7 Ways Small Businesses
## Can Get More Out of a Small Marketing Budget

by Lita Mikrut

1. Repeating Template Designs

This can be useful for several reasons. First, you can save costs, by re-using the same template, and solely replacing the content. This can work well for postal mailings, recurring events, and announcements. This is especially important for e-mailings, such as e-newsletters. In addition to being able to save time and money on newly created work, when you repeatedly present materials with your same branding / placement, over time the brand becomes more familiar, and therefore, more trustworthy. Your clientele will quickly know who has just sent them information, because they will recognize your company brand, and information in a layout they have already come to know. I have helped clients create postcard mailings, brochures, announcements, and posters in this manner. It has been a successful way to get the materials done quickly, and keeping the company identity displayed consistently.
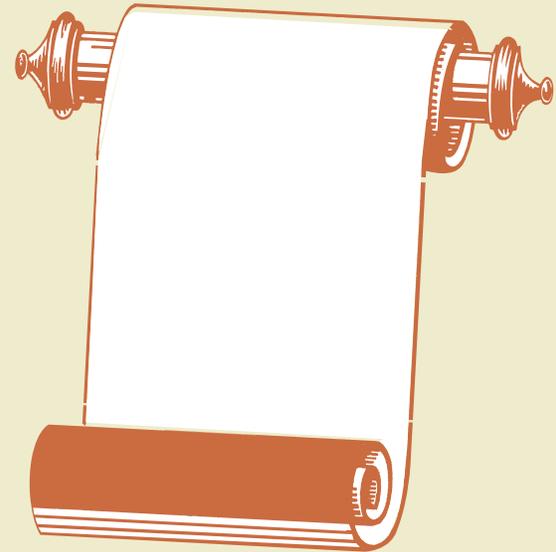
2. Build a relationship with a printer or with a designer who works with a favorite printer.

I have had great success in collaborating with printers. We have come to build a mutual trust and respect. The workflow becomes very efficient. I know how to provide them with the right information and files. They know when things look right and wrong. Also because I am able to continually give them new business from my clientele, they reward that loyalty by offering substantial discounts on their services. It's a win-win.

3. Get all stakeholders requirements & opinions at the onset of the project.

Everybody has something to say about your project goals, what you are presenting in your materials, and how you are doing the presentation itself. It's critically important to first identify who all of your company's stakeholders are from the very beginning — before any production. Have a communication and review plan in place with the stakeholders throughout the continuing stages of development. Make sure everyone has had an opportunity to be heard before moving to the next phase. This will save a tremendous amount of time, and you can get to the finishing stages much more seamlessly when this is done on the front-side of the project. I have worked with clients that have made the mistake of starting the work without hearing from, and including the knowledge of, key stakeholders. In some cases, this has resulted in having to go back to square one, revising the scope of work, and starting the clock all over again. Causing unnecessary costs, headache, and delay on deliverables. I have seen greater success when my clients have prepared the project specifications based on meetings and conversations from all departments, users, and stakeholders —thusly, creating a strong blueprint from which to work from.

4. Keep your contacts up to date.

Maintaining your database, or contact list, can sometimes take a low priority. It can pile up, and then become a time-consuming project. If you are spending resources on a marketing effort, you don't want to waste any of it, by sending your materials to outdated contact info. If you have already spent time on knowing and understanding your target audience, keep that as effective as possible by making sure that the information you are delivering is actually received. Keep addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses up to date. You can save on postage and printing costs for tangible mailings. With e-mailings, it's important to keep your 'opt-in' and 'opt-out' list current, so that customer communication is respected. In a small but important way, it shows you can be trusted to take care of their needs and requests. The preparation time you put in will be well worth it, when in the long run you are maintaining and distributing to a healthy and vital list of actual prospects (a valuable commodity).
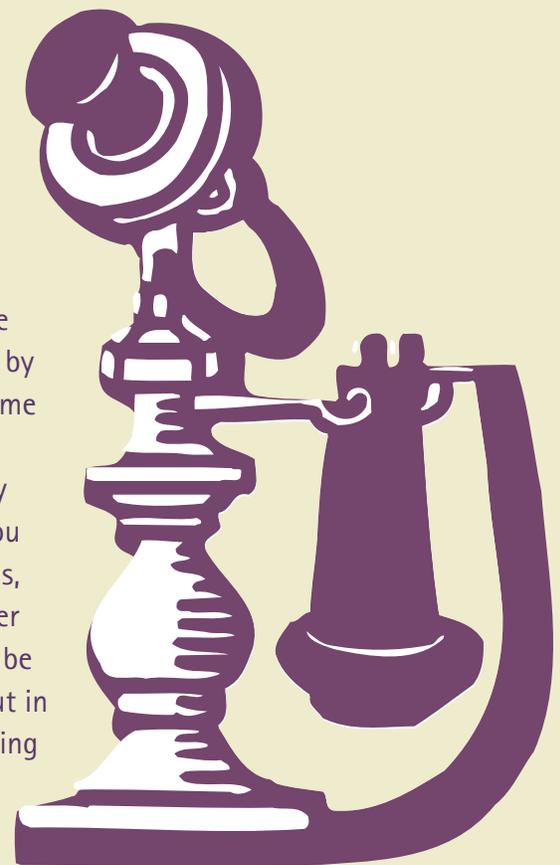
5. Plan ahead, avoid rush fees, and stress!

