

11 Ways to Increase Sales

By Robyn A. Friedman

Sandy Vilas isn't someone who turns away new business. So when the chief executive of CoachInc.com, a Sarasota company that trains business coaches, realized that other companies wanted to hire the coaches who had gone through his educational programs, he set up a new placement division. The new division, Corporate Coaches Inc., acts as a placement agency for coaches. "We were just giving sales leads away," says Vilas. By setting up the new division, however, he was able to increase sales and profits.

Setting up a new business to increase sales may seem a bit extreme to some people, but Vilas says that the company earned about \$100,000 in fees in its first year — income that would have been lost had Vilas not spotted a niche and responded.

Most business owners don't have to set up a new business to increase sales. Here are some other ways — many of them simple and inexpensive — to increase sales.

1. Improve follow-up on sales leads.

It may sound obvious, but improper follow-up can lead to the loss of qualified leads. Ken Gross hired a dedicated sales representative to better handle sales leads that came into his business, Boca Raton-based AlertSite, a website monitoring company. The sales rep contacts customers to ensure that they've selected the right product and to answer questions.

Apparently the approach is working; in the past two years alone, sales have increased 300% and the number of customers has doubled. Says Gross: "Every one of my customers has been contacted personally by our support rep, and we've heard many times that that's what's knocking our competition out and increasing our sales."

2. Build customer loyalty.

Most business owners spend their time seeking out new business and ignore their past customers. "When I ask small business owners whether they keep in touch with their customers, 90% say that they don't," says Denise O'Berry, a Tampa-based small business operations consultant. "They're so busy looking for new customers that they completely forget about the gold mine of people that they're already serving, people that already have some kind of faith in them, that would probably buy from them again."

O'Berry recommends that small business owners stay in touch with their past customers through newsletters and by surveying them to ensure that they were satisfied. "Tie into their needs," she suggests. "If you read the paper and see an article that reminds you of that person, cut it out and mail it to them."

Terry Brock, an Orlando-based professional speaker, uses downtime to send quick notes to his clients using his Palm Vx and a wireless modem. "I'll use the Palm to say, 'How are you? I'm thinking of you,'" says Brock. "That's what sales are all about — it's connecting at a personal level to better serve our customers, which then increases sales."

Jerry Osteryoung, Ph.D., a professor of finance at Florida State University, recommends marketing to past customers as well as new ones. "I would say it's 20 times harder to get a new customer than to keep

an existing one," he says. "You need to keep existing customers and figure out ways to increase sales and get products to them."

3. Enter into strategic alliances with companies that have a customer base similar to yours.

For example, if you are a real estate agent, consider co-hosting a seminar on purchasing a home with an attorney or home inspection firm. That way you can cross-promote your goods or services to potential customers.

4. Outsource.

Small business owners are accustomed to wearing many hats; often, they are not only the primary rainmaker for the business, but they perform accounting, human resources and managerial functions as well.

While wearing all those hats may work well for a start-up, as the business grows the owner needs to dedicate herself to sales while letting others take over the administrative tasks. "Owners need to spend at least 50% of their time focused on sales," O'Berry says. "Unfortunately, many times the owner spends 90% of his time doing the work of the business. That's why too many fail."

5. Get rid of under-performing employees.

Employees are on the front lines of your business; they represent you and your business to the world. If your employees are not doing a good job, then the public's perception of your business will be affected adversely. "It is hard to fire people, but sometimes you need to do it," says Linda Moore-Buck, a spokeswoman for the central Florida chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners. "If an employee is rude, incompetent or just plain lethargic, think about the impression the customer now has of your company."

That's why it's essential to ensure that your employees are providing good customer service. Train them properly and check up on them periodically to ensure they are treating customers right.

6. Eliminate clients that are not producing enough income.

You only have a limited amount of time to devote to your customers; why not spend that time productively, serving the needs of customers that bring in the most money? Says Moore-Buck: "Throw clients away. You know the ones — the smaller clients who want the most attention. Time is money and by throwing away your time-consuming, non-profitable clients, you will come out ahead."

7. Consider hiring a public relations firm.

Public relations is a powerful tool that can help get your company's name out and give you credibility. "Credibility is the name of the game in business," says Don Silver, executive vice president of Plantation-based Boardroom Communications. "While ads may get noticed by your target audience, everyone knows you paid for the space. Being featured or quoted by the media commands instant respect, since the reporter had a choice to speak to most any expert, but chose you."

