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Case Study #:

How Targeted DM & Web Promo Built Buzz at Trade Show (and Doubled Customer Base)

SUMMARY: If your company is not a household name in a niche market that relies on a good-old-boy network to land clients, how do you get prospects even to listen to you?

Find out how a software marketer relaunched their brand with a postal mail and Web campaign that coincided with the industry's biggest trade show. They also added an interactive testimonial map that let prospects see which peers use the software. The strategy worked: they doubled their customer base and increased revenue 130%.

CHALLENGE

Even with his company's three-year track record, ExpressYard Co-Founder and Sales Director Justin Gillam still felt like a startup trying to break into the market.

The company, which makes software to manage railroad car maintenance operations, was having problems gaining traction among potential customers. Gillam and his team relied on barrages of cold calls to try and arrange appointments, often with frustrating results.

"When we'd call people, it was few and far between getting ahold of people who knew about the product, who we are and what we did. We had to practically introduce our software every time and often use comparisons to competing software," Gillam says.

Gillam wanted the company to become a household name in the railroad industry and to differentiate their product from other repair billing programs. He knew he needed a new marketing strategy that would raise their profile while prime their prospects with enough information to make their sales calls more effective.

CAMPAIGN

Rather than attempt one or two changes, Gillam and his team approached it like a complete relaunch. To do this, they combined a rebranding effort with an aggressive, integrated advertising and lead generation campaign timed to coincide with the railroad industry's biggest trade show.

Here are the five steps they followed:

Step #1. Refine the company's branding and ad messages

Before launching a new campaign, the team updated the company's overall branding approach, including Web site, logo, tag lines and advertising strategy. The goal was to reflect a new positioning statement.

- They added new colors and font styles to the company logo on the homepage to give it a more sophisticated look.
- The existing ExpressYard tag line, "Simplify your billing," was too limiting because it focused on only the repair billing aspect of the product's capabilities. It also placed the company in direct competition with other products that focused on billing, rather than complete repair operations management.

The team also created new tag lines for different types of marketing materials that focused on creating efficiency and increased profitability for customers.

- Marketing collateral, such as product brochures, were redesigned to be easier to read and provide higher impact. The team slimmed down an existing, six-page gatefold brochure to a two-page piece that focused on the promise of improved billing efficiency and ticked off high-level features, such as online or wireless-handheld access, yard management features and inventory tracking capabilities.
- A new series of print ads for industry trade magazines touted the promise of increased efficiency and profitability with the theme of "energizing your railcar repair operation."

Step #2. Collect user testimonials

The railroad industry is one of the oldest old-boy networks around, says Gillam. Any company perceived as a newcomer has a hard time breaking through to repair shops used to doing things a certain way and with people they already know and trust.

To counter this mentality, Gillam's team augmented their own marketing materials with endorsements from prospects' peers. They approached a handful of their best customers and asked them to provide testimonials -- anything from a sentence or two to a longer, case-study type description of how the product helped their operation.

Testimonials were rounded up in a new section of the Web site labeled "Customer Success" and organized according to short quotes and longer testimonials available as PDF downloads. The team also created an online customer map, showing where their customers were located and indicating with an icon which ones had provided testimonials.

Testimonials also were incorporated into print and postal direct mail advertising.

Step #3. Postal mail pieces for different participants in the buying decision

The team's outreach efforts started with direct mail, but for the first time they tailored unique pieces to the entire range of potential decision makers or influencers in a railroad repair shop.

The pieces targeted the following individuals with appeals to their own pain points:

- Owners/presidents/CEOs. Pitch: "Want to know how I added 9% more revenue to each repair bill?"
- Chief Maintenance Officers. Pitch: "Want to know how I increased my overall productivity by 20%?"
- Inspectors. Pitch: "Want to know how I reduced my inspection time by 50%?"
- Billing clerks. Pitch: "Want to know how decreased my month-end billing time by 90%?"

Each mailer featured a unique URL for respondents to visit for more information. Respondents also could call a toll-free number or fax back a form for more information.

Step #4. High-profile trade show presence

The new marketing effort coincided with the Railway Supply Institute annual convention, the largest trade show for the railroad products and technology industry. Gillam's team treated the event as ExpressYard's coming-out party and to drive traffic to the booth, collect leads and raise the company's name awareness.

At the trade show, they:

- Doubled the size of their booth from previous years and decorated it with new images and marketing collateral, such as photographs of customers alongside the testimonials.
- Generated buzz by using a large group of people dressed in yellow ExpressYard shirts, walking the floor handing out energy drinks branded with the company name, to coincide with the new ad campaign theme "Energize your operation."
- Invited attendees to "express yourself at ExpressYard," a call to stop by the booth and describe their biggest problems and concerns with their current maintenance operation or billing software.

The goal of the promotion was to get potential customers to the booth to view a demo and talk to the sales team. "Our product is one that speaks for itself. When we put it in front of the competition, we find we're winning every time."

Step #5. Follow-up on leads with independent sales rep team

Gillam knew going into the process that their sales team wasn't large enough to handle the volume of leads they hoped to generate, so they contracted this out.

Names collected at the booth and through direct mail and other advertising were divided among the reps in appropriate territories for schedule sales calls, in-person demos, or provide other marketing collateral, such as white papers.

RESULTS

Gillam is ecstatic about the impact of the new marketing efforts. They've gone from struggling to get in the door at prospective companies to fielding calls from potential customers asking them for demos and more information.

Since launching the campaign last fall, their customer base has more than doubled, delivering 130% revenue growth.

Gillam admits he didn't do as good of a job tracking response by individual pieces as he would have liked, noting that the concurrent ad campaigns, direct mail blasts and trade show promotion left his team "overwhelmed." But he can say that they pulled in more leads and business from last year's convention than in the company's entire history before that.

Their outsourced sales rep team members are busy following up on leads generated last fall that are at different stages of the marketing/sales cycle. In the meantime, many of those tactics have become standard procedures in their ongoing marketing efforts. The number of user testimonials, for example, has increased from about five to 19.

Anecdotally, Gillam knows that they achieved their biggest goal of raising the company's profile and reputation among the close-knit railroad industry. "When our guys walk into a shop now or make a call, they know who you are. They know your name and they've seen some of our materials."

Useful links related to this article

Creative samples from ExpressYard's marketing relaunch:

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/expressyard/study.htm>

Arends, the B-to-B marketing agency that helped ExpressYard with its new branding and marketing approach:

<http://www.arends-inc.com>

Transportation Product Sales Company - ExpressYard's sales rep company:

<http://tpscrail.com>

ExpressYard:

<http://www.expressyard.com>