

HYPE YOURSELF

BY RANDY KRAFT

Congratulations. You've got a great idea—a better way of doing things than you've ever seen.

You're sure your homebased business will set the world on fire. But how do you get the word out? How do you create demand for your product or service? Even the best ideas don't sell themselves.

You need marketing. Marketing makes contact with potential customers, creates an image for your business, and generates interest in your product long before you make the sale. Despite what they teach at Harvard Business School, marketing is not a science, it's an art. A good marketing plan requires only common sense and a bit of creativity.

Just ask Ken Makovsky, founder of Makovsky and Co. in New York City, recently named the best small public relations agency of 1990 by *Inside PR*

Magazine. Makovsky isn't working at home anymore—he's got 35 professionals on staff—but he started 11 years ago with a \$12,000 loan and the belief that a public relations firm specializing in technology could be successful. He was right.

Makovsky took the time to plan his marketing strategy well. He still does. "Prepare and plan, study the client and the competition, and develop a unique program," Makovsky says. "Do an analysis of the marketplace, comparing the strengths and weaknesses of your idea or product with what is available. Where are you stronger? What needs to be improved? What areas of the market appeal to you the most?" Makovsky knows a good idea is simply not enough—a good marketing plan is essential.

Marketing a homebased business is different from marketing other types of businesses. In a homebased business, you sell yourself as much as—or more than—anything else. What you



Nancy Godfrey (left) and Laura Hough share the marketing secret that's made their homebased business so successful: "Don't get lost in the clutter of boring business materials. Stand apart from the crowd."

offer is personalized attention—that's your competitive edge over bigger companies.

Start by creating an image. Remember, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Spend the time and money to create a "look" that's personal but professional. Pay attention to everything from color to typeface to the quality of paper you use for your stationery and business cards. Get help from a graphic artist or communications specialist. "Be creative; distinguish yourself from the competition," says Nancy Godfrey of Godfrey Hough Associates, a home-based corporate communications firm in Norwalk, Connecticut. Creating the right image gives your client a good feeling about your business before you ever meet.

Next, create a brochure or flyer advertising your business. Think of it as your first sales call. "The way your brochure looks says a lot about you," says Laura Hough of Godfrey Hough. "Words do have the potential to inform, to arouse and to excite, but this is a very visual society, and graphics are an integral part of communications. Graphics are the 'body language.'" Thanks to desktop publishing, you can print a high-quality brochure without spending a fortune. Keep in mind that in marketing, it's not just what you say that's important, but how you say it.

GET THE WORD OUT

Now you're ready to spread the word. "Word-of-mouth" is the most powerful marketing tool ever created. A smart marketer uses techniques that make it seem as if people are already talking about the business or product. In May 1991, Valerie Ryan started Baby Buckets & Bundles, a Bridgeport, Connecticut, company that designs and delivers specialized baby gifts. Ryan started with beautifully illustrated brochures. "I hand-distributed them to small businesses, churches, temples and community groups and ran a few ads in local newspapers."

Photo Courtesy: Godfrey Hough Associates

pers," she says. "Right away, the phone started ringing."

Public relations is the best marketing tool for a homebased business. More than just publicity, public relations stimulates interest in your business—and often doesn't cost very much. Here are a few public relations techniques you can use to promote your homebased business:

• **Publicity:** Journalism is more believable than advertising. News stories lend real credibility to a business, but the story has to be newsworthy to get coverage. Issue a press release about your business to local newspapers or magazines. Include photographs, if you have them, and critical information such as your company's location, phone number and hours of operation. If possible, tie the release to a business or lifestyle trend, or something important to the community. This will make it more interesting to the press. And make sure the release goes to the appropriate editor—business, lifestyle, community, etc. If your product is not too expensive, drop off a sample. Nothing gets attention like the real thing, especially food or playthings.

Radio and local cable stations are an often overlooked possibility for publicity. Most local broadcasters are interested in new businesses, and may even invite you to appear on their shows. This is a great place to be heard, especially if you have valuable expertise, like telling people how to finance a college education, or interior decorating tips.

• **Seminars and Speaking Engagements:** Holding seminars is inexpensive, the press will be glad to announce them for you, and they attract potential customers. Talk to the local YMCA

or YWCA, community college or continuing education program; they'd probably love to have you speak or teach a course. Also contact your industry's trade association. Speaking at trade meetings is another great way to meet potential customers.

• **Newsletters:** Newsletters are an excellent marketing tool because they create lasting relationships with your customers. If you don't feel confident

business lends itself to participating in charity events or community activities, get involved. For example, a catering business can help out at a charity ball. Look around your town—there are dozens of events with the potential to generate lots of press for the businesses involved. Such events also give you a chance to pass out brochures and spread the word.

• **Trade Shows:** These are seasonal, and are often related to the home, specializing in antiques, crafts, gift items or gardening products. They attract large local audiences and are a great place to introduce your business to customers. Even if people are "just looking," ask them to sign your visitor's list; then follow up with a mailing or phone call. Check with your local chamber of commerce for a calendar of events.

• **Direct Mail:** Many homebased businesses rely on direct-mail communication to make sales contacts. Store all your current and potential customers on a database with mail-merge capabilities. Or buy a list of names from a list broker.

Your mailing should be a simple letter or flyer introducing yourself and your product or service. Describe why your product is different or better than others on the market. If you already service some well-known clients, by all means name them—this impresses new customers. If your business is new, explain why you started it, and why what you offer is distinctive. Also mention any previous experience you have in the industry.

• **Promotion:** This is a marketing technique that induces customers to try a product or service for the first time, or to buy in larger quantities or more



Solid market research and planning took Ken Makovsky's public relations firm from a one-person homebased operation to a 35-employee commercial site.

Photo Courtesy: Makovsky and Co.

about your writing abilities, a communications consultant can do the job for you. There are even companies that create newsletters for you, on almost any subject.

Make sure your newsletter supports the needs of your customers and looks good. "The words and graphics must be (professional), and you must include some response mechanism—a phone number customers can call for more information, or the next seminar dates," says Godfrey. "A good newsletter stimulates action."

• **Special Events:** If your