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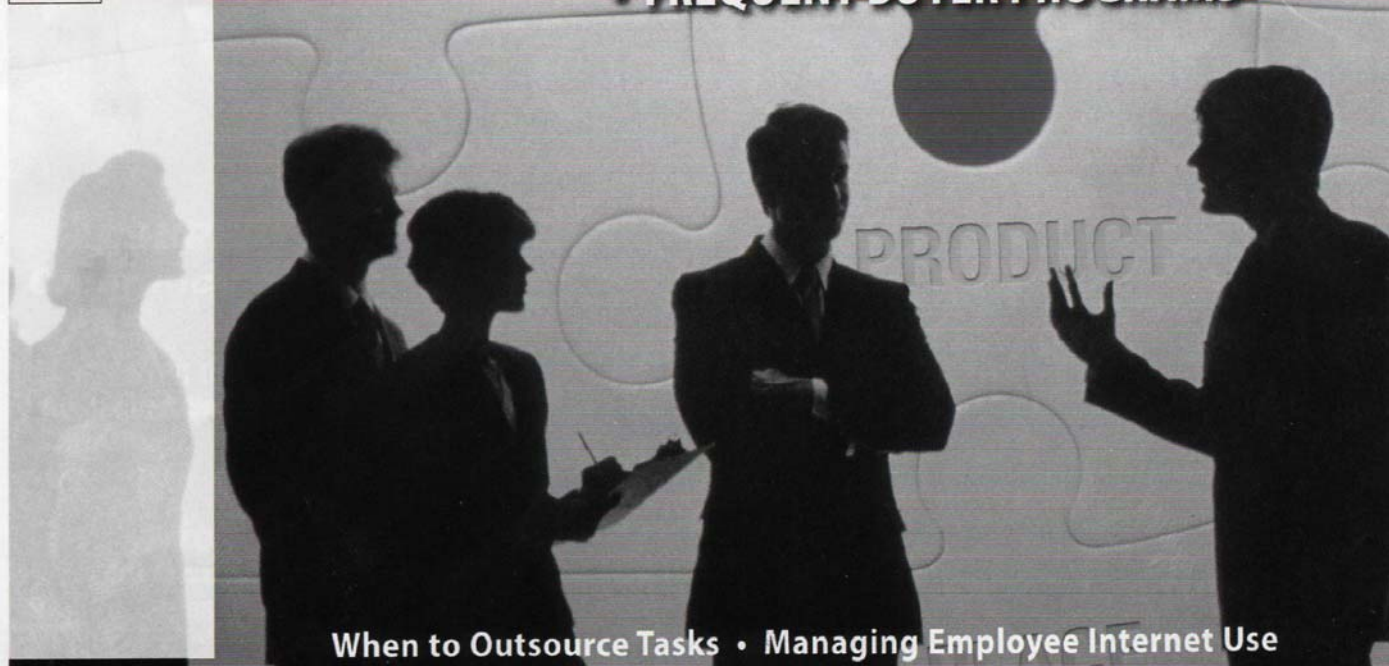


Marketing

A vital part of the business puzzle

- DEVELOPING A LOGO
- BRANDING YOUR BUSINESS
- FREQUENT BUYER PROGRAMS

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LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

BY PAMELA BARNETT

Advertising legend Leo Burnett breezily and effectively summed up the process of promoting one's product or service, but the process of developing and executing a marketing strategy—a cornerstone of any successful business—is multifaceted. Good marketing must center, not on your product or your service per se, but on the needs and desires of the people who want that product or service. Marketing experts agree that a successful marketing message is one that: identifies your target audience; develops and communicates effective messages by clearly articulating your prospect's problem—along with credible solutions; appeals to your prospect's wants and needs by providing examples of the benefits you've provided to others; and conveys the competitive advantages that separate you from your competition. Broken down to its barest essence, your marketing message must both communicate the most important aspects of your product or service and establish its value in the minds of prospective customers. And don't forget Mr. Burnett's last bit of advice: Tell your prospects "how to get" what you're offering!

Smart Business Ideas™ magazine spoke with marketing expert Kelly Harman, CEO of The Harman Group, whose mission, according to her Website, is "to provide practical, sales-driven marketing services to companies that want to grow, and an emphasis on measuring performance and delivering maximum results for every investment." Thanks to this emphasis, Harman says, her company has grown rapidly, achieving industry recognition and a solid foundation of clients. Marketing delivery systems take many forms, from the traditional printed advertisement and direct mail campaign to the low-tech practice of distributing coupons on a street corner. Small businesses don't usually have the resources to launch huge advertising blitzes in multiple media formats, but a modest marketing budget

is no excuse for neglecting the area altogether. "Sometimes your budget won't let you do a lot," Harman says. "That's okay." The key, she says, is to "never stop" doing as much as possible to bring the benefits of your products and services to the attention of people who need or want them.

Listening to the dynamic and pistol-quick Kelly Harman reinforces the message that meekness is not a virtue when it comes to marketing. For Harman, CEO of The Harman Group, a "virtual" marketing firm in Manassas, VA, good marketing is tantamount to a satisfying and ongoing conversation with... just about everyone: clients, prospective clients, colleagues, friends and strangers alike—even a reporter who has no particular need for Harman's services, but left the conversation wishing she did. If Harman's suc-

***“Advertising says to people:
Here’s what we’ve got.
Here’s what it will do for you.
Here’s how to get it.”***

— Leo Burnett, member of the Advertising Hall of Fame

cess is any gauge, one can't be shy when it comes to successfully marketing one's product or service. "The least said the better" is simply not an adage that applies.

