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Marketing Your Business

*Baby Boomers have changed every market we entered,
from disposable diaper market to
the stock market to the job market.*

We like to be marketed to.

—LYNN LANCASTER, author, *When Generations Collide*

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HAT IF YOU OPENED A STORE and nobody came? It's a

nightmare all retailers have in the days, weeks, and even months before they open their doors. And for good reason:

How can customers find your store if they don't even know it exists?

That's where marketing comes in.

In retail, we have a saying: "Good ideas are a dime a dozen. Great ideas are slightly less plentiful." It's simple, but true. We have another saying: "If it works, even if you didn't come up with it, use it." Retailers steal each other's ideas all the time! So, if we're all using the same ideas, why are some stores successful and others not? The difference between a successful retail store with a great idea and an unsuccessful store with exactly the same idea boils down to how well the idea is implemented. In the end, it's not great ideas that make the difference, but great *implementation*. My favorite saying, and the theme I've had running through this book, is: "Retail is detail." It applies not only to how well the store is run, but also to how efficiently, creatively, and energetically your marketing ideas and campaigns are carried out.

The successful retailer must be an expert in just about all phases of the business, and marketing is no exception. You must know at all times what you, your staff, your customers, and even your competitors are doing. So, comparison shop, read competitors' ads, study the trade magazines that cover your area, go to trade shows, read relevant books, listen to lectures by experts, pick manufacturers' brains—be and remain a true expert in your chosen field. Before any marketing campaign is launched, make sure you know the answers to the following questions:

- Who is your audience?
- What does your audience want?
- How do you reach your audience?
- How can you expand the base of this audience?
- How can you get your audience to frequent your store more often?

- How can you get your audience to spend more money every time they are in your store?
- Why have you previously lost customers?

Marketing:

Timing Is Everything

There has never been a better time to be an independent retailer. Rather than having to deal with rigid policies dictated from a home office that may be halfway around the country (and well out of the loop), as an independent retailer you have total flexibility to address local marketing and promotional opportunities, to develop personalized customer service policies based on the needs of your customers, and to participate in and take advantage of the events, feelings, and traditions of your local community.

More than ever, a local storeowner can gain a huge advantage over ever-larger and more impersonal megastores by being a known quantity to his customers, by building a personal reputation for integrity and service, and by becoming a leading citizen of his community.

Customers know the difference between a true community leader and a hired gun who pulls dollars out of the area and sends them off to some home office to line the pockets of greedy executives and stockholders.

The local retailer can attract local loyalty by making a significant economic impact on the community. He is keeping the money he collects from the community in the community where it belongs.

Nevertheless, local retailers do not all succeed, some fail. The reason for this often lies in the local retailer's unwillingness or inability to change. To succeed, retailers must be forever vigilant for the next great marketing idea to promote their business. The storeowner must be ready, willing, and able to make any changes necessary to keep his store competitive. Resistance to change and the fear of failure are the greatest inhibitors to business success.

Above all, to succeed, you must banish the fear of failure. You will fail only if you do *not* change. Like any winning sports team, you have to make constant adjustments to stay ahead. You must closely follow all the trends and changes taking place both in your local community and nationally.

Independence:

How Much Is Too Much?

No matter how good you are, it is not wise for you to market your business totally alone. There are going to be times when you would be well advised to market with fellow businesses. Sometimes, you may even want to cooperate with your competition to develop strategies and programs that will ensure a vibrant, pro-small business environment in your trading area.

Unfortunately, independent retailers have frequently failed to work together in the past to create a unified front. And, because of this failure, municipal, county, and state governments have bowed to pressure from big box and national retailers, granting them all sorts of concessions such as tax breaks, improvements in traffic flow, new streets, and better access to major highways—all because the independents were too independent to organize and fight off the well-financed public relations and lobbying efforts of the chains.

But it's never too late. So don't ignore the power of banding your businesses together for the good of all. Certainly you want to run your

own store, be your own boss, but sometimes cooperation with others, even with your competitors, is for the good of the whole group, including you.

This leads to the first great promotion I'm going to discuss, namely one in which all the small businesses in town get together and hold a small business (retail) day or week. By pulling together, independent retailers can get free support from local media, free PR. For example, the mayor can proclaim the importance of small retailers to the community. Participants run their own specials in context with the promotion, but they share the cost of promotional flyers and possibly radio or television advertising. And, of course, they all place signage throughout their stores announcing that they are proud members of the local retailer community. The beauty of this promotion is that it kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand, the power of a large number of stores offering specials is bound to attract more buyers than any single store could, thus providing a business boost to all; on the other hand, the community will realize the value of keeping small retailers in business—and perhaps of keeping the huge stores away—and that is of immense importance to the survival and growth of every independent in the area.

Competitors:

Friend or Foe?

No doubt you've heard the adage famously uttered by the young Al Pacino in *The Godfather: Part II*, "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer." It certainly rings true for retailing. By knowing what your competitors are up to, you will be able to better choose your products, establish your margins, and please your customers.

Of course, your competent competitors are just as interested in you as you are in them. And, since ideas are easy to duplicate, you want to keep the competition at arm's length and share as little of what you are doing with them as possible. So, keep your eyes open and your mouth shut! Here are some techniques to help you keep on top of what your competitors are doing (and to keep them from finding out too much about you):

- Have a relative, friend, or professional shopper shop the competitors' stores. Let them try to make friends with one or more salespeople there. By doing this, they may learn of upcoming sales or gather other advance information that will help you in planning your promotions. They may have to buy some items from your competitors, a marketing expense likely to pay dividends in the future. At the same time, warn everyone on your staff not to talk about your future plans and to keep their eyes open for competitors' shoppers. If they suspect someone, they should remain perfectly polite, even welcoming, but give out no information.
- Have your shopper get onto your competitors' mailing lists and any special clubs or programs they may offer. Be discreet about this. You should try to use someone with a different last name than yours.
- Closely monitor your competitors' advertising program and estimate their expenses. Chart the pattern of their advertising so you can predict, and possibly counter, their advertising waves.

