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10 MARKETING IDEAS TO GROW YOUR BUSINESS

By Gregory Neil

While there are signs of economic recovery, there is still uncertainty for what the future holds. The downturns of 2008 and 2009 taught many the value of acting to survive in an ever-changing economic landscape.

Many restoration companies are finding it is increasingly difficult to work with insurance company programs.

Allstate started this 15 years ago with help from the corporate consulting firm McKinsey & Co (the firm whose strategic thinking made Enron). What many restorers are encountering is the “new plan” for handling claims, namely “Claims Core Process Redesign,” which is nicer way of describing a program to reduce any claim by 20 percent.

It’s no wonder this continues. In 1994, the average claim cost was almost 70 cents for every premium dollar. By 2006, this dropped to 43.5 cents for every dollar — transferring profits from the insured’s pockets to the shareholders’ and leaving some insurance companies with an increase in profits to more than 3,000 percent. Although legal action has been taken in many states, the practices continue with an offered defense of “respectful civil disobedience.”

Another common story concerns restoration companies that were doing well for so long. Then they began having trouble over the last few years and all of sudden are going out of business. Larger companies have the cash resources to withstand the costs of expanded marketing, leaving smaller companies the option of having to work extra hard, get really focused, and run lean to survive and keep up.

Marketing is surfacing as one of the most important parts of a business plan. What does a successful marketing campaign look like these days? Here are some recommendations from two different restorers’ points of view. Ben Justesen, CR, owner of Just Right Cleaning and Construction, comments on actions that drive leads into the business.

“There are really no secrets. It’s all the small things that you have to do, and you have to do them consistently no matter what. The reason I call these ‘all the small things,’ is because the

list is *inexpensive* to do and these simple things are *very effective*.”

1. **Making the rounds:** This is what most companies do, they have a route for their marketers to fill the candy jars or just go by to say hi to as many insurance agents as they can. Make sure to be consistent, otherwise they think you are only coming out to see them because you are slow for work. It is effective because people have to see your name as often as possible. Being genuine and establishing relationships is our secret to success. There is no job to sell here, just people to become friends with. Getting your estimators and even yourself get out to see your main targets develops more trust that you may realize.

2. **Newsletters:**

We create our newsletters in house. We have one newsletter for our carpet and duct cleaning division that goes to all of the customers we have ever had. We have one newsletter for agents, adjusters, real estate agents and property managers. We always have before and after pictures of jobs we have recently completed. Just another way to get your name out there on a regular basis.

3. **Internet:** There are so many things to put under this category that have little to no cost. Having a website is key, and then having as much content all over the Internet is what makes your website a great one. Then there is blogging, Facebook, Twitter, Super Pages, etc. All of these need to be pointed to your website. I have taken the time to go to all of the “yellow page” type sites to claim my company, put in the information, and ask a customer to give me a testimonial on that site. It now puts me at the top of the list with five stars.

4. **Customer appreciation:** We throw a party once a year and rent out the Aquatic Center in our area, have a BBQ and hand out a bunch of prizes. This is actually pretty inexpensive. Money is donated to the city, we get a free rental of the Aquatic Center and advertising all summer, we buy the food, and our suppliers and vendors donate the prizes. We get at least one person/family from every insurance agency in our area. Talk about effective, this year over 300 people showed up.

5. **Golfing:** This has been one of the most effective marketing tools we have. This can get expensive but it doesn’t have to. We sponsor two teams and a hole at six tournaments a year. We invite people who we would like to get business from and people who give us a lot of business. This makes for easy marketing when you get an agent or adjuster who really likes you to talk about you to potential agents and adjusters who you want to work with. You also get at least four hours of quality time to create some great relationships.

6. **What is your agent doing for you?**

Our company has been with one agent for more than 20 years. He has definitely given us work, but in the last five years it has really fallen off because his insurance company does program work and he doesn’t have control of referrals like he used to. I started talking to other agents to see who would prefer me to do work for their customers. I found an agent who I wanted to give my business to, and I have since received more jobs than I ever expected. It has been one of the best things I have ever done.

