



# Marketing 101 Column

## Building a Brand on a Shoestring

by  
Michelle Merlo, Managing Partner  
Michelle Merlo Communications, LLC

Predictions on when the economy will rebound differ according to which industry expert is talking, but all agree that it will be in a downward spiral for most of this year. Although your own business may be experiencing a negative environment, it is essential to keep your chin up and leverage any positive strategy available.

Building your brand is one of those positive opportunities.

The process of fortifying your brand need not be expensive. Sure, hiring a branding firm can cost thousands. Instead, let's focus on user-friendly tips any business owner can leverage to build a brand on a shoestring budget.

**Post brochures online.** Make sure your brochure and any other marketing materials are online, available via PDF format on your site. Having online resources gives real time access to your message without having to spend time, money and effort printing and mailing. In fact, a recent article in B-to-B magazine reported on studies that show online marketing materials are now favored by decision makers, because they can download, email and share information much faster with electronic brochures.

**Fortify your email.** Instead of just a name signature, use the common and easy features of any email software to add your company's logo, slogan, or even full business card. Or, use the space to advertise specials, promotions, etc.

**Collect kudos.** A third-party testimonial is one of the best brand-building strategies available. A happy customer's letter, or short "case study" write-up of their experience with your company has multiple benefits: Email it out to your prospects as an FYI...post it on your web site's home page as a news item...include it with RFPs...send it to the media as a possible feature story.

**Start an email newsletter.** With some thought and effort to build an email list, sending a simple e-newsletter with short, relevant nuggets of information about your industry positions you as a resource to your prospects and clients. It isn't a hard "buy my product" sell, but it's a softer approach that builds your brand via thought leadership.

**Nurture your base.** Spend down time nurturing your existing clients. Try a simple phone call, handwritten note, or in-person visit to check if they need anything, if they have any suggestions for your product, or if they are aware of any industry advancements. Or, contact them to simply thank them for their business. Like the e-newsletter, the focus of this strategy is not to sell, but to become a resource to your clients. This strategy helps you solidify your brand and promote customer loyalty.

**Become an expert.** Media outlets need to fill space every day, and with the onslaught of online blogs, e-magazines, e-newscasts, etc., and the 24-hour cable news community, worthy information is snatched up by

info-hungry journalists. Fill the void. Position yourself as an expert in the field. This is completely free and yields excellent results. There are two ways to do this – reactive and proactive.

- **Reactive:** Stay current with the news, both online and offline. If an issue touches on your industry, call the reporter of that story and offer your insight. This works for local news, but it's even better for national news. Local reporters love to localize a national story, so if you see national news that you can relate to your local service area, call your local news outlets and tell them what you have in mind. Even if the reporter doesn't bite on your offer, write a letter to the editor or offer a guest column or opinion-editorial piece for your online and offline news outlets about that topic.
- **Proactive:** Contact your local media outlets and your industry's trade media and offer to write a Q&A column, a blog, or an article regarding your industry. That puts your name and that industry in the same frame for thousands of potential customers. For online strategies, locate the popular blogs for your industry and get in on the conversation – again offering insight, tips, etc. to display your experience and knowledge.

**Give thanks.** Always, always, always thank colleagues, employees, family, friends, customers, etc. for any referrals, whether you get a new customer or sale from the lead or not. Positive reinforcement goes a long way to those trying to lend a hand.

The bottom line is this: Building and maintaining your brand in this current economic climate need not be another expense. Look at your current marketing assets and make the most of them. And at the end of the day, if you've reached out to your existing clients and your prospective customers in some format, then your brand is that much closer to becoming top of mind to your audience.

#### **About the Author**

A two decade, award-winning veteran of marketing and communications, Michelle works with organizations and companies of all shapes and sizes to help them implement marketing strategies to further their businesses. She can be reached at [michelle@michellemerlo.com](mailto:michelle@michellemerlo.com) or 412-475-0425.