Promotions

When beginning a marketing campaign, don't forget that no promotion

can replace the basics: good merchandise, fair pricing, convenience, service, and a caring sales staff. Now, as you start developing your promotional campaign, you should consider the following:

- Make sure your promotional dates do not coincide with religious holidays celebrated by a good number of your customers.
- Don't schedule a promotion when people will be on vacation. If major local plants shutdown for vacations, make sure you know the dates. If you are in a college town, make sure you are in sync with the school calendar.
- Be flexible and factor in snow or storm days.
- Decide whether major local events such as key high school or college games are good or bad times to schedule events. I was in Green Bay during a Packers game once. You could have walked from one end of town to the other without encountering a single soul!

Retail Versus Theater:

One and the Same?

In the modern world of business it is useless to be a creative original thinker unless you can also sell what you create. Management cannot be expected to recognize a good idea unless it is presented to them by a good salesman.

—DAVID OGILVY, Former CEO Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide ad agency
When I ran a major department store branch, I used to pretend every morning that the curtain was going up on a brand new show and that everything in the store had to be perfect so the audience would give us a standing ovation.

Retailing is like theater in that people like to be entertained when they enter your store. If they find your store exciting and your competitors' merely routine, you will gain their loyalty. You can generate this sense of entertainment through many touches, including, but not limited to:

- Lively in-store promotions such as demonstrations or sampling (which your suppliers are often willing to pay for), gift-with-purchase events, or other promotions appropriate to your store such as:

–Author signings at bookstores

–In-store performances at music stores

–Tastings at food or beverage stores

–Fashion models at clothing stores

–Play demonstrations at toy stores

–Perfume testers at drug stores (but make sure they don't spray unwilling customers, especially men who will have to explain why they smell of perfume to their colleagues or their wives)

- Show stopping displays, especially ones that show a little whimsy and originality. A horn of plenty with candy spilling out of it may be more fun than a basket of candy. A huge display of soap packages in front of a washtub that actually bubbles can make people laugh—and buy.

- Theme related sales and special events. By all means, have your staff, and your store, celebrate Valentine's Day, Easter, Mothers' Day, and Fathers' Day. (One storekeeper had all his predominantly female staff wear men's clothing and painted-on moustaches on Fathers' Day!)

- Warm, friendly customer service atmosphere. This includes music that is appropriate to the preferences of your audience, bright but warm lighting, and a pleasant temperature (remember that in cold weather people wear warm clothes while the opposite applies in the summer, so

keep your store *cooler* in winter than in summer). In some cases, such as in upscale clothing boutiques, a subtle fragrance may enhance the atmosphere. And never let unpleasant smells intrude.

Holi Daze:

Minding the Calendar for Marketing

When it comes to marketing, the calendar is your friend. The holidays that fall throughout the year, the four seasons, and significant local and national events can set the tone for exciting weekend, weeklong, or longer seasonal promotions.

Whenever running a promotion, you need to carry out the theme you have chosen throughout the store, in your advertising, on your Web site, and in all the publicity you generate. In-store decorations should tie the entire store into the event, holiday, celebration, or season. Store windows need to reflect the consistent theme. Salespeople's dress or accessories or buttons should reinforce it. Nothing should go unnoticed in presenting a unified, thematic front. Most important of all, of course, the merchandise you choose to feature must tie into the theme and seem more desirable, and saleable, as a result.

In developing promotional plans, always remember that you need to be thinking at least one quarter and probably six months ahead. The following sections describe some of the major (and minor) themes that may work in your business.

First Quarter

The first quarter of the year is known as "the sale quarter" because stores are selling out leftover Christmas goods and may run White Sales and Presidents' Day sales. Because this is not a big gift-giving quarter, I would recommend taking a conservative approach to how much you spend in promotions. Use that money to mark down and clear out overstocks of leftover Christmas products. Often suppliers will help by providing mark-down allowances.

That being said, here are some great opportunities for unique, inexpensive, and creative ways to celebrate holidays and other special events that occur in the first quarter:

- **Happy New Year.** This is a great theme to run from the day after Christmas through the first week in January. You can build it around a New Year's Eve party or New Year's resolutions or New Year's predictions. This is an ideal time to give away calendars or notebooks with the store's name on them. You can actually have a New Year's Eve party in the store all week with hats, refreshments, etc., to really get people in the mood. The buying mood, that is.
- **Elvis Presley's Birthday.** "The King" was born on January 8 and this is a one-day promotion from which you can get great publicity. You could hold an Elvis look-alike contest, plug in a karaoke machine full of Elvis tunes and run a sing-a-long, or even have the shopper with the best 50's or 60's outfit win a prize. This would be a great co-sponsored event with an oldies radio station.
- **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.** There should be no commercialism attached to this celebration—only respect. Ideas for celebrating it include using window displays or giving a percentage of the day's sales to a local civil rights group.
- **The Super Bowl.** The most publicized sports event in the United States

gives retailers a chance to say goodbye to the football season. The name is licensed by the NFL so you must be careful how you present your promotion. It can also be called “The Big Game,” which does not violate the NFL license. No matter what name you use, however, be creative because this really gives you an event that will exude excitement, especially if your favorite team is involved.

- **Chinese New Year.** Even if you do not have a large base of Chinese-American customers, there are all kinds of promotional events you can tie in with the Lunar New Year. Giving the store an Asian theme featuring made-in-China products could work well. Passing out fortune cookies or giving away dinner coupons to local Chinese restaurants can create a buzz.

- **African-American History Month.** Like the Dr. King event, this celebration would call for a non-commercial tribute or display. Working with local African-American leaders and educators in your community during this event can be fine public relations.

- **Valentine’s Day.** This is the second busiest greeting card holiday (Christmas is the first). It is also an important gift-giving day, although gift purchases fall in a limited range of categories, primarily candy, flowers, jewelry, and lingerie. It is also a very close buying holiday, which means that the buying activity centers on the three days before Valentine’s Day. Nevertheless, these promotions should start a week to ten days before Valentine’s Day and then end on Valentine’s Day. If you have the kind of retail store that doesn’t carry traditional Valentine’s products, you can still get into the spirit by running a “red sale” where everything red carries a discount. You can take pictures of customers in a red, heart-shaped background and insert them into a special Valentine or gift certificate. In-store drawings may offer boxes of candy or dinner at a local restaurant. You can also tie in a promotion with the local American Heart Association. Here’s a little trick I learned: if you have left-over Christmas gift items in January that are “gift-y” (e.g., perfume sets) but not too tied into Christmas (no Santas, Christmas trees, snow scenes, etc.), buy some self-adhesive paper hearts, stick them prominently on the gifts and, voilà, an early Valentine’s gift (which is much better than a leftover Christmas item)!

