

Spending Your Marketing Dollars Wisely

Lisa Freeman

Years ago, when Fiske & Freeman first started selling antiques at shows, I remember being envious of dealers who claimed to have regular customers. At the time, the idea of a repeat customer – someone who actually came to us because of who we were and what we carried – seemed, well, nearly unattainable.

Today, nearly half of our sales are to regular customers. Some of those people buy from us at shows, but many buy from our website or after making a special trip to visit us in Vermont. They know who we are and that what we carry is of interest to them. In other words, we have a *presence*, or if you prefer, we are a brand. And while that brand is intimately linked to our merchandise, people know about it because we have nurtured it and supported it by strategic marketing for many years.

Antique dealers would like to believe that if their stuff is good, it will (magically?) find a buyer. While this may once have been the case, I do not believe it is true now. Potential and existing customers are being bombarded with opportunities to spend their discretionary dollars elsewhere: iPods, meals out, gadgets, cars. You name it. People are used to shopping in a marketplace saturated with sophisticated marketing and endlessly repeated brand names. If you don't remind your customers that you are there with some regularity, you will fade in their memories as sure as your cellphone will be obsolete next year.

Selling in a Tight Market

Many dealers seem to believe that business is more difficult these days because fewer people are interested in antiques. Fair enough: enough has been written in these pages and elsewhere to support that claim. But just because there are fewer people doesn't mean you that there aren't opportunities: some dealers are selling more than they used to, and some have new customers, some of whom are even under 40.

The difference between those with expanding antiques businesses and those struggling to keep up is, I would argue, as much about marketing (and the modern business practices that underlie good marketing) as it is about the quality of their merchandise. It doesn't matter whether you deal in high-end classical furniture or rustic country: someone, somewhere wants what you

have. All you have to do is find them at the right time, with the right object. All you have to do is keep your name in the front of their minds. Marketing.

When I say “marketing,” I mean more than advertising. I’m including any money that you spend (or ought to be spending) on building your reputation and making your presence known. For most antique dealers this includes things like advertising in the trade papers, but it also includes business cards and bags with your name on them, website activity (including selling through eBay), exhibiting at antique shows, distributing flyers, and ads in show programs. It extends to how you describe your business every time someone asks you what you specialize in. In our case, it includes a self-published book on our specialty, and a private label brand of furniture wax polish, things that our customers will see (because they are useful) over and over and over. And it includes the most effective marketing tool in any business: word of mouth.

Antique dealers, like many small business owners, are often reluctant to spend money on marketing because a lot of marketing activity seems like a waste. (As the old adage goes: 20% of the money you spend on marketing is highly effective. The problem is knowing which 20%.) An ad that doesn’t generate a single phone call can seem like a mistake if your only goal was to sell the object advertised. But marketing has to be seen as a broader activity, and marketing dollars spent strategically – targeted toward the right customers, sustained over time, and designed appropriately – can pay off far better than the sale of a single object.

Marketers in the direct-mail business like to talk about “echo” effect. That’s the business you get later from something that you do today. I had a call recently from an ad in a magazine that I placed over 18 months ago. Fortunately for me, the object advertised had already been sold (though imagine how thrilled I would have been if I still had the thing and someone actually phoned up to ask about it!). More important, however, that ad brought me a potential new customer more than a year after it was published. It provided the opportunity for me to talk with someone directly about my business.

Traditional marketing wisdom holds that you need 28 impressions – 28 different exposures to your customers – before they’ll remember your name. When you advertise in the same publication (the right publication) regularly, your customers not only begin to recognize your name; they even begin to feel that they *know* you. And most customers like to buy from someone they know, particularly with something as personal as antiques.

Developing a Strategy

Let's say that you accept my argument that you need to do more to market yourself and your business, but you don't really know how to begin. Before you do anything else, you have to commit to spending some of your scarce dollars on the effort. Look at your last year's sales and decide how much of that money you are willing and able to devote to marketing. Establish a budget, then make sure to spend it – wisely.

(How much is the right amount to spend on marketing? It's difficult to say, in part because the antiques business doesn't provide much opportunity for dealers to share this kind of information. For what it's worth, Fiske & Freeman spent 15% of our gross income on marketing last year. That includes anything spent on advertising, shows, printing business cards and brochures, and costs associated with selling our book.)

Now that you've got a budget, you need to decide how to spend it. But first, take a strategic marketing look at what you did last year.

1. Where are your sales coming from? Are you spending your marketing dollars to support your most effective sales channels?
2. When do your sales come in? Are you spending your marketing dollars prior to or during your strongest sales periods? Would some different marketing during slow period help generate more sales?
3. Do you market to your existing customers? Servicing your existing customer base, including just reminding them that you are there from time to time, is critical.
4. Do you market to reach new customers?
5. When someone buys something from you, do you give them a receipt with your name, address, phone number, and email address printed on it? (Printed receipts are an inexpensive way to remind people who you are.)
6. Are you collecting and storing the names, addresses, and basic information (what they purchased, how much it cost, when they purchased it, and where they purchased it) about every customer?
7. Do you ask everyone who makes a purchase from you how they found you?
8. Are you on the Internet, and if not, why not?

Thinking more broadly about marketing and collecting basic information about your customers are the first steps toward helping you develop an effective strategic marketing plan.