7. **Plumbers:** This is probably where we should all start our marketing efforts if you do water damage restoration. They, like the insurance agent, are the first line of defense for water damage. They can usually refer you before there is even a claim. Make sure to take care of them and as many of them as you can. Taking donuts (with the owner’s or manager’s approval) to a meeting to get to know the guys in the field is important. Their boss might like you, but if they don’t know you, you won’t get the referral.

8. **C.E.C classes:** This is such a great tool in our marketing arsenal. All agents have to

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have so many credits every three years. Why not get certified to do these classes for them, make them fun with free food, and get their attention for two to three hours. We do not charge them anything for this, and their alternative is to do it online and watch a boring presentation on a computer screen for several hours. I think that you will see a lot of them come for at least the free food.

9. **Get your employees involved:** This could mean a lot of different things, but if you give them an incentive, it is very easy for them to talk about what they do and you can give them a little sales training to make sure they are effective. Most employees will jump at the chance to get more training, and maybe a small referral fee every time they land a job. They usually talk to people off the clock, a win/win situation.

10. **Customer feedback:** Have a customer comment form. Our goal is to get all fives on a 1-5 scale. This is then given to the agent, plumber, adjuster and whoever else was involved in the claim to show them the great service the customer received. This is also marketed to let people know that they will receive this survey when the job is done. It takes a lot of discipline from everyone in the company to make sure it comes back, but it is well worth the effort.

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Jeff Farley, CR, owner of Custom Restoration and acting VP/COO at Four Star

Cleaning and Restoration, Inc., comments on how to keep existing business relationships alive, and answers the question — *Can restoration estimators effectively market and sell?*

“The short answer is yes! But every company’s marketing and sales strategies may differ depending on how they’re structured to produce leads and generate business. If insurance vendor programs supply enough leads to keep estimators busy, then maybe less effort is needed unless the business plan is crafted to grow the company.”

Some contractors choose to market heavily and not rely on insurance carriers to determine their sales volume. Personally, I believe relying solely on vendor programs is a mistake. Insurance companies’ personnel turnover, rule changes, and restrictions may leave a few vulnerable to a drop in business without warning. There are many companies who’ve lost a key account overnight and struggled to survive. It pays to protect one’s turf.

The world is more competitive than ever and every company should be marketing and sales-focused to ensure their survival during these tumultuous times.

While there is a long list of strategies to develop business, here are a few suggestions busy estimators (and even more critical for not-so-busy ones) consistently practice a few key habits that will enhance their success in finding and selling work.

Hot Points

- ▶ **Marketing is important to any business plan**
- ▶ **It doesn’t have to be expensive**
- ▶ **Be consistent with marketing efforts**

• **Plan an hour a day.** It will rarely be at the same time each day and without interruption. That’s ok.

• **Be consistent.** You’re investing in yourself. ASK. Always ask for the work, for a referral, for help in solving a customer’s problem, ask what they want to do, ask a lot of questions. If you don’t understand their answer, don’t nod and ignore, ask why, how, what, when, who, where? Ask and you shall receive. These simple ideas are sound, time-tested and not any great secret. They’ve been used for many years in many industries, because they work.

Estimators need to develop relationships everywhere, and no one can afford to cultivate only one-time customers. Develop a hopper system to track and follow up with contacts. Got 20 minutes? Send an e-mail to the top five contacts. Attach photos of how the company solved the customer’s pain on the last job and ask if customers have ever that problem.

There is plenty of software on the market to help manage and automate this. Multiple touches with a prospect are required to land most sales. Keep farming your prospects. Don’t wait until the company is out of work or slow. Regular, steady, consistent marketing wins the day.

And finally all the advertisements, golf outings, fishing trips, ball games, lunches, poker tourneys, slick brochures, candies and coffees won’t make up for poor performance. The best marketing is a quality job that involves clients with strong communication in a way they want. Become savvy with marketing positive outcomes. Shoot a 30-second video testimonial with and post it on the website or Facebook. Get customers to post positive reviews on Yelp. Don’t be the best kept secret in your market while prospects are searching for someone just like you. ■

Gregory Neil is the president of Gregory Neil Associates in San Anselmo, Calif. He gives employers and employees the tools to create win-win solutions for day-to-day operational challenges, empower employees to be the driving force of the business, and allow owners to “just be an owner” in the business. He can be reached at greg@gregoryneilassociates.com.