- **Presidents’ Day.** Celebrated as the third Monday in February, this is historically a huge sale day. It can be a one-day event, a three-day weekend event, or run from Lincoln’s Birthday on February 12 through Washington’s Birthday on February 22. You can tie in with a local bakery to offer cherry pies as a snack in the store. The timing on this holiday sale is ideal for “blowing out” all of your remaining Christmas overstocks at significant savings. Since most types of retailers use this holiday to scream “sale,” it takes on many of the advantages of a community sale, without the trouble of tying all the businesses together. Themes could include “We Are Chopping Our Prices,” “Stretch Your Washington Dollar,” “President’s Day Values,” “One-Cent Sale,” etc.

- **Mardi Gras.** This is the natural time to give the store a New Orleans feel. Costume parties or contests along with giving away beads or having beads on sale make sense. Getting a jazz or rhythm and blues band to play in the store can create excitement that gets your customers in the mood to buy.

- **St. Patrick’s Day.** This has become an “event holiday” (whether or not you have a large Irish-American population in your trading area) because it is another excuse for everyone to have a party. Start the promotion

a week before March 17 and end it on St. Patrick's Day. Green or Irish-made products should be featured throughout the store. Irish coffee is a great refreshment to serve if liquor laws in your area permit. Irish hats, music, or even a local bagpipe player could create a spirit of fun. Maybe a local talent agency could supply a leprechaun.

- **Winter Festival.** This festivity can be held during any of the three months of January, February, or March. Great sale themes to move winter merchandise include "It's Snowing Savings," "The Thermometer and Our Prices Are Dropping," "We've Thawed Our Prices," "Hot Bargains on a Cold Day," "Meltdown to Spring Savings," etc. Don't let the first quarter end without taking advantage of winter's great last gasp—at sales!

Second Quarter

This is the second strongest gift giving quarter (after the Christmas quarter, of course) because it includes Mother's Day, Graduation, and Father's Day. Those aren't the only causes to celebrate during the second quarter. Here is a list of sales-inspiring festivities for this quarter:

- **Spring Sale.** Spring is a season of renewal. Not only are new leaves emerging, but so are shoppers. So, run seasonal events such as "Spring into Savings" or "Spring Ahead to Bigger Bargains" to spotlight your new spring merchandise and get the customers who were too cold to shop last quarter back into your store and into the mood for some great spring shopping.

- **Easter.** Easter displays are a must for most retailers because Easter not only represents an important holiday, but also ushers in the change of season. Easter egg hunts for kids drive traffic into the store as parents enjoy a brief respite from keeping the kids occupied and also use the time to do some shopping.

- **Cinco de Mayo.** In the many cities with a large and growing Hispanic-American population, this May fifth Mexican national holiday is another opportunity for an exciting in-store event. Cinco de Mayo celebrates the Battle of Puebla in 1862 when greatly outnumbered Mexican troops defeated the French. Tie in with a local Mexican restaurant or feature products from Mexico to provide authentic flair.

- **Mother's Day.** Promotions for this no-brainer should run from the prior weekend through Mother's Day. A special "kids' shopping time" may be set aside for kids to buy their moms' gifts.

- **Armed Forces Day.** Celebrating our armed forces is always right. Armed Forces Day is celebrated on the third Saturday of May and there are all kinds of patriotic themes you can develop, including tying in to a local veteran's association or giving away American flag pins or even miniature lawn flags. This is also the perfect time to promote products that are "made in the USA." You may want to offer a discount to all members and retirees of the Armed Forces and their families.

- **Memorial Day.** This festive time ushers in barbecues and summer sales. Make sure you show the same respect you gave Armed Forces Day earlier in the month.

- **Graduation.** May and June are both graduation months. Themes and products around graduation tying in with the local high schools and colleges can be a great way to push products for the younger generation. Honoring graduates with prizes or discounts may also work to entice this new group of buyers into your store, not only to spend some of that graduation money, but also to become future regular customers.

- **Weddings.** May and June are also big wedding months, so don't forget those with upcoming nuptials by offering special promotions to newlyweds

or newly betrothed.

• **Father's Day.** Father of the year contests always work well. Since male-oriented products normally sell at a slower pace than female-focused goods, this is the time of the year when you can reverse the norm and gain strong sales on such traditionally male goods as golf products, knit shirts, ties, tools, and gag gifts.

Third Quarter

This is a tough promotional quarter because of summer vacations and summer activities that tend to lure customers away from your store. Consequently, you'll need to reach deep into your bag of special events to drive traffic into your store. Here are some great places to start:

• **Independence Day/Summer Promo.** Set up your Fourth of July and summer displays beginning at the end of June. Once Independence Day has passed, don't fret: You can still have a good summer promotion after taking off the July Fourth products. Sale themes for July Fourth could include "Star Spangled Savings," "Firecracker of a Sale," or "Fourth of July Sparklers." Summer themes could be "Beach Bargains," "Sun & Fun Sale," etc. Remember to reach out to where your audience is spending time. If you're near a beach, hire kids to place flyers advertising beachwear or toys under windshield wipers.

• **Christmas in July or August.** This is the ideal time to drag out any old Christmas goods you have left over from previous years. Take your lumps and mark them down to traffic-building prices. Maybe have Santa arrive at the store amid a flurry of fake snow, which will likely generate local media coverage. To get reluctant shoppers into the Christmas spirit, you may want to structure this sale so they get a coupon for a Christmas item in the fall if they buy some type of Christmas item now.

• **Back to School.** This promotion is starting earlier and earlier each year. Most stores are ready for Back to School promotions to begin right after July 4. Tying in with your local schools by giving a percentage of your Back to School sales is another way to get attention. Tying in with the Teacher of the Year could get some publicity as well.

