



by Rich Herbst

## Connecting the Dots

Marketing can be a confusing subject at times. There are so many options to consider – websites, direct mail, media advertising, social media, PR, print, and more – it's easy to get lost in the tangle of tactics. When you're dealing with the question of lining up your programs into a coherent master plan, you need a sound strategic framework to connect the dots and make sense of it all.

But it's not easy to create such a framework. Books and books have been written on the subject of marketing strategy. And this is the kind of stuff that keeps marketing consultants in business. I can help, though, by offering the three Big Questions that can get a strategy started.

### **Big Question #1: How do you stay in a healthy relationship with your current customers?**

Your current customers are a major asset, and you don't want to lose them. And you have competitors that would certainly love to steal them away. So, you need a set of programs that will sustain that important relationship and demonstrate that your company is the better choice.

First, make sure that your "customer experience" is sound, and that all your communications that are part of doing business are customer-friendly. Then think about ways you can engage your customer more deeply. And think about how you can create meaningful dialog and interaction. Now the tactics come into play: the website as a relationship-building platform, social media as the means for fostering dialog, direct mail as an option for expressing appreciation for valued customers. Line up these tactics as a means to accomplish the goal of sustaining customer relationships.

### **Big Question #2: How do you make sure that your brand stays vibrant and relevant in the broader marketplace?**

Your brand is also a massively important asset. You want to keep your brand "edge" relative to your competition. And again, you have competitors that are doing their best to gain an edge versus you.

When it comes to marketing your brand, clarity and consistency of message are the keywords. Your brand's positioning must be clear. Your points of differentiation versus the competition must be meaningful. And your brand is not just a concept or an idea; it's also a visual image and a "personality". All these elements must come together in a consistent, compelling way. Then you need to deliver this brand message and image, clearly and consistently. Again, the tactics will vary. In today's world you need to start with your website. Think of the website as "brand central" – that is, the place where new customers come to check you out. When a new

customer lands on your website, the brand messaging must be clear. And the site needs to deliver a visual impression reflective of your brand.

With the website "brand" in place, you then want to think about putting the message out into the broader marketplace. An array of options and tools are available here: media advertising, print advertising, direct mail, Web advertising, and/or media coverage through PR. Ideally, you want a combination of these tactics to get your message out.

### **Big Question #3: How do you engage new customers, powerfully?**

Question #1 took care of existing customers. Question #2 addressed options for seeding your brand with a broad set of possible customers. Now you need to think about landing some of the "possibles" as new customers. This calls for a third facet of marketing: direct engagement.

In the old world of marketing, direct engagement meant "selling". In the new world, though, it's a bigger subject. Direct engagement happens (again) through an array of possible tactics. Selling, of course, still matters. But now 1:1 direct marketing also has a role. This is the targeted, list-based, marketing that engages customers through direct mail, email, or telemarketing. Direct engagement also happens in the digital arena. A well-crafted website not only delivers a message; it starts a dialog. Social media tactics are another option for direct engagement.

Seek out direct engagement tactics that "fit" with your customers, their mindset, and your proposition. Regardless of tactics, though, the job here is to connect directly with your target to invite him/her to do business with you.

*Now we need to connect the dots.*

Consider your answers to the three Big Questions above. List out tactics that support each of these. Make sure, though, that your tactics fully solve each of the Big Questions. Once you have the tactics lined up in a way that support the Big Questions, you're on your way to building a solid, strategically sound marketing program.

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