can't put a price on that.

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By Shariff

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