• **End of Summer Sale.** This is the perfect time to mark down summer goods and introduce fall products such as sweaters, footballs, and blankets, as you entice customers to "stock up early" and "beat the fall rush."

• **Labor Day.** This is a second bite at the end of the summer season—a good way to take your final markdowns on summer goods and a fine opportunity to start the fall rush into your store. You may even give discount coupons for future sale merchandise.

Fourth Quarter

Ready, set, hut! This is the quarter when retailers make most of their profits, so pull out all the stops for your biggest selling season of the year as you gear up:

• **Fall promotions.** Football season, leaves changing, new and heavier clothing coming back—these all give you an excuse to create fall promotions any time sales start lagging.

• **Columbus Day.** This national holiday is another great excuse for a weekend sale. Themes could be "Discover a New World of Values" or products on sale for \$14.92.

• **Halloween.** This month-long October celebration has now turned into the second most active holiday for retailers. Themes could include "Trick or Treat Sale," "Broomstick Bargains," "Orange & Black Sale,"

“*Falling Prices*,” etc. A good way to promote your store is to give out empty bags with your name on them for kids to use when they go trick or treating. All kinds of contests can be held around the Halloween theme—everything from pumpkin decorating to costume contests.

- **Veteran’s Day.** This is a traditional sale day as we honor the veterans of all wars. The themes here are similar to all of the other military holidays.

- **Thanksgiving.** With the Christmas selling season starting earlier every year, it has unfortunately sapped the importance of the Thanksgiving holiday selling season. Don’t let that stop you. If nothing else, Thanksgiving promotions get more customers to do their Christmas shopping earlier. Remember, if they buy early from you, they won’t buy later from your competitors.

- **Christmas/Holiday Season.** We usually call it the Christmas season but, depending on the ethnic makeup of the area in which you operate, there are actually three different holidays involved: Christmas on December 25; the eight-day observation of Chanukah, the starting date of which varies from year to year; and Kwanzaa, the seven-day festival that begins on December 26. This is when you pull out all the stops. Turn Santa into a profit center by selling portraits of kids with jolly St. Nick. Tie in a philanthropic event to benefit the needy. Offer a discount coupon on new toys for every used toy a customer brings in to be given to charity.

Christmas is a natural promotion time, and you know as well as I do the type of promotions all stores, including yours, will run at this time of year. Don’t forget to try some unorthodox ideas, too. Give out “charity coupons” that let consumers donate to a designated charity every time they make a purchase of the couponed item. Build a Christmas attraction in the parking lot outside your store. (One sporting goods store I know gave an ice-skating demo on a tiny artificial rink—and sold a ton of skates!)

The holidays are a warm, family-oriented, and fun time. Make sure your store fully reflects this spirit.

In-Store Special Events

Customers love to be entertained while they shop. The promotions mentioned above provided an energizing “what will they think of next?” beat to your business. In doing so, they attract new customers and keep your existing customers coming back. However, before you go to all the extra time and effort needed to create special events, you must first ask yourself this critical question: “What promotions will actually appeal to my current and potential customers?”

If most of your shoppers are harried and pressed for time (for instance, if they are office workers out during their lunch breaks), you should avoid special events that slow them down. Ask yourself: “Will my event take up too much floor space or hide merchandise so that I lose more sales than I gain?” Or: “Will the event create too much noise and distract too many shoppers from their appointed task of buying my goods?” And the most important question that sums it all up: “Will this special event bring in enough additional revenue to cover its cost?”

I could spend the rest of this book listing every special event I have run or witnessed. Instead, I am just going to list a number of events that I have seen work especially well. I hope they spark your creativity and help you develop the right events for your business:

- **Anniversary Sale.** Whether you have been in business for one year or

twenty years, celebrating your anniversary gives you unlimited marketing opportunities. By focusing attention on your anniversary, you are showing the community that you have a successful operation that has been part of the community and, perhaps even more importantly, will continue to grow with the community. The celebration can run anywhere from a weekend to a week to a month. The theme is to thank your customers for making your store a success. All of your advertising, windows, and in-store signs should contain the phrase “Thank You.” This will make your customers feel they are part of “the family.” Special tributes to customers and employees should be part of this anniversary celebration. You can get the customers involved by having them nominate candidates for Employee of the Year. Offer “thank you” door prizes. This is the ideal time to present employee awards based on years of service. Hold special receptions for your best customers by serving birthday cake.

Your anniversary promotion is also the perfect time to make significant announcements regarding your business, such as introducing a new merchandise program, new policies, or new store hours. You might want to start a tradition of (temporarily) “rolling back your prices to the year of the business founding.”

- **Costumed Characters.** You can either rent a costume, have your local team mascots from the high school or college show up, or check with your suppliers to see if they have any licensing agreements and access to use cartoon characters for a day or a weekend. Make sure that, if you hire someone or use an employee to become that character, the person can relate well to people and has a (not so) hidden desire to become a star. Position the character near the front to greet customers and attract the attention of passersby. Have cameras ready to take pictures of the character with customers. Also, encourage the character to sign autographs. One of the key functions of this character can be to entertain the children while the parents shop. You could also offer to have the character appear at a birthday party for either kids or adults. If there are too many requests, you can choose which ones to attend by holding a public drawing.

- **Live Music.** When deciding to use live music in or around your store, make sure you are confident it will enhance your business and not divert attention away from the selling floor. You can have music scheduled at the same time each week (for example, every Friday night or Saturday afternoon) or just for special occasions. Tie in with a local school to showcase their best musicians, or tie in with a local radio station to feature local talent. Make sure the talent you present is sufficiently skilled to avoid embarrassment. Of course, little kids doing their best, even if they aren’t all that good, can be a charming family event.

- **Magicians.** You can use magicians to draw people to a certain product or area of the store, or just to fascinate people. Remember, however, that this performance needs to be choreographed so the customers are forced to move around the store and are given enough time to shop. Make sure the performance is no longer than ten minutes and each performance is scheduled with different tricks. A schedule of performances should be posted (and the time of the next show announced at the end of the prior one) so customers may hang around the store longer to see the next act.

