

# Marketing Your Products

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By Atlee Raber

I can still visualize our county ag agent tilted back in his chair with his feet propped up on his desk, pondering my question about growing plants, shrubs, and trees. “Atlee,” he said, “I can show you how to grow this stuff, but how are you going to sell it? No one has created a market for it yet.”

That was the beginning of Raber’s Greenhouse in Berlin, Ohio. I walked out of his office that day thinking, *This is the best time to start a greenhouse—no one else is doing it. We just need to create a market.* That was our challenge. Before long, people began to discover how convenient it was to buy shrubs and trees for their yards. The market grew so rapidly that in only ten years we had gone from being the only greenhouse in the area to being one of eighteen, because now a market was established.

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## **Producing a good product is only part of the task of starting a business.**

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What our reclining ag agent had pointed out was that producing a good product is only part of the task of starting a business. No matter what field you are in, marketing the product is one of the major components to a successful business.

Marketing includes every activity involved in moving goods from the producer to the customer, including selling, advertising, and delivering. It involves understanding what the customer needs or wants and letting them know that you have it to sell. Reaching the

customer is sometimes accomplished with very little effort, such as a sign at the end of the lane or word of mouth, but usually effective marketing requires a well-calculated plan.

## **Why you need a plan**

Business doesn’t operate with an on/off switch. Some of the variables are out of your control, and as a business leader, your position is to devise a plan that will help you manage the portion that is in your control. For example, some owners don’t want their business to grow beyond a certain size. This is easier said than done, because a business is generally either growing or dying, but never standing still. To gain size, maintain size, or even to downsize safely requires a plan because the marketplace constantly ebbs and flows. With business booming in the 1990s, it seemed you hardly had to advertise beyond a sign at the end of your driveway. However, in today’s environment, there is little chance of a business prospering without effective marketing. A plan is essential to maintain a steady flow of business.

## **Key considerations**

To devise a plan effectively, you need to take stock of your situation. One of the first items to consider is your own resources. Resources extend beyond the physical materials at your disposal and may include certain immaterial benefits such as a good work ethic or outstanding customer service. We once received a call from a high-end patio store needing service on a product they

had bought from us. During the conversation, the caller asked, “Who are you folks? We know you’re from Berlin, Ohio, and you manufacture outdoor furniture, but there’s something different about you.”

“We are Christians,” we explained.

“That’s the difference!” they exclaimed. “We’ve never had a company that goes the extra mile like you do.” Outstanding customer service is more than powerful resource in our businesses. It can also be a witness for Christ in our work.

You also should be aware of the bridge that links you to your customer. Who are your customers? What is your access to them? Some customers are neighbors who come right to your store. Perhaps you deliver to their farm. However, maybe you manufacture products that are shipped a long distance and require a different sort of contact. Some customers’ lifestyles may not mesh with yours and thus require a professional go-between or broker. In addition, sometimes the gap between you and your customer changes. At one time, there were companies that manufactured nothing but buggy whips. This was a big business until the horseless carriage came along. Then those businesses found their customers’ needs changing. They needed a new direction for the company and a new plan. Know who your customer is and how to connect the link between you and the end consumer.

### **METHODS OF MARKETING**

1. Word of mouth
2. Referrals
3. Direct sales
4. Sales reps
5. Advertising
6. The Internet
7. Trade shows and business image

### **Methods of marketing**

Once you’ve evaluated your resources and the gap that lies between you and your customers, it’s time to consider some methods of marketing. This includes something as

simple as hanging out a sign. Most companies employ this method, and some get by with doing very little else. But most of us need to extend our reach beyond the traffic driving past our location. Let’s take a look at some other methods.

### **Word of mouth**

A plumber once told me, “I hear you guys talking all the time about advertising and marketing. But all I did was replace a toilet for somebody and then their neighbor found out and wanted the same thing. I’ve been too busy to stop ever since.” There is no question that word of mouth is a powerful tool and can bring both positive and negative results. When a new veterinarian moved into our community, she was delighted to learn that many of her clients were Amish farmers who wouldn’t sue her if she made a mistake. She also discovered that when an animal under her care dies in a certain part of the community, business in that area dies as well. The word got around quickly!

Word of mouth happens whether you want it to or not, so pay close attention to your reputation and quickly correct mistakes to the customer’s satisfaction. When people discuss mistakes your company may have made, you want the stories to highlight your commitment to bringing total satisfaction.

