

How to Create a Marketing Plan

What is a marketing plan and why is it so essential to the success of your business? Find out here, in the first section of our comprehensive guide to creating a marketing plan.

Firms that are successful in marketing invariably start with a marketing plan. Large companies have plans with hundreds of pages; small companies can get by with a half-dozen sheets. Put your marketing plan in a three-ring binder. Refer to it at least quarterly, but better yet monthly. Leave a tab for putting in monthly reports on sales/manufacturing; this will allow you to track performance as you follow the plan.

The plan should cover one year. For small companies, this is often the best way to think about marketing. Things change, people leave, markets evolve, and customers come and go. Later on we suggest creating a section of your plan that addresses the medium-term future--two to four years down the road. But the bulk of your plan should focus on the coming year.

You should allow yourself a couple of months to write the plan, even if it's only a few pages long.

Developing the plan is the "heavy lifting" of marketing. While executing the plan has its challenges, deciding what to do and how to do it is marketing's greatest challenge. Most marketing plans kick off with the first of the year or with the opening of your fiscal year if it's different.

Who should see your plan? All the players in the company. Firms typically keep their marketing plans very, very private for one of two very different reasons: Either they're too skimpy and management would be embarrassed to have them see the light of day, or they're solid and packed with information . . . which would make them extremely valuable to the competition.

You can't do a marketing plan without getting many people involved. No matter what your size, get feedback from all parts of your company: finance, manufacturing, personnel, supply and so on--in addition to marketing itself. This is especially important because it will take all aspects of your company to make your marketing plan work. Your key people can provide realistic input on what's achievable and how your goals can be reached, and they can share any insights they have on any potential, as-yet-unrealized marketing opportunities, adding another dimension to your plan. If you're essentially a one-person management operation, you'll have to wear all your hats at one time--but at least the meetings will be short!

What's the relationship between your marketing plan and your business plan or vision statement? Your business plan spells out what your business is about--what you do and don't do, and what your ultimate goals are. It encompasses more than marketing; it can include discussions of locations, staffing, financing, strategic alliances and so on. It includes "the vision thing," the resounding words that spell out the glorious purpose of your company in stirring language. Your business plan is the U.S. Constitution of your business: If you want to do something that's outside the business plan, you need to either change your

mind or change the plan. Your company's business plan provides the environment in which your marketing plan must flourish. The two documents must be consistent.

A marketing plan, on the other hand, is plump with meaning. It provides you with several major benefits. Let's review them.

Rallying point: Your marketing plan gives your troops something to rally behind. You want them to feel confident that the captain of the vessel has the charts in order, knows how to run the ship, and has a port of destination in mind. Companies often undervalue the impact of a "marketing plan" on their own people, who want to feel part of a team engaged in an exciting and complicated joint endeavor. If you want your employees to feel committed to your company, it's important to share with them your vision of where the company is headed in the years to come. People don't always understand financial projections, but they can get excited about a well-written and well-thought-out marketing plan. You should consider releasing your marketing plan--perhaps in an abridged version--companywide. Do it with some fanfare and generate some excitement for the adventures to come. Your workers will appreciate being involved.

Chart to success: We all know that plans are imperfect things. How can you possibly know what's going to happen 12 months or five years from now? Isn't putting together a marketing plan an exercise in futility . . . a waste of time better spent meeting with customers or fine-tuning production? Yes, possibly but only in the narrowest sense. If you don't plan, you're doomed, and an inaccurate plan is far better than no plan at all. To stay with our sea captain analogy, it's better to be 5 or even 10 degrees off your destination port than to have no destination in mind at all. The point of sailing, after all, is to get somewhere, and without a marketing plan, you'll wander the seas aimlessly, sometimes finding dry land but more often than not floundering in a vast ocean. Sea captains without a chart are rarely remembered for discovering anything but the ocean floor.

Company operational instructions: Your child's first bike and your new VCR came with a set of instructions, and your company is far more complicated to put together and run than either of them. Your marketing plan is a step-by-step guide for your company's success. It's more important than a vision statement. To put together a genuine marketing plan, you have to assess your company from top to bottom and make sure all the pieces are working together in the best way. What do you want to do with this enterprise you call the company in the coming year? Consider it a to-do list on a grand scale. It assigns specific tasks for the year.

Captured thinking: You don't allow your financial people to keep their numbers in their heads. Financial reports are the lifeblood of the numbers side of any business, no matter what size. It should be no different with marketing. Your written document lays out your game plan. If people leave, if new people arrive, if memories falter, if events bring pressure to alter the givens, the information in the written marketing plan stays intact to remind you of what you'd agreed on.

Top-level reflection: In the daily hurly-burly of competitive business, it's hard to turn your attention to the big picture, especially those parts that aren't directly related to the daily operations. You need to take time periodically to really think about your business--whether it's providing you and your employees with what you want, whether there aren't some innovative wrinkles you can add, whether you're getting all you can out of your products, your sales staff and your markets. Writing your marketing plan is the best time to do this high-level thinking. Some companies send their top marketing people away to a retreat. Others

go to the home of a principal. Some do marketing plan development at a local motel, away from phones and fax machines, so they can devote themselves solely to thinking hard and drawing the most accurate sketches they can of the immediate future of the business.

Ideally, after writing marketing plans for a few years, you can sit back and review a series of them, year after year, and check the progress of your company. Of course, sometimes this is hard to make time for (there is that annoying real world to deal with), but it can provide an unparalleled objective view of what you've been doing with your business life over a number of years.