Real time marketing is cool and effective. But when you can, give your marketing strategy some time and attention. Plan out your campaigns as far in advance as makes sense. When you do this, you can achieve the milestones without added stress of needing to be done 'yesterday'. Often times, there are unforeseen events that occur, such as, having to put out fires in other business areas, or someone being out sick...when you have enough lead time on your marketing projects, you can still stay on track with your deadline. I have seen clients pay extra costs in rush fees for production because of planning. And knowing that if they had started, sometimes just even a week earlier, they could have kept this money in their pockets and used it for other marketing efforts. It can add up over time; especially if waiting until the last minute is the norm. When working with my clients, I try to help them prepare by discussing the stages of the project, milestones (including time for revisions), and who needs to be involved (and/or approve items) to move the project forward. This way we can set a schedule that is realistic and get the deliverables finalized on target.

6. Don't reinvent the wheel; find the tools & means and customize.

Your project needs may already exist. Before you 'start from scratch', do some research and see if what you are looking for has already been built. For example, you might need an industry specific search engine for your website. See if there is already a 'canned' solution that you can put in place before you spend a lot of money having one made for you. In some cases, you may be able to find 'shareware' (low-cost) or 'freeware' (free!) solutions that can be tailored to your business, by a specialist. Adding a few final touches to make it more suitable to your needs is less expensive than building a solution from the ground up. You are also much more likely to find support easier when you need it. When your solution is built for only you, it's harder to find qualified individuals to help you when it needs maintenance. I have seen clients spend way over their allotted budget making (and fixing) their proprietary solutions. It depends on your own specific needs, but doing some investigative research to find a ready-made solution, could be time well spent, and save you dollars in the long run.
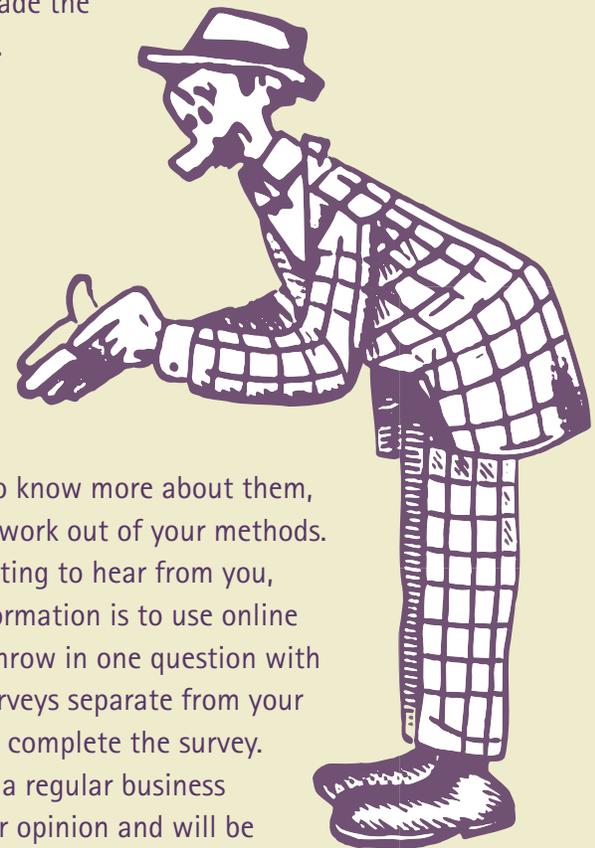
7. If you can, use your own photos—in lieu of stock photography.

This suggestion really depends on the end goal, but in some cases, it could be better to use images from your own collection rather than stock photography. Consider first what you want to communicate — and how your project would benefit most from the kinds of images you display — and if it is an option to use your own crisp digital photos, rather than purchase the rights to images from stock photo companies. [Note: image quality is as important as the image content. This idea will save costs only if your images are photographed well. Today's digital cameras make this a lot easier than it used to be.] I worked with a client on a piece where we wanted to show how their organization was effective at making a difference in the community. We showed the faces of the actual participants; which made the piece much more successful than it would have been to use images from a stock photo company. Our decision to use their 'in-house' photos was appropriate in that it immediately made the connection of the message and intention.

One more idea to take away...

8. Survey your clientele: How do they want to hear from you? Where do they look for information about you?

Your business is unique, and so are your prospects and clientele. Getting to know more about them, and understanding how to reach them is useful because it takes the guesswork out of your methods. It also gives the effort more value when your clientele is expecting or wanting to hear from you, rather than being 'intruded' upon with your collateral. One way to get information is to use online surveys to find out what people are thinking. If you send out e-mailings, throw in one question with each e-mailing about what they are looking for. You can also do longer surveys separate from your newsletter; sometimes offering an incentive for people to take the time to complete the survey. If your business is more person-to-person, strike up a conversation during a regular business interaction. Most people will feel complimented that you are seeking their opinion and will be willing to help. Keep the conversation directed and short, thank them for their feedback (positive and negative), and keep track of what you hear. If you start to notice patterns and repetitions in the responses, respond to the results of your 'focus group' — give the people what they want!