### **Referrals**

Referrals are similar to word of mouth, except referrals are testimonies you solicit from customers to use in spreading the word about your products or services. Request satisfied customers to submit their testimonials for your literature or advertisements, or ask to provide them as a contact for potential clients. Nothing is more powerful than a positive testimony. What others say about us is more powerful than what we can say.

### **Direct sales**

Direct sales are a common method of marketing in which your employees interact directly with the customer. This is important and effective because people relate to people. If a customer likes you, he will drive past your

competition to do business with you, even if you have higher prices. This is why it is critical that your employees serve your customers to complete satisfaction. Direct sales should be part of your marketing plan.

Direct sales also involve selling to stores who will resell your product. These store personnel depend on you to provide the products, the information, and the service they need to represent your goods to their clientele. One strategy that works in making direct sales outside your locality is reaching out to these stores during your vacations. Bringing your family with you tends to have a positive effect on these potential clients. People like family operations, and children have a way of winning hearts. I am not suggesting that you put your family in situations where they feel uncomfortable or when it spoils or cuts short your vacation. I am merely pointing out that family and business go quite well together if handled properly.

### Sales reps

Finding a sales representative to go between you and the stores that sell your products is an effective marketing method. One of the most important considerations with this method is finding the appropriate rep who will honestly represent you and your product. Many stores have representatives that they prefer to buy from. If you can recruit those reps, you increase your chances to gain their clients.

Your personal connection to these reps can pay dividends as well. I like to bring the reps to our facilities and invite them over for an evening around the campfire. I even gave three of them a ride in an open buggy. One of them called his wife during the ride and held the phone so she could hear the clip-clop of the horse. These simple connections create a bond between the two of you, and the rep becomes an effective bridge to your customer.

### Advertising

Advertising is tricky, powerful, and expensive. Some time ago, a gentleman from our area invented a cart uniquely designed to load merchandise onto a truck by hand. Hoping to market his new product, he went to a

local trucking company and asked for the name of the most frequently read magazine in the trucking industry. He then contacted the publisher about running an ad in the magazine. After some negotiating, he settled on a half-page ad at a six-month rate. When the bill arrived, the inventor was surprised to discover that the \$1500 price he had agreed upon was for only one month instead of six. He hadn't listened closely enough. The upside was that the ad was more effective than he expected. He had carefully chosen the right magazine. Orders began to come in, and within a year and a half, he was shipping his product as far away as California. This is an example of the power of well-placed advertising. It is a critical part of business, however, and you should get advice as you select an agency or firm to do your advertising. Not only are they good at making ads, they are even better at selling them.

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### The Internet

Nearly everyone in today's society goes to the Internet before making purchases. Because prices can easily be compared, selling on the Internet is extremely competitive and customers tend to expect to find cheaper prices there. This devalues your product.

A lot of businesses are still finding their way into this marketing method. For us, this method should create some concern. We believe that no matter the advantage to our business, there are moral boundaries we will not cross. Customers tend to respect our convictions, and they realize that our willingness to make sacrifices to preserve our spiritual and moral integrity means we will serve them with the same integrity by refraining from using the Internet as a marketing tool ourselves.


### Trade shows and business image

Taking your products or services to trade shows markets

your product to a broader demographic. Along this same line is bringing the show to your own facility by having an open house. Show your product, provide food, and have your employees mingle with guests. This humanizes your company and creates that critical connection between people.

An open house also motivates you to get your facilities in tip-top shape. When customers pull in and see a crooked sign or paint peeling off the siding, they tend to expect bargains. Taking the time not only to promote your business, but also to tidy it up is a good way to

increase your market value.

In conclusion, marketing is one of the pieces of your business that you can't afford to ignore. You might be tempted to neglect this aspect of your company when you're busy and sales are good. But like everything else, marketing won't take care of itself, and sooner or later you will find yourself wondering why business is slumping. Marketing is essential and requires a strategy. Find the right strategy and keep it well-oiled, making improvements wherever needed. 

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*Atlee and his wife Lizzie founded Raber's Greenhouse in 1975 and Berlin Gardens in 1988. Berlin Gardens manufactures and distributes backyard furniture and structures. Atlee works in sales at Berlin Gardens and is a business advisor for Anabaptist Financial.*