- **Caricaturist.** People love to be the subject of a drawing and usually display them proudly in their homes. So if you have a caricaturist sketching your customers, make sure they work the name of your store

into the picture so that it becomes part of the customer's home décor.

Pick a slow day to offer this service because it may help build traffic.

You may want to offer this as a gift with purchase.

- **Psychic Readings.** If you have a large female clientele, this is a clever promotion for slow days. You can also use this promo as a gift with purchase.

To get publicity outside the store, have the psychic predict what is going to happen during the year or forecast the results of local sporting events or the local economy. Newspapers typically eat up this type of story.

- **Other Artists.** Entertainers can create all kinds of excitement in your store. Balloon sculptors can entertain the children; mimes hold people spellbound and can quietly advertise a product you want to feature; puppeteers can baby-sit both kids *and* husbands; clowns appeal to all ages; origami artists give you an opportunity to have customers take a novelty item home. These are just some of many artists and performers who can make yours a “destination store.”

- **Pets Are a Customer's Best Friend.** Almost every man, woman, and child loves pets. Have your local humane society (www.americanhumane.org) or pet rescue group bring in puppies and kittens for adoption. A local pet store may cooperate by putting on a display of reptiles or parrots or miniature piglets. You may want to stage a dog or cat show and let your customers bring in their pets to win ribbons. With enough creative categories like “Biggest Smile,” “Least Obedient,” “Slowest Eater,” “Fastest Scratcher,” etc., *every* pet can be a winner. You can also hold a pet photography show and have your customers bring in pictures of their pets. Here everyone can also win a ribbon with categories such as “Best Costume on a Pet,” “Most Unusual Pose,” “Biggest Eyes,” etc. Any way you slice it, pets really are a customer's best friend. And a retailer's, too!

- **Celebrities.** Celebrities always create excitement, but make sure the additional cost is worthwhile—as you would expect, celebrity appearances cost money. Check with your suppliers to see if they have any celebrities under contract for personal appearances. Find out if any celebrities are coming to your town to perform. If they are not too famous, they may welcome the opportunity to appear in your store to promote their show, especially if you carry anything in the store that relates to them such as a book or any of the products they endorse. If that is the case, you can give this product away, choosing the winner by a drawing that the celebrity will pick. Alternatively, you might buy tickets to the celebrity's show (or get them as comps) and give them away with great fanfare at another drawing. Some local charities have relationships with celebrities who may come to your store if you donate a percentage of generated sales to their charity. Local celebrities, such as news anchors, radio personalities, sports reporters, authors, coaches, local chefs, and retired athletes may appear for small fees, or no fees at all, if you have an event that also benefits their organization. Whenever you get a celebrity, try to get the media to do interviews from the store.

- **Designers and Presidents.** Designers of all kinds—fashion, beauty, interior design, automotive—often make store appearances and, even if not well known, can create a buzz in your community when you promote their appearances correctly. Make sure the appropriate editor from the local paper and the radio and television bookers know about the appearance. The president of a company whose products you carry can also be used as a valuable “celebrity.” Few know his name; but the title carries cachet. You can capitalize on the visit by running a “President's

Day” promotion, provided it is a major firm. Make sure the local business-oriented media know when the person will be at your store. This is an ideal event to introduce new products from the manufacturer.

- **Private Shopping Night.** Special nights can be set aside for groups such as senior citizens, Kiwanis, unions, armed services members, teachers, working women, singles, husbands or wives (before Valentine’s Day), and so on.

- **Welcome Back Party.** This would be a great event for inviting customers who have not shopped with you for at least six months back to the store for a party or special discounts. This is also a great way to find out why customers left you, especially if you offer incentives like discounts or prizes after they complete an in-store survey or comment card.

- **Fashion Shows.** If you sell fashion goods, putting together a show of them does drive traffic into your store, especially if you can get the local media to cover the event. It is easiest to use professional models. However, as an alternative, you might use customers and make it a charitable event by donating part of the day’s sales to a not-for-profit organization. Customers, even those who pretend to be unimpressed, will often be elated to be asked to model. And naturally they will invite oodles of their friends and family to witness their modeling debut!

- **Product Promos from Around the Country and Around the World.**

Special events featuring products from a certain country or a certain region of the United States offer all kinds of promotional opportunities. Examples include a Southwest promotion featuring goods from Arizona and New Mexico, an English promotion featuring goods from the United Kingdom, an Australian promotion featuring goods from Down Under, etc. Often you can get help by asking the relevant tourist board for literature or display material. Be creative and the costs will be minimal.

- **Children’s Story Hour.** This could be a monthly, weekly, or even daily event, especially if you have a large number of customers with small children.

- **Supply a Meeting Place.** Many organizations don’t like to meet at restaurants because they have to pay for a meal. Offer your store as an alternative meeting place. They can meet before the store opens, after it closes, in your stockroom, or in an area on the selling floor you prepare for them. Not only will you be showing your civic pride, but there is a good chance that people who would never have come to your store otherwise will become customers.

- **Parking Lot Promotions.** If local ordinances and lease agreements permit, running truckload sales in your parking lot, perhaps featuring products you do not normally carry, will generate extra sales and lure customers into the store. Alternatively (or additionally) setting up a petting zoo or pony rides will attract families with young children. Offering a tethered balloon ride (it is tied down so it only goes so high) with a minimum purchase adds a feeling of adventure. Holding an arts and handicraft show for a local group brings all kinds of notice. Exhibiting memorabilia or antique cars creates a crowd.

- **Health Screenings.** Free health screenings in the store can create a buzz. It is usually easy to tie in with a local hospital or medical group because they too will get good public relations and exposure for this event. February is National Heart Month, so this is a good hook to sponsor cholesterol and blood pressure screenings as well as to promote nutritional products you offer for sale. Making your store available as a blood bank site or for flu shots and other inoculations where

customers pay a minimal fee is a good way to grab traffic and further increase your status as a civic leader.

Sales That Drive Traffic

The easiest sale to run is putting everything in your store on sale, but easiest is rarely best. The *smartest* sale is to focus on one theme and make it meaningful to create excitement and traffic, not only for that product but also for the entire store. That way, you will be cutting your margins on only part of your inventory, but selling a lot of your other merchandise at full profit.

