



Marketing, no longer a luxury, it's vital for survival!

Retail has never been more complicated. Consumers have access to more information, choice and options than ever before.

Your customer is comparing you to other stores, sites and products from the comfort of their home.

You can communicate with your customer via: post, email, radio, sms, local paper, facebook, twitter, online advertising and the list goes on.

Once upon a time, fliers or glossy brochures, with a nice script font heading, were all that was needed to catch the consumer's eye – not any more! Marketing is not just what gets sent out, it encompasses every aspect of your business, instore and out; Including visual merchandising, product mix, pricing strategy, store layout, events, customer loyalty programs, customer service, staff , training etc

It has never been more important to get your Marketing in order and be clear about what your business is and what you offer so that your customer knows exactly who you are and what you are offering.

I am currently reading "Retail selling ain't brain surgery...it's twice as hard" by James E.Dion. It is so true!! As retailers you have to work with variables – nothing is guaranteed or fixed, it is constantly changing and you need to keep up.

The Marketing Objective must be very clear, increasing sales and profit in a strategic way. You may focus on one element of the mix at a particular time but all the elements must be inline with each other.

For example; you may be having a Customer Shopping Event. The objective may be to increase customer awareness of a new product range and the services available instore. You will have your checklist: the store will be immaculate and fully stocked, the VM areas strong, organise a gift bag, maybe some supplier demonstrations, your best staff will be rostered on and a special offer. Properly executed, this will ultimately lead to increased sales and a more 'profitable' customer. The customer has learned more about you and your store. They are now aware of the store, the products and the services. They will feel warm and fuzzy at being treated as a special customer and want to feel this way again. Marketing builds a relationship with the customer through better communication and matching of customer needs to the store's offering. So the customer will not just come back once, but repeatedly and often, they are more comfortable and feel valued with each visit.

Looking at a different scenario; if the objective was to increase sales short term, the effort would be smaller but so would the returns, long term. You get all your 'dead' stock, hire a few trestle tables, print off some signs on the computer and voila! Money is in the till and stock is cleared. But long term, have you build lasting relationships with profitable customers? No. Thus the importance of the objective, its definition and subsequent execution.

This said, different objectives have their place. There will be times when profit is more important, or sales increase is the focus or long term sales the main objective and you should have a strategy for each.

In the same way that you call an electrician, computer specialist and take your car to a mechanic, there is help to be had outside your business. Marketing and technology are changing faster than ever before.

Outsourcing is not something as small business owners we like to do but it is just as vital as having a good accountant do your books and a lawyer to take care of your legal position. Business owners don't have the time to do everything involved in running a successful profitable business - there are many hats to be worn. They should be the conductor of the orchestra - not the player of every instrument. There is software available to aid in data collection and analyse the data (sales, products, shopping cycles etc) thereby ensuring decisions are made on fact and not just gut-feel (which has its place too).

Computers can be as easy or as hard, simple or as complicated as you like, you just need to know who to ask.

As with any profession, there are guides and rules to follow which is the backbone of a successful business. But the flair, passion and awareness of customers and what they want, is the flesh on the backbone and the skill in knowing and managing this, is what ultimately separates the leaders from the imitators!

Marketing specialists are to your business what your mechanic is to your car – they will keep it going and running. As business owners, sometimes we need an outside objective perspective that is not coloured by history. It means that you are working with someone who spends 100% of their time learning about the marketing, adapting to changes and thinks strategically.

If you have a sound marketing background but don't have time to execute your fabulous ideas, outsource this part too. The investment you make will be back to you 10 fold, if the strategy is correct. You need to weigh up the options: of not doing or constantly putting off a project– things don't change. If you try and fit a project into your already full schedule, you will not be giving anything 100% especially the day to day tasks of running a retail business. If you outsource the task and pay 'x' dollars then the objective must be that the revenue is 10 time 'x' leaving you will a profit at the end of the task. The key is to work out what your time per hour costs not just in terms of dollars but also what else – more productive activities – can you be doing at this time.

Let me give you an example: you are a gift store, do you give your customers gifts? Do you know who your customers are and what they want? Do you know how to collect this information? When you do collect it, how do you store it? Finally, how do you use it to build sales and create a profitable customer? This is a simplified way of looking at your customer database but it is a vital first step.

In conclusion, when thinking about Marketing and your business the question is not 'Can I afford to do it?' but "Can I afford **not** to do it?"!

About Nancy As The Retail 'Miss Fix It' and the Chief of Ideas at [Magnolia Solutions](http://www.magnoliasolutions.com.au), I have drawn on my own experience of over 20 years in retail and with my first business [Paper Magnolia](http://www.papermagnolia.com.au), to help clients create integrated marketing solutions online and offline that are based on sound retail practices.

In 2009, I gave myself the challenge of finding a super low cost solution to get Paper Magnolia started selling online. At the same time, I started to use this new 'thing' called Social Media with great results! In 2010 I co-founded [Social Media Women](http://www.socialmediawomen.com) and continue to support new social media users. I hope my experience will help you start off on the right foot.

I work with retailers, manufacturers, brands and service-providers in various roles including external Marketing Manager. My focus is on Customer Service, marketing, new media, product, retail principles and retail as a craft. I utilise online and offline tools in a wholistic approach. I am an avid user and participator in Social Media as an extension of my marketing activity.

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