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Building Your Home Inspection Business A Guide to Marketing, Sales, Advertising, and Public Relations

Editor's Foreword: The following article is an excerpt taken directly from "Building Your Home Inspection Business: A Guide to Marketing, Sales, Advertising, and Public Relations" by Carson Dunlop & Associates and published by Dearborn Home Inspection Education. (This material is copyrighted by Carson Dunlop and made available here by permission of the publisher, Dearborn Home Inspection Education. It may not be further reproduced or distributed except by permission of the publisher.)

There are many books about marketing out there, but this is the first I've seen that is directed only at marketing a home inspection business, and it is excellent. No more trying to match esoteric academic theory to the real world of home inspection. This book does it for you. I highly recommend the book to all home inspectors, whether a novice or old hand. You will learn how to target your market, sell your services, deal with customer service issues, and more. **You can purchase "Building Your Home Inspection Business" by phone at (800) 903-6036 or online at www.DearbornHomeInspection.com.**

BASIC MARKETING CONCEPTS

Before you can develop a marketing strategy for your home inspection business, you should understand some fundamental terms and concepts. In Study Session 1 we will look at the difference between sales and marketing, and describe key marketing concepts, such as features, benefits, unique selling proposition, and value proposition. We will also look at the issue of identifying who your customers are, which isn't always obvious. Finally, we will consider the concept of company image, and how to develop yours.

MARKETING VERSUS SALES

Marketing and sales are not the same thing, although many people use the terms interchangeably.

Marketing Makes Phone Ring

Marketing is an activity designed to encourage prospective customers to contact your company. Marketing in the home inspection business includes advertising, brochures, business cards, presentations at real estate offices, indirect mail pieces, Web sites, trade-show booths, and so on. Marketing is also inherent to the inspections themselves, the inspection reports, and any of the follow up activities, such as thank you notes to the clients or real estate agents. All contribute to attracting prospects.

Sales Picks Up Phone

Sales, on the other hand, is typically a one-one-one activity with the goal of converting an inquiry into a sale. Sales may be made face-to-face, over the telephone, on the Internet, or by e-mail. Sales usually involves a real-time or virtual conversation. The conclusion to a sales activity is an order for the company.

You might think of the difference between marketing and sales this way: marketing makes the phone ring. Sales picks it up.

Because marketing is often the precursor to sales, we will look at marketing first.

FEATURES VERSUS BENEFITS

Client's Perspective is Key

The distinction between a feature and a benefit is a key marketing concept. A feature is a quality of your service from your perspective, whereas a benefit expresses a quality of your service from your customer's perspective. Put another way, a feature is an element of your service; a benefit is what this element does for the prospect or the customer. For example, "Open 24 hours!" is a feature that the company offers. Convenience is the benefit that the customer enjoys.

The success of any professional service depends to a large extent on its ability to put itself in the customer's position. All the customer cares about is how one service will help them more than another. Everything in marketing, advertising, public relations and sales should focus on what aspects of the service are going to benefit customers. To successfully market your business, you need to adopt the credo, "It's all about the customer."

Features Describe; Benefits Sell

Features are easier for us to promote because they are the parts of our business we think are desirable. It's always easy to speak from our own perspective. Benefits, on the other hand, are a little more difficult to identify. They require us to justify the value of the features to someone else. In other words, a benefit is what your customer finds desirable about your features.

Step 1: Identify customer needs.

Step 2: Identify what aspects of your services will fill customer's needs.

Step 3: Market the benefits of your services.

For example; you book a flight to Europe for an important business meeting. The airline is advertising business class seating. You are trying to decide if you should fly business class or coach. The advertisement states that business class has larger seats and more legroom. You immediately book the coach tickets. Your rationale: You aren't going to pay twice as much just for a little extra legroom and a larger seat. You will tough it out in coach. The airline failed to sell you the more expensive seats because they only provided you the features of a business class seat, rather than showing the benefits of these features.

A more compelling airline ad would have demonstrated that the larger seats in business class provide ample space for you to set up a workstation. And the extra legroom which makes it possible for you to comfortably stretch out, means you can sleep during the flight, if you choose. With proper room to work and a comfortable place to sleep, you will arrive for your meeting prepared and refreshed. You will excel at the important meeting; you will get a promotion and a big bonus at the end of the year.

Show Benefits of Your Service

Although benefits are the obvious and logical conclusion of features, it's a mistake to assume your prospective customers will make the connection between the two. Most people don't have the time or inclination to fill in the blanks. Furthermore, it's your job to make the benefits of your services immediately apparent. You can demonstrate benefits without discussing features, but not vice versa. You must focus on selling the benefits.