8. Try internet search engine positioning.

If you're doing business on the web, you need to promote your website. One way to do so is to hire a firm such as Boca Raton-based MoreVisibility.com that specializes in search engine optimization. With 85% of all web surfers starting their session at a search engine such as Yahoo! or Google, the odds of making a sale increase as your ranking gets higher. "Search engines can be a powerful tool for small businesses," says Andrew Wetzler, president of MoreVisibility.com. "They present an opportunity to position the



company under specific keywords that their prospective customers are interested in." Wetzler's fees range from \$4,000 to \$15,000 per year for most businesses. Those seeking the benefits of search engine positioning without the high cost should take a look at software such as WebPositionGold, available for as little as \$149.

9. Network.

Join business groups such as the chamber of commerce, Rotary or professional organizations, and become active. People like to do business with those whom they know and trust, and networking allows you to build relationships.

Mark Budwig has seen what networking can do for a small business. Budwig, president of S. Mark Graphics Florida, a graphic design studio based in Fort Lauderdale, made a diligent effort last year to become active in organizations such as the Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce and the American Marketing Association. And his hard work has paid off. Since getting involved last year and meeting new people, his business has doubled.

10. Make sure you're getting the most bang for your advertising buck.

Advertising is expensive, and if you're not getting a good return on your investment, those dollars are wasted. "It's good to advertise, but you need to make sure advertising is effective, especially when you're trying to increase sales," says Osteryoung. "A good rule of thumb is if I spend money on advertising, it should bring in 20 times the amount spent in revenues."

Osteryoung recommends asking customers what prompted them to call or to come in. That way, you can track the effectiveness of the various advertising tools you are using.

11. Ask your clients for more business.

If you're looking to increase sales, let your clients know you're available and keep them informed of the different services you offer. If you're an attorney, for example, and you just did a real estate closing for a client, suggest that they now prepare a will. And don't be afraid to ask for referrals. "Ask for what you want," suggests Orlando-based accountant Judith E. Dacey. "If you want people to buy from you again, ask them. Open your mouth, and you shall receive."

The bottom line for a successful sales strategy is that it takes hard work. In good times, when it seems that sales are coming fast and furious, don't take them for granted. Treat every important customer with respect and care. When times turn tough — as they always do at some point — those same customers will be more likely to stick with someone who has treated them well.

Sales is a never-ending job, and it is important to be creative in thinking about what you can do to make your product or service more appealing — and then get the message out to prospective customers. Think outside the box and listen carefully to every new idea presented by your sales staff.

As your company grows and as you, the business owner, take on more responsibilities, don't lose touch with the day-to-day sales operation. Even if you are not on the front line of sales anymore, take some time each month to make calls to customers. The payoff will be good will with customers and, perhaps, a new sale.

Real Life: One Business Owner's Story

When Andy Berns bought his FastSigns business in 1993, it was in a shambles. The Fort Lauderdale-based graphic design and signage firm had previously been run by an absentee owner who devoted little time to marketing and management.

"It was doing horribly," says Berns.

But Berns apparently did something right. Since taking over the business, he has turned it around, increasing both sales and profit. By the time Berns had owned the business for seven years, sales had increased eight times.

How did he do it?

Focusing on customer service. Berns didn't want to just satisfy his customers' expectations; he set out to exceed those expectations. He made a deliberate effort to get his customers' signs completed faster than they expected. If a customer couldn't come in to pick up his order, Berns would try to impress him by delivering the order. "I did whatever it took to go above and beyond the competition," he says.

Networking. Berns joined local chambers of commerce and business associations. He also became a sponsor of the Broward County March of Dimes. He actively participates in the groups and attributes a large part of his sales directly to his efforts.

Asking for referrals. Once Berns has made a customer happy, he asks that customer for the names of other businesses that might need his services. He says that nearly half of his business comes from referrals.

Delegating. When Berns first purchased the business, he was involved in all aspects of its operations. "I looked at every order when it went out," he recalls. Now, however, he's too busy to handle everything on his own, and he's learned one of the most important business skills — how to delegate effectively. "The hard part is to let go and let somebody else have responsibility," he says. "I try to provide direction and let others dot the i's and cross the t's."