For instance, if you are overstocked in one category, say, housewares or junior miss, that is what you put on sale. Or, if you want to promote a department you feel has more potential than it is realizing, that is what you feature. You can even turn a sale into a treasure hunt by giving a percentage off everything of a specific color or with an identifying label. Here are just some more ideas of sales that will build traffic:

• **Opening a New Store:** There are two key reasons to run a Grand Opening sale: taking in cash and building awareness. When you first open, you want to expose your business to as many people as possible. “The stronger the opening the stronger the store” has long been a retailing axiom. To make your store opening a success, you’ll need to pull out all the stops. It’s never true that “money is no object,” but your opening is as close as it gets. Here are some of the ingredients that go into a strong new store opening:

- Make sure you choose a date that doesn’t conflict with other crowd-attracting events (unless they happen to be taking place at your front door), or with days when you have to be off doing something else.
- Run as much advertising in local media as you can possibly afford.
- Offer spectacular specials: “Free pound of coffee with every order over \$10.00.” “Everything half price.” This is one of the rare times you are justified in running a storewide sale.
- Decorate the outside of your store with as many flags and banners as city ordinances allow.
- Post notices about the opening around local colleges, factories, health clubs—anywhere your potential customers are likely to gather.
- Attract a celebrity if you can.
- Run a parking lot event (like having elephant rides for kids).
- Of course, notify the media and make as much noise as you can.

• **Making Room for New Merchandise Sale.** Keep your merchandise fresh. Your store should be big enough to house all the merchandise you need, but no larger than that. If you have space you don’t need, you may find yourself hiding slow-moving, problem merchandise for years, instead of promptly marking down older goods to make space for the latest items. The first markdowns you take should always be deep enough to get rid of the merchandise and build traffic. As the retailing adage goes, “If you can’t make money, at least make friends.”

• **Happy Hours.** Happy hours build traffic at restaurants and bars, so why not try them at your store? Happy hour can be the theme at any time of day, but the promotion is most effective when your store is at its slowest. Limit happy hours to no more than two hours, be specific about products that are on sale, and don’t continue to offer the discounts once the happy hour is over. You don’t want to “train” your customers to think they can get a deal out of you whenever they want. You may want to serve refreshments during your happy hour or even champagne if

that's your sort of audience and local laws permit. Promote your happy hour to local organizations such as senior citizen groups and PTAs. You may be cutting down on profits during this slow time, but at least it will help cover the overhead you would be paying anyway.

- **Birthday Sale for Customers.** Make each customer's birthday a special occasion by offering them a special deal during their birthday week.

Invitations for this birthday discount should be sent to customers two weeks prior to their birthdays.

- **Temperature of the Day.** Depending on your location, this sale kicks in when the temperature either dips below a low number (such as 15 degrees) or above a high number (such as 100 degrees). This will bring people into the store in bad weather when they would otherwise stay at home. Themes for this sale could be "Warm Up to our Cold Day Deals," "Cool Prices on a Hot Day," or "Our Prices Drop with the Temperature."

- **Rainy/Snowy Day Sale.** Since business is usually much worse during inclement weather, you may have a policy that prices drop when it is raining or snowing outside. The deals could kick in after 1 inch of snow or after it has been raining for an hour. Promoting this policy with the local weather reports helps drive customers into the store during what otherwise may be dead selling periods. In these type of promotions, you should be a bit loose in your interpretation of the weather. If someone has ventured out to your store in a snowstorm, you can hardly refuse to give them the discount just because the snow is only a tenth of an inch.

- **Weekly Senior Citizen Day.** This is another particularly good event during the slow period of the day or week, and easy to tie in with senior's organizations. Since seniors usually have flexible hours, it does not matter when you run this promotion.

- **Late Night Sale.** Occasionally you may want to stay open late and run a special sale for night owls. This is a way to pick up an entirely new customer base. If they are sufficiently impressed with your products, convenience, and service, they will return to the store during normal business hours.

- **Customer Appreciation Sale.** Let your current customers pick the sale items. Give them a ballot listing products you are willing to put on sale and have them vote for their top three choices. Then put the top five to ten winners on sale. Your promotional message should explain, "We asked you what you wanted on sale and here is what you voted for . . ."

- **Let the Dogs Out Sale.** "Dogs," in this case, refers to merchandise that has been hanging around the store that nobody wants to buy at the current price. As the buyer for the store, this is merchandise that you once loved—but nobody else did! At least once a year you need to clear your stock with heavy markdowns known in the industry as a "down and dirty sale." Yes, you will take a loss on these goods. But, the fact is, you have *already* taken the loss because the goods are not worth what you paid for them. By selling them off at rock bottom prices, you are merely recognizing the loss. But at least you are pleasing your customers; salvaging what cash you can; and giving yourself the space and money to buy more stuff that, hopefully, the customers will like as much as you do.

- **Surprise Special of the Week.** Feature a different product at a generously discounted price at the same time each week. Don't advertise the product or price in advance, just promote the concept. The idea is to get the customer to visit the store weekly to see what the promotion will be.