Let's look at another example. Let's say you are in the market for a new flashlight and you walk into a store and see a display with this headline: "The world's first steel flashlight!" The fact that the flashlight is steel is clearly a physical feature of the product that the manufacturer is very proud of. What is important, however, is what that feature will do for you. The value of that feature lies in describing what the product actually does. The fact that the flashlight is steel will help justify the added cost, but the manufacturer should be telling you that the added weight of the steel means that if you drop it, it won't break. The manufacturer should tell you that you will never have to buy another flashlight again—guaranteed! So the feature is steel construction, but the benefit is durability and reliability. The functional aspect of this particular product (not the physical feature) intensifies your desire for it.

Benefits Are Explanations

If you are giving a presentation to a real estate office, or speaking to a client or agent, you have all the time in the world to describe the benefits of your features in detail. But in written marketing materials you need to be concise or you will lose your reader's attention.

Features are easy to come up with, and to position in a brochure, because they amount to basic descriptions. Benefits are harder to express because they are explanations of the descriptions.

Inexperienced marketers make the mistake of filling a brochure with features, resulting in an unconvincing and weak piece. Have a look at your competitor's brochure. It will likely be filled with a list of features only. Any marketing piece that you put together should list the benefits. Marketing materials that would benefit from this philosophy include:

- Brochures
- Business Cards
- Yellow Page Ads
- Mailers to Agents
- Websites

Good Layout Helps

Here is an example of a successful marketing piece. A Website ad for a software company features a simple, two-column fact sheet. The left hand column lists features, and the right hand column lists benefits. Each feature lines up with its associated benefit, clearly demonstrating the added value inherent in the feature. After seeing this ad, we decided to try it out in some marketing pieces for home inspection services. It has been a very successful layout. It's simple, yet effective. Try it in your own brochure.

Show Features and Benefits

Here is an example of how to think about the benefits associated with the features of your services.

Feature: We are available seven days a week.

Benefit: The benefits to your clients are convenience and accessibility. They can reach you when they need to.

Feature: We have been licensed builders for 20 years.

Benefit: You have the experience to detect problem areas. What is the benefit to the client? You can potentially save them headaches and money down the road. What's the benefit to the real estate agent? Because you have years of experience in problem solving, you may be able to suggest a simple solution to a problem. Your suggestion could help the client avoid an expensive fix. This could make the difference between the deal going through and the deal falling apart.

Writing a concise benefit is not as easy as describing a feature. Writing about benefits requires more time and finesse, but if you hope to make an impact, you have to show the benefits of your service. Benefits are an essential part of all your marketing material.

A benefit often sounds like a promise. It is frequently followed with a good description of the feature that shows how you can make good on the promise.

UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION

What's Different About You?

In order to successfully build a marketing or sales campaign, you need to identify what is special or different about you and your inspection service. In the terminology of marketing, this is your Unique Selling Proposition, or USP. The concept is that if you can think of something unique to your business, you will have an easier time differentiating yourself from the masses.

Differentiate Yourself

The more distinctive you are, the stronger the message. For example, let's say what makes you special is that you are a building foundation specialist. Maybe you used to work for a company that designed repairs for house foundations. You know more about foundations, and foundation problems, than anyone in town. This area of expertise makes you stand out.

In contrast, if you used to be in the construction business, you won't stand out as much because many home inspectors used to be licensed brokers. This is not to say that being a licensed builder does not give you a powerful competitive advantage, it's just not quite as distinctive as the first example.

Remember: The more distinctive, the stronger the sell.

VALUE PROPOSITION

Market Yourself to Callers

Your value proposition is what you offer to a prospect. This is a combination of your USP, your position, and the benefits of hiring you. In short, your value proposition is what you tell a prospect who calls and asks, “What will I get if I hire you?” If your answer is, “You will get a home inspection,” you need to do some work on your proposition.

You need to create a quick, concise, statement that explains how the client will benefit from your service and how it is of sufficient value to justify your fee.

It helps to have a few tangible items in your value proposition. Why? It becomes much easier to create a sense of value in your client’s mind. At Carson Dunlop, we publish and use the Home Reference Book as our main tangible item. It’s a 400 page guide to the average home. If you haven’t seen it, you should get a copy just to get an idea of the marketing impact it has on clients.

If a client calls and asks what they get from Carson Dunlop for their \$400 inspection fee, we answer with the following value proposition:

- You get a professional engineer who inspects the structure, the roof, the exterior envelope, and all of the systems of the home including electrical, plumbing, heating and air conditioning, and so on.
- You receive a customized report and a 400-page guide to your home, the Home Reference Book.
- You receive discounts on products and services you will need, such as home and auto insurance and alarm system installation.
- You receive a free, one-year subscription to managemyhome.com, an Internet-based maintenance program customized to your home.
- You get a lifetime of free telephone technical support on anything involving your home.

This list of features becomes even more powerful when accompanied by the corresponding benefits.

***Editor’s Postscript:** This article is only 4 pages out of a 292 page book. You can see it is packed with information. Although, the article is a direct quote, the format had to be modified slightly to fit the NAHI Forum publication format.*

-- John Wills, Assistant Editor