



Retool your marketing with technology

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BY PHIL SASSO

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Some customers are really passionate about new tools. You might even say obsessed. But you already know that. That's why you work hard keeping up on the newest automotive tools and equipment. You want to be the first to tell your tool junkies about all the latest and greatest products on the market.

Reading Professional Distributor (and sister publication Professional Tool & Equipment News) will help you keep up on all the gadgets and gizmos that make your customers' jobs easier. If you aren't up on that new "solar-powered environmentally friendly ratchet wrench," some other dealer will be — and they'll get the sale.

But what about the tools you use? Is your marketing toolbox full of dusty old literature and tattered catalogs, or are you using the latest marketing technology?

If you're planning to retire within the year, you can stop reading here. This marketing technology won't matter much to you. You'll soon be busy with lazy days at the beach, fishing or tinkering on your favorite hobby ... congrats! But if you're like the rest of us and hope to still be in business in a year or two and you want to find new and innovative ways to pull ahead of your competition, read on.

Geeks not required

Today's new marketing technologies can help you stay connected to customers with less time and effort. A few of these marketing tools are especially helpful in reaching younger and more tech-savvy customers. But there's something here for everyone.

If you don't think of yourself as a computer geek, don't worry. Most of these ideas aren't overly high tech and mobiles across the country are using them right now. A couple ideas are a little more advanced, but are working in other industries and could fit your business well. These services are designed to make marketing simple and inexpensive for the average Joe or Jane.

Your cellphone

There's nothing fancy about this. Customers can call you about an order,

warranty, problem or question. Your cellphone can be your best customer service technology tool. But if a customer doesn't have your number, he or she can't call you.

I suggest a simple, low-tech technique to get you cell number out there: business cards. Actually, I like magnetic business cards (check out vistaprint.com for some good prices). Your customer can put your magnetic business card (MagCard) right on his or her toolbox so everyone in the shop will see it — and hopefully use it.

Voicemail

With your cellphone number out there at dozens of stops, be sure you check voicemail often. What's worse than calling a customer the day after your competitor answered his question? A easy way to keep up on call backs is

to do them as you drive between stops (and always be within the confines of any local driving-and-talking laws).

Don't have voicemail, or don't like yours? RingCentral.com voicemail let's you listen to your messages by email, phone and/or PC.

To make the most of voicemail, try using your greeting to announce new product lines or promotions: "This is Sam from Rite Tools. Sorry, I can't take your call. Leave a message and I'll get right back to you. And ask me about our new impact wrench line when we talk." Don't force it though if that's not your style. It's worse to sound uncomfortable promoting something than to not promote it at all.

Email

Put your email address on your

MagCard, too. Encourage customers to use it to email you quick questions or after-hours orders. And, just like voicemail, check your email several times a day and respond as soon as you can.

Collect your customer's email addresses and ask if you can email them your weekly or monthly promotions. Regular emailing helps you stay in touch with customers between stops. Also, if you print your own flyers, emailing can save you some money, too.

Quick tip: When sending a group email, put your address in the "to" field and your customers' addresses in the BCC field. Do this so customers can't see all your other customers' addresses.

Better yet, services like constant-contact.com and reachmail.com avoid

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SALES & MARKETING 101

BCC'ing and sidestep most spam filters. You can quickly create and send professional-looking emails, even segmenting your customer list into categories or the days you stop. The best part is the easy-to-read reports show you who's opening and reading your emails so you can see what's working and what's not.

SMS/Texting

Beth's New Year's resolution was to learn to text message (also known as SMS). So, after 10 months of practice, I now get a "yes" or "no" when I text my wife a question. (At this rate, by next July she'll be up to "maybe.")

Do you have a text messaging plan on your cellphone? If so, even if you don't "do" texting, encourage your customers to text you. They can contact you right from their bay with questions or orders. You don't have to text back, just call them — especially if you're on the road. Calling gives you a chance to upsell product or cross-sell accessories.

Also, services like dialmycalls.com will send bulk text messages out to all your customer's cellphones at once for less than a dime each. You just buy a package of credits (starting at \$10 for 140 credits) and can use them whenever you like for texting, or robocalling.

Ask permission before you do bulk texting. Many plans charge for incoming sms/text messages. You don't want to tick-off your customer by costing them money. But this can be a great, quick way to send your customers a simple message, like a reminder you're on vacation this week or that the tool cart promotion deadline is Friday. Just keep it short.

Voice blasts

I received an annoying political call during dinner the other night. I tried to stop the caller, but they kept rambling — then I realized it was a robocall, an outgoing pre-recorded message. I hate most robocalls. But

I don't mind thank you or reminder calls: "Hi. This is Susie from the Chicago Tribune. I just wanted to thank you for your new subscription and remind you that you can subscribe to free email news alerts at chicagotribune.com/services."

You can use robocalls to provide better customer service, but avoid doing anything that sounds like you're selling. Effective Sept. 1, you could get slapped with a \$16,000 fine if you send a sales robocall to someone who did not give you written approval (<http://tinyurl.com/robocall09>).

Depending on your style you can use an outgoing recorded message to remind customers about a free training class or to tell them you're out sick and won't be stopping today. DialMyCalls.com outbound voice messages cost 7 cents or less each call. The service provides concise online reports showing if your calls were answered, went to voicemail or got a busy signal.

Just remember, it may be legal, but it could be annoying to many customers. So, ask before you even consider adding a number to your robocall list. And use it with discretion.

Website

I've met several dealers that have e-commerce websites — one was even making money (pardon my cynicism). I have nothing against websites. In fact, part of my business is building them. But as a dealer, a website can become a huge timesuck, wasting hours of your time with no return on that investment. You're in sales; anything that takes you away from selling is time wasted.

Some flags offer (or are working on) free dealer e-commerce websites. I'm all for anything that makes you money without costing you time. But handle this new opportunity with caution. Whose customer is an online buyer? Yours? The franchise? Both?

Building a website for your business can be a good idea. It lets you put your contact information and catalog/literature PDFs within easy reach of your customers. But I'd leave e-commerce to the folks with lots of time and no truck payments. Check out fatcow.com for cheap website hosting. They're reliable and have several easy-to-use website building tools.

Notice I don't mention business blogging, Facebook, or Twitter. That's because they can waste more time than they're worth. Leave that for the rock stars and celebrities.

Keep in touch, on track

Ask customers and prospects how you can contact them. Then create a master database for emailing, texting or robocalls. You'll be surprised how

many customers will be willing to give you an email address or cellphone number ... as long as you promise not to abuse it.

Don't have the time or talent to do this stuff? Consider hiring a high school or college student for a couple hours a week. Technology is second nature to them. They'll appreciate the pizza money. You'll appreciate the increase in sales.

You don't need to use every tool on here. In fact, I suggest you don't. Some may not fit your style. Others may not fit your customers. Whatever you do, just be consistent. Start by implementing one or two ideas. See what impacts your bottom line. After two or three months, keep what works, dump what doesn't. Then consider something else to try.

Over time, using marketing and

customer service technology can help you edge out the competition, earn more customers and close more sales.

How are you using marketing technology? Anything I missed? Email phil@philsasso.com and let me know. Many services listed here offer free trials. Find links to all the services in this article and more at: philsasso.com/retool. ■

Phil Sasso is president of Sasso Marketing Inc. (www.sassomarketing.com), a technical marketing agency specializing in tools and equipment. Subscribe to his free marketing tips at philsasso.com/blog.



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