- **Moon Sale.** Based on the positions of the moon, you can run all kinds of themes around a scheduled event like “full moon,” “half moon,” or “new moon sales.” For an added touch, tickets on the sale goods could be in the shape of the moon.
- **Blood Donor Discount.** Blood is often in short supply just about everywhere. Thus, giving a special discount to anyone who donates blood is a great public relations move, builds sales, and helps people—a heady combination!
- **Tax Time Savings.** Run this sale around April 15 to help ease the taxpayers’ expenses, or just to give them an excuse to find a bargain to ease their annual tax pain.
- **Private Sale for Private Groups.** Such sales can be directed to nonprofit organizations, civic or business organizations, or non-competing firms who may want to offer a special benefit to their employees. You can keep the store open after normal closing hours or open up early for these groups.
- **Welcome to Our Community.** Mailing addresses of new residents can be obtained through your county clerk and some towns even have services that will provide you with this valuable information. Special discount coupons mailed to newcomers have a higher redemption rate of return than normal coupon mailings because new residents are still looking for the right places to shop—you will have helped them decide it’s you!
- **February 29 Sale.** Even though leap year only comes every four years, take advantage of it when it does come.
- **Diet Sale.** This is a two-part sale because customers who want to participate have to weigh in when they start the program and weigh out a certain number of days later (twenty days is a good number). Their discount will depend on how much weight they lose, say 1% for every pound. If someone loses fifty pounds and you lose money by having to give them 50% off, don’t worry. The money you lose will seem trivial compared to the publicity you gain. You can add further excitement by running a special drawing for a larger prize among everyone who loses more than 15% of their starting weight.
- **Cheaper by the Dozen.** The theme for this one is simple: the more you buy, the less you pay. Quantity discounts are always a favorite for customers and, if you pick the right items, this is a quick way to get the average sale up.
- **Two for the Price of One.** Before jumping on this one, make sure you pick products on which you make a high margin or on which the supplier is willing to give you goods at a reduced price. Variations of this sale include the “One Cent Sale” and “Buy one and get the second at half price.” Personally, I would try this last one first to maximize profits.
- **Grandparents and In-Laws Sale.** Grandparents Day is the first Sunday in September after Labor Day. Mother-in Law Day is the fourth Sunday in October. Father-in-Law Day has never been officially designated, so you can assign any day you want. Each of these days lends itself to heartwarming or funny themes to attract these oft-neglected groups.
- **Next Season Sale.** When a customer buys something from this season, hand them a coupon for a percentage off on specific items for *next* season.
- **Specific Person Sale.** Retailers traditionally hold manager’s sales. So if you have a manager named Bill, consider naming your next sale “Bill’s Sale.” Take it a step further and have your customers register to have a sale named after them and draw a winner. This is a great way to include

both employees and customers in your interactive sales promotions.

Contests:

Everyone's a Winner!

Everyone loves a contest and, when it comes to marketing your business, carefully planned contests offering meaningful prizes can build excitement and added store traffic. There are basically two different types of contests:

- Sweepstakes where no skills are required to win; customers only need to enter to win. In this type of contest, you may not legally require a purchase—everyone who fills in a sweepstakes entry form must have an equal chance of winning. One typical example is a scratch off card that is given to everyone who enters the store.
- Contests where the customer has to exhibit some skill to win, for example, writing a slogan for the store. If skill is involved, you may require a purchase as the price of entering the promotion. Please note, however, that the rules governing sweepstakes and contests vary by state, so you need to seek legal advice before proceeding.

When deciding whether to run a sweepstakes or a contest, consider this: sweepstakes attract more entries because they don't require a purchase. However, for exactly that reason they may not build sales. Contests, on the other hand, attract fewer entrants (and maybe not enough to justify your time and expense). However, at least you know each bought something and you have collected their names for your mailing list. Thus, both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The best thing to do is to experiment with both approaches and repeat the one that works best. In order to keep costs down, have other merchants or your suppliers provide the prizes free or at least at a favorable price. After all, they are getting a lot of publicity when you make their product your main prize; they should be pleased to supply it for little or nothing. Here are some more great sweepstakes and contest ideas:

- **Rent a Roulette or Carnival Wheel.** Have the customer spin the wheel to determine their percentage off on products. Obviously, you want the odds to weigh in your favor. (Check for legality on this one; it may not be allowed in some states.)
- **Scratch-off Tickets.** These fun, interactive cards can determine either discounts or prizes.
- **Pick from a Container.** You can have capsules inside which are the discounts customers can get (same day only). All the capsules are in a drum from which the customers can pick when they come through the door. You can control the amount of discounts by what you put into the drum.
- **Treasure Chest.** Pass out keys as the customer is leaving the store or via mail. When the customer next comes in, their key will open the treasure chest of discounts.
- **Guess the Number of Items.** This is good almost any month of the year, from chocolate kisses in February to golf balls in May to candy canes in December. Putting this container in the window will attract the casual passerby.
- **Poetry Contest.** This idea is great PR that attracts media. Have the contestants write an ode (or perhaps a limerick) about your store, a favorite salesperson, a particular product, or the community in general. You can even start the ball rolling by offering your own limerick. Mine used to run like this:

*Marc Joseph started out poor
But thought if he opened a store*

His income would rise

But to his surprise

He found charging less gave him more.

Okay, so it was pretty blatantly self-serving; but it got my point across. And I was delighted when one of my customers responded:

His customers entered his store

Fearing they'd have to pay more

But to their surprise

Their delight on the rise,

His prices had dropped to the floor.

A panel consisting of educators or media personalities can choose the winning entries.

- **The Bests.** This is a promotion that could cost very little but generate a lot of publicity. The best could be “Best Mother,” “Father,” “Teacher,” “Grandmother,” or “Grandfather,” etc. And the entrants could be supplied as essays written by elementary-age kids. Contact your local elementary school teachers, who can use this as part of their class assignment.

To ensure the kids are doing their own work, accept only entries that are handwritten. As entries come in, post them around the store and in the windows so passersby will stop and read. Judging should be done by people outside the store. Once winners are picked, be sure to notify the local media. A valuable reward should go to the top three.

- **Look-alike Contest.** This one is another great PR ploy, especially if you can get the local media to be the judges.

- **Shopping Spree.** Just as you've seen on TV, this sweepstakes creates real excitement in the store. People come in once to sign up; again to witness the drawing; and a third time to see the “spree-er” in action. The winner's spree can be based on how much they can carry with their bare hands (no carts allowed).

- **Best Tan in Town.** This one is a good sweepstakes to have in July or August, especially if you sell health and beauty care products, sportswear, health foods, or cosmetics.

- **Home Video Contest.** Solicit videos of children, the beach, Thanksgiving dinner, etc, and limit tapes to five minutes. Have a local television station judge the best, possibly even airing it, and give the winner an impressive prize.

- **Sponsor a Walking or Running Race.** If you can tie this event into a non-profit organization that will be using this event to raise money, you can create considerable press coverage.

Building Customer Loyalty

Gaining repeat customers, the essence of retail success, depends on their satisfaction in seven respects: 1) the quality of the products you carry, 2) the selection you offer, 3) your pricing, 4) the treatment they receive from your personnel, 5) the store's ambiance, 6) its location, and 7) the hours you are open. If you cannot satisfy your customers in these respects you won't keep them.

