

15 Foolproof Ideas for Promoting Your Company

Every successful company uses some sort of promotion to influence certain audiences - usually customers or prospects - by informing or persuading them. Reasons for promoting a business include: increasing visibility, adding credibility to you or your company, enhancing or improving your image, and bringing in new business. The following cost-effective, easy-to-execute ideas have the power to increase sales in a way conventional advertising cannot. The key is to find the methods that are appropriate for your business, marketplace, and professional style.

1. **Contests.** As one example, a cookware store decided to sponsor cooking contests. After sending out a press release announcing a competition for the best cookie or chocolate cake, a mailing went out to the store's customers soliciting entries. Food editors, professional chefs, and cooking teachers were invited to be judges. Both the winners and the winning recipes were publicized. Essay and design contests are also possibilities, such as a furniture store establishing a prize for student furniture design. Pie eating, pancake flipping, oyster shucking, and grape stomping contests make sense for restaurants. Dentists can hold smile contests, while video rental stores can stage movie trivia quizzes.
2. **Newsletters.** Another good way to promote, particularly for brokers, banks, and business consultants, is through newsletters. They demonstrate how much you know about your field and do it in a low-key, informative way. They help keep your company high in the consciousness of your prospects.
3. **Demonstrations.** Demonstrations are an option to attract people to your place of business, show them how to best use your product, and establish your credibility. A retail-wholesale fish outlet holds cooking demonstrations twice a week, featuring a different restaurant chef each time and attracting substantial crowds. Recipe cards are even given out. Wallpaper demonstrations, fashion shows, gift wrapping, refinishing, and computer demonstrations have all worked well for retailers selling products associated with them.
4. **Seminars.** Often more appropriate for business-to-business marketing, seminars are the commercial side of demonstrations. If you hold a seminar, follow these rules for success:
 - Schedule the event at a time convenient to most attendees.
 - Be specific in the invitation about when the event begins and ends, who will be there, and what the agenda is.
 - Follow up the invitations with personal phone calls.
 - Charge for the seminar to give it a higher perceived value.
 - Follow up after the event to get people's reactions.
5. **Premiums.** Also called an advertising specialty, a premium is a gift of some kind that reminds your customer of you and your service. There are thousands from which to choose: key chains, coffee mugs, refrigerator magnets, baseball caps, paperweights - just about anything that can be engraved, imprinted, silk-screened, or embroidered with your company name and phone number.
6. **Speeches.** Depending on your topic and market, you might want to speak before Chambers of Commerce, trade associations, parent groups, senior citizens, or other local organizations.
7. **Articles.** Another possibility is to write an article for a trade journal, reprint it, and mail it off to your friends, customers, and prospects. This positions you as an expert, and is a particularly good way to promote a consulting business.

8. **Bonuses.** If you have a restaurant, give away a glass of wine with dinner to introduce a new menu. If you sell to retailers, give them a display fixture with the order of a gross. If you sell office supplies, give away a new pen with a sizeable purchase. If you're in the cosmetics business, offer customers a free sample blusher when they buy mascara and lipstick.
9. **Coupons.** For best results, the price break should be significant - at least 15 percent. This is one of the least expensive ways to develop new trade and an excellent tool for evaluating advertising. However, one theory holds that coupons draw people who only buy discount and never become regular customers, so be sure to monitor the results.
10. **Donations.** Donating your product or service to a charitable cause often results in positive exposure to community leaders, charity board members, PTAs, and civic groups. While consumer products are desired most, many organizations also look for donations of professional service time. If you have a restaurant or a large meeting facility, consider hosting an event for a charitable organization. This works best if volunteers for that charity are potential customers.
11. **Samples.** No matter what you do to promote your business, giving potential customers a sample is an excellent way to attract attention and make a positive impression. In many cases, it makes just as much sense to spend your marketing and advertising dollars on giving out your own products instead of buying advertisements, especially if cash is tight. The key is to give samples to the audience you want to reach, i.e., software packages to computer user groups or nutritious snacks to health-oriented consumers. In the food arena, where one taste is worth a thousand words, firms now exist that test-market new products for large and small companies alike through in-store demonstrations. A good demonstration company not only keeps track of how much of your product was given away, but also submits detailed reports on what people said about the product and how much of it was purchased.
12. **Free Trials.** If your product is too big or expensive to give away outright, why not offer a free trial to qualified customers? Try shipping it out to prospects with no strings attached. Most people will appreciate the opportunity to try the product, and hopefully many will like it enough to buy it.
13. **Free Services.** If you can't afford to give away products, offering your services as a way of generating new business can also pay off. For example, if you own a retail clothing business, send out a flyer offering customers a free fashion consultation to draw them into the store.
14. **Special Benefits, Rates, or Notices.** Smart organizations go out of their way to make customers feel important and appreciated. Frequent flyer clubs are the most pervasive example of loyalty-building benefits for customers only; this method has been adapted by many kinds of businesses. Most software companies sell program updates to customers at discounted prices, and advance notices about sales, changes, or opportunities can help cement customer ties.
15. **Say Thanks.** One of the best ways to let customers know you value their business and encourage their continued patronage is also one of the easiest. It boils down to saying thank you in letters, mailers, surveys, statement stuffers, receipts, invoices, and in person.