The Harman Group is a virtual marketing organization in the sense that it assumes the role of marketing department for an organization that does not have its own marketing staff. The Harman Group's niche is telecommunications, technology, and professional services outfits that market to the public and private sectors. As a former, longtime salesperson, Harman says she became fascinated with the marketing side of the business: "I love marketing from a sales perspective," she says.

Harman stated that her primary means of securing new business for herself is simply to let her clients know that she is always looking for it, and that "we always appreciate referrals." "A lot of business owners don't ask for referrals; they think it's somehow not polite or not right." That's something they need to get over, Harman declared.

Indeed, "telling stories [to prospective clients] about what [you've] done ... is one of the strongest ways to market yourself," Harman says. "Never be afraid to ask for a reference or testimonial. Write the testimonial and ask the client to put their name on it or to edit it any way they want. People will always want to help you as long as you've done a good job," Harman observes. "Tell what you did, the end result and the success that came out of it. Share your success stories with your clients, on your Website in your newsletter—just talk to people." This enables you to say to a prospective client, "I don't know what you're looking for, but this is what I've done for [others]." The prospect "is seeing how they fit into that same solution," Harman says.

In that vein, be very clear both in print and on the Web about what you are offering and what you have achieved.

When companies describe their products and services, they often use jargon and big words. Make it "very simple and easy to read ... simple and elegant," Harman says, and make sure the written materials emphasize the benefits to the customer. For customers to make a decision, they need to know what you have to offer and why it's different from your competition. Good marketing centers on helping consumers understand how and why your product or service will help them.

Once you, as the owner, figure out what makes your company unique, Harman says, "the next step is to develop a branding tag line and a marketing plan that helps everyone else understand what makes you special—what your success stories are."

Harman's outfit doesn't do direct mail or advertising for themselves because they are not a retailer trying to bring customers into a shop. Her target audience is made up of businesses. "You want to really put yourself out there in a targeted way. There's a reason you do certain things. The right mix of marketing varies from customer to customer and depends on what type of business one is in and what they want to accomplish," Harman says. The key is to engage a marketing firm that has experience selling to your target audience, be it business-to-business, government, or consumers.

In terms of marketing her own business, Harman indicated she gets very involved with certain organizations that "I know will ultimately put me in front of my prospects." Harman says too many people approach the joining of professional or service organizations in the wrong spirit, that being "with the sole purpose of 'Can I get leads?'" The better course is "to get very involved in a few organizations."

Harman, for example, chairs committees, works to pro-

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Kelly Harman,
CEO of The Harman Group

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

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mote causes, and speaks at events. "And that's how you build your business." At the same time, you "are developing a network of colleagues and some become friends ... and that leads to more leads." Harman also requires that everyone on her staff participate in a similar way.

Harman also makes a point of being "very generous" with her time—meeting with people at no charge who might not even be business prospects. Nevertheless, she adds, "You never know who that person knows or who they're going to talk to."

Paraphrasing the underlying message of her favorite business management book, *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It* by Michael Gerber, Harman says: "You are either working for your business or you working on your business. If you're working for your business, it's going to be very difficult for you to break out and build your company. You always need to take the approach that you are working on your business."

Harman's marketing strategy also includes reminding her customers "on a regular basis what I do." Never assume that customers remember what services you did for them in the past or know what other services you are capable of providing, Harman says.

Harman will occasionally "grid" her clients—charting what her clients look like in terms of business type, size, revenue, etc., and then compare that to the services her company offers and what it has done for those clients. "We see what patterns emerge and this is my sweet spot," Harman says. "Once you know what your sweet spot is, you go out and try to market to companies that look like the ones you already have." She adds, "Marketing isn't rocket science [but] it is very strategic."

Harman adds, "You have to think of your business as a brand." That's something every entrepreneur should consider before embarking on a particular venture or expanding into new areas. "Every small business takes on the personality of the owner of the company. You have to think very carefully about what a person is like because it will infuse itself into the company."

In her own case, Harman, a self-described "passionate" and "outgoing" person, brings a playful air to her dealings with her clientele and works to build a personal relationship

with her staff and clients. "We work very hard and we play hard, too. There's a lot of hugging going on and we buy [clients] little presents"—the most unusual of which was a llama.

Well, not literally.

But two years ago she did donate to Heifer International—a charity that helps poverty stricken people around the world become self-sufficient through livestock ownership—enough money to purchase llamas for poor families on behalf of each of her clients. "They [the clients] loved it," Harman says. She adds, "I had a client say once, 'You're the party everyone wants to come to.' That's because we're so much fun to work with."

From Harman's perspective, one's marketing plan should describe the unique solution your company provides. Figure out what makes one brand "unique and special and then come up with a branding tag line and marketing plan that helps everyone understand what makes you special."

Harman knows how to get the word out about her own services and to talk up her successes with prospects, but she also knows how to facilitate conversations among her clients. When Harman spots a synergy between two clients, she makes what she calls a "virtual introduction" between the two—securing their permission to exchange their contact information—and then steps back and lets things take their course.

"I try to connect my clients with each other—that's another part of the value I bring to them. I'm always staying focused on the ways clients can get value from other clients. If you do enough stuff like that for people without thinking about what it can do for you, after a while, they're going to start doing that for you."

And, if marketing is indeed an ongoing conversation between a business owner and consumer, Harman has no intention of staying mum.

"Marketing is something that always needs to be focused on," Harman says. Indeed, her business cards and other professional materials bear a quote by marketing guru Jay Conrad Levinson that has become Harman's credo: "Marketing is not an event, but a process ... it has a beginning, a middle, but never an end for it is a process. You improve it, perfect it, change it, even pause it. But you never stop it completely."