However, if you do satisfy them in all seven respects, you can, and should, still develop ways to accelerate repeat business. The best technique is through a customer rewards program. The customer wins by getting better deals, but the retailer *really* wins because it costs less to keep a customer than to attract a new one. Thus, a business with a core of repeaters will almost always be more successful than one that has to rely on constantly attracting new customers. Of course, every retailer has

to do both. But the higher the ratio of old customers to new, the more profitable the store is likely to be. Here are some great options for customer reward programs:

- **Rewards Card.** Also called a savings card, bonus card, or courtesy card, this is a free-of-charge card that lets customers take advantage of discounts offered only to cardholders either in the store or via coupons or deal announcements sent by mail. The cards can be given out to every customer who signs up for one, or it can be a gift with purchase tied to a certain level of purchases, or (as at Barnes & Noble, for example) it can be sold to customers.

- **Frequent Buyer's Club.** This card rewards the customer at the end of a specific period (usually the end of the year) with cash back or a special award. The awards may kick in once customers reach certain total purchase levels for the year. Awards may include (but certainly not be confined to):

- Store discounts either as cash back or as reductions on future purchases.
- Free gifts chosen from among designated store merchandise. Instead of actual merchandise, the store may prefer to give out gift certificates that represent another way of attracting customers back into the store.
- Outside gifts chosen from a catalog, possibly at different values based on the points earned by customers. (The number of points may be tied to the dollar amount the customer buys, or varying points may be awarded on different items based on which products the retailer wishes to emphasize.)
- Travel awards.
- Tickets to special events such as the circus, the theater, or sports events.

Using PR to Get Your Message Across

Whether you decide to buy advertising, you can (and should) add to your exposure with a creative publicity campaign. The media is always looking for newsworthy story or photo opportunities. You can often get free exposure by providing products for contests sponsored by the media. Don't limit your thinking about media to only dominant papers and TV stations in your market. By all means, include alternative weekly newspapers, cable television, ethnic and foreign language media, local magazines, high school and college newspapers, free publications, union publications, tourist publications, and literature from all kinds of business, civic, religious and nonprofit organizations. Each has some readership and, not infrequently, the relatively small number of people who read these local media do so with intensity and are strongly influenced by them. And even a few new customers are important to your business. So, go after every medium, however small.

If you have the budget, you can hire a public relations agency.

However, unless you can afford to handle what is usually a pretty hefty fee, you will probably do better handling the publicity yourself. You may develop an internship program with a local college and get a public relations student to help out, but let's assume you need to do everything on your own. Here are some effective, simple ideas for getting local media coverage:

- First, find out who the key people to contact are. This shouldn't take more than a few phone calls. There aren't usually that many media outlets. Make sure you get their e-mail addresses because most editors prefer

e-mail to phone calls. This is now your media list. The art of getting your information published is to make it sound like news, not a commercial announcement—even though that is what it is.

So, let's say your purpose is to announce a new line of clothing that has just arrived at your store. "Schmolowitz Fashions proudly announces the arrival of the newest shipment of Thierry Mugler Blouses, ready-to-wear" won't make the news. But this might: "Julia Roberts to attend Academy Awards in Thierry Mugler blouse announces Joe Schmolowitz of Schmolowitz Fashions, the only store in our area to carry the sought-after designer's fashions."

Of course, what you write in your press release has to be true.

However, almost always, when a new product is launched or newly arrives at your store, the manufacturer will know something unique and newsworthy about it. By concentrating on that newsworthy aspect, you can often get your point across—vigorously and for no money. However, be careful not to send the media "non-stories." If you do, they will soon completely ignore you.

- Let your media list know that you are willing to give out prizes for their contests, either as merchandise or as gift certificates. Since prizes are promoted on the air and in the press, this is an excellent way to get free publicity for your store. Entry forms will be available at your store, and filled-in forms may be dropped off there.

- Because you are a retailer and viewed as an expert in trends in your field, push yourself to your media list as a spokesperson who would be glad to do a guest appearance on an interesting topic. The topics you can tell your media list you would be glad to discuss (as applicable) include:

- Trends in retailing
- What is new for the season
- What toys to expect for Christmas
- What's the latest in cooking and gourmet foods
- What are the hot colors this season
- What's hot, what's not
- What gifts men are buying
- What gifts women are buying
- How the small retailer survives against the big chains
- The importance of product safety
- What to look for when reading labels

- Use a significant milestone like a twentieth anniversary or Santa coming to town to get your media list interested in doing a remote broadcast from the store. That costs you nothing and is wonderful publicity.

- Volunteer to make your products or your store available for media stories such as trends in women's clothing or having young children test toys for Christmas. Or give some of your products to decorate the Christmas tree in a local homeless shelter or orphanage.

- If you have a newsworthy announcement or an idea for an article, email the announcement or the facts of the story to your media contacts—and hope for the best. Getting a story into the newspaper rarely involves face-to-face meetings, but if you fail to get any "hits" from your e-mail, review why. All media need material and are always looking for prepared information to put into their publications. Therefore, the fact that yours didn't get picked up probably means one of two things: either it wasn't newsworthy enough, or it was too poorly presented to get its point across. So, learn to do better next time.

- If you are confident of your writing abilities and you have something

newsworthy to say, by all means, write a full article in the form of a press release. Harried newspaper editors are pleased if they can “lift” a complete article and print it without too much rewriting. If you cannot write well, you might retain a young local writer to do it for you. Starting writers are very inexpensive.

- Be aware that ethnic publications are also good for news placement, but they are only interested in news that affects their *precise* market. Be targeted in what you send them.
- Remember that high school and college newspapers are worthy targets if you want to attract students. They will often run such things as your announcement of an intern program, an interview with a graduate who has worked his way up in your store, teen shopping trends, announcements of special programs, or contests for students.

Parting Words

Marketing is vital for your survival and growth. Fortunately, there are almost as many ways to market your store as there are customers to frequent it. I hope that this sampling of ideas both assists you in keeping your store crowded and inspires you to develop and implement even more successful ideas of your own.

As you grow in experience, you will grow in creativity. As you learn ever more about your customer base, you will come up with more personalized, powerful, and exciting ways to market your store.

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