

# MARKETING IN TOUGH TIMES

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**A**nyone facing the sales climate going into this spring and summer that is not at the very least apprehensive could reliably be considered crazy. For many of us the last real downturn that we experienced was the Dotcom bubble pop of the 90's and that is nothing compared to today's economic climate.

With so many of our customers out of work, worried about being out of work soon, or having had their financial nest egg greatly shrunken, selling things this growing season will be very different. There are some things that you can do to help your bottom line. Doing something is far preferable to hiding under your office desk and praying.

- Be sure your advertising is targeted, but keep advertising even when things are tight. First and foremost, you need your customers to know that you are alive and kicking. Secondly, numerous studies (they may have been done by advertising related businesses, but I have not had the time to do that deep research) show that businesses that keep advertising and do so in an organized manner following a coordinated plan do much better in both the short and long run. Rather than run scattered ads in newspapers with discounts and the usual stuff you run every year, try a new approach; take control of where your ads are located. If you are selling greenhouse ornamentals, make sure that your ads run with associated news articles or in garden inserts. For produce, require that your ads be connected with food articles. Wasting money on teaser ads may work in fat times, but now is the time to take control. Develop a budget, stick to that budget and keep records of how your new campaign works to better refine it later. I've always liked coupons that must be presented to measure how an ad works.
- Be sure your place looks maintained. This is not the time to let your signs fade, shingles fall off and your parking lot stripes vanish. If your customers question whether you are in business to stay, they will migrate elsewhere. Few people like doing business with failing companies unless they are giving things away.
- Submit articles to local newspapers, church newsletters, garden clubs....If there was ever a time to clearly demonstrate your expertise and how wonderful your business is, this is the time. If you've got meeting room space, invite local garden clubs to use the space for meetings, give them tours, maybe provide part of their refreshments, use your imagination.
- Sample (how would that work with plants?): While staying within NY Dept. of Agriculture rules and regulations, provide samples of ready to eat (RTE) produce. This can be soup, salsa, dips or simply cut produce. People buy more readily when they know what they are getting. Be sure to provide recipes for whatever RTE products you offer along with the main ingredients. If you've got a chef connection, take advantage of that and provide some well marketed edutainment. People love to watch others cook.
- Network, network, network.....Talk to your colleagues and competitors, you never know when mutual connections can be developed.
- Use your customer base to drag in new people, reward them for referrals: Word of mouth is still the most effective form of marketing. It costs you little and your good customers often bring in people a lot like themselves. Develop a simple straightforward method to reward people for dragging their friends in. Ask them to introduce their friend to the manager on duty for a gift. Keep the gift simple, but reasonably valuable.
- Train your staff - be sure they know your products inside out. While we are on the subject of staff, weak staff will stay that way, fear of job loss is seldom the motivator to change a lifetime of bad habits. When you hear business consultants say cut the fat, this is the first and easiest

fat to go. I hate bad employees. They tend to bring even the most positive, professional people down like a bad case of the flu.

- Go after your present customer base, don't let them get away. Make sure that everything about how you do business makes it clear that you like what you do, appreciate your customers and intend to keep things that way regardless of the rockiness of our present road. Start with your warrantee, if they bring back a plant, replace it, if they say the sweet corn they got last week was wormy or mealy or off-flavor - give them a dozen. These things cost little in the larger scheme of things, but make it clear that you appreciate their business. Everyone should greet your customers - help your shy staffers with scripted lines until they get a clue. Even the shyest staffer can say "Welcome to Bogash Farms, our strawberries are awesome today." Or "We just brought in a new load of begonias, they're in the front of greenhouse #2, you've got to check them out." Everybody smiles for the customers, I know some surgeons that can help. If you have employees that cannot put down their cell phone or IPod, recommend a new line of work.
- Negotiate, yes, bargain with advertisers. These are tough economic times. Don't be afraid to ask for a price break. This is more than just saying I want a discount, bargaining takes time and patience and the willingness to say "NO" until you get the deal you want.
- Weekend weather will still be the single greatest factor. While somewhat self-explanatory, we all know that cool, wet, weekends dampen green product sales. Make your place as weather neutral as possible, so customers know that they will not suffer unnecessarily. Have umbrellas handy, help people load their cars, provide liners for under pots and flats and build overhead coverings to keep people out of the weather.
- Luxury items will probably be in low demand. Fortunately, most of you reading this article don't sell much in the way of true luxury goods. Perhaps some buyers will look at the price of raspberries and blackberries and reconsider, but most of what we sell at worst falls under the category of little luxuries and thus may be spared. I've seen color bowls getting pretty pricey in recent years.
- Things could get really tight before they get better. Your individual situation could be very different from even 10 miles away if a factory or trucker or warehouse closes that makes up a lot of your drive-past business. Keep on top of the news and keep your inventory under control.
- Price point will matter a lot. People react to price point. That is why Wal-Mart spends so much time playing with and advertising their supposedly 'falling' prices. Try to keep as much of your product priced according to perceived value. Ask friends that shop to keep an eye over your shoulder. Everyone appreciates a deal, but finding the right price is an art form. Product that appears too cheap makes one wonder what's wrong with it. Overpriced stuff simply means product that sits. This entire article should be devoted to this issue alone, but even that would help little as each business must find price points that keep sales rolling while making a profit.
- Vegetables gardening will help, but only a little unless things get really bad. I keep reading that vegetable gardening is a growing trend and that may be so, but I cannot imagine enough people tearing themselves away from their big screen television and air conditioning to make much of a difference in our businesses, yet. Make sure you have good quality vegetable plants on hand in varieties that people want. This is a minor investment and who knows what will happen as electricity prices climb and jobs vanish, maybe everyone will be growing veggies again. I'm betting hard on the big screen.
- Make your place a destination. Let's face it, people can buy produce at large grocers and do without flowers in a pinch. We are solidly in the entertainment business, so make your place worthy of your customer's time. Demonstration gardens, cooking classes, How-to classes,

snack bars, things for kids to do.....all help to create an inexpensive opportunity for people to get their plants, produce, or baked goods and keep you in business.

- Don't get despondent. Gardening is still a relatively cheap hobby and people need to eat and want locally grown products. You can make it through, but not using a business model from 2007, 1997 or before that relied on lots of money floating about. Based on my reading of the economic news, that money never really existed. Those of us that can become lean and mean will still be standing next year and beyond.

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