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## Six Ways to Ease **A Cash Flow** **CRUNCH**

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# Seal The Deal!

## Secrets For Boosting Business-To-Business Sales



By Mindy Charski

If your micro-business sells to other businesses, you already know that marketing your products or services is essential and complex.

What you may not know is that b-to-b selling also requires getting personal with potential buyers.

“The big thing in b-to-b to remember is a lot of it is not selling in a traditional sense. It’s relationship building,” says Nedra Pope, a vice president at the b-to-b sales and marketing consulting firm Hunter Business Group in Milwaukee, Wis.

Fortunately you can tap many tools and strategies to help you build those relationships.

### Hone Your Message

First, take the time to evaluate the message you want to communicate.

“Understand your audience and give them something they’re going to find more interesting about you than your competitor,” says Gay Gaddis, president and chief executive officer of T3, an integrated marketing firm in Austin, Texas. “I think a lot of small businesses don’t stand back and say, ‘Why would that company use or need my service?’ They need to think about what is their unique selling point.”

While you probably won’t be able to tailor your pitch for each member of your target audience, you should be able offer a few versions to appeal to different groups within it.

“To the extent you can, the more specifically your message can speak to your audience the better your response rate is going to be,” says Pope.

You may be able to segment your potential customers by decision-making types, for example. Some buyers make decisions simply based on price, Pope says. Others buy only from brands they know, while a third set simply turns to companies from whom others are already purchasing.

“You may be sending out an e-mail that is essentially the same but has four or five different subject lines because each of the groups responds to a different aspect of your offering,” Pope says.

To best understand the language to use in your pitches – through whichever means you communicate them – chat with your current customers.

“Ask them what they liked about your offering. Ask ‘how would you describe to one of your peers the work we did or why you hired us,’” says Pope. “Generally companies tend to refer to their own offering differently than their customers do. You want to get their terminology, not yours, built into your [value propositions].”

### Seek Referrals

Your customers can help your marketing efforts in another way – through recommending your business to people within their organization and to other companies.

“Referral programs are one of the least expensive and most effective kinds of marketing that you can do,” says Judy Schramm, CEO of ProResource in Alexandria, Va., which provides virtual business support for micro-businesses.

Marketing expert Gaddis adds, “I think one of the most important things for a small-business person to focus on is there are so many giants out there . . . but if you can get in the door, and do a project or sell to one group inside the organization and do an awesome job, they’ll tell other people about you.”

### Reach Decision Makers

Finding those involved in purchasing decisions will take some work, and depending on your industry, there could be more than one person within an organization to which you’ll need to direct your marketing. In addition to the user of your product or service, for instance, there may be tech folks who want to ensure an offering would work with existing systems, and there’s at least one person with check-signing power.

To find these people, use the Web, talk to colleagues and network at trade shows. You can also gather names of prospects by purchasing direct-marketing lists.

A good resource for finding list rental information is the SRDS Direct Marketing List Source ([www.srds.com](http://www.srds.com)), which is sold through subscriptions and can also be found at some public libraries. Among the thousands of lists included in the database: Cleaning & Maintenance Management magazine recipients who are directors, managers and supervisors of cleaning services at various facilities, and the Medical Supply Purchasers Masterfile, of medical professionals who buy supplies and health information.

List prices vary, but they'll likely cost at least \$3,000. You may also find Hoovers ([www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com)) to be a useful resource for building prospect lists. Subscriptions start at \$75 a month.

Likewise, receptionists and administrative assistants can be helpful in directing you to the appropriate people. Keep in mind, however, these gatekeepers can also put the kibosh on your efforts, and that's another reason to have a strong pitch.

"You need to have a good description of your value proposition and what you're trying to do and what you can offer to convince the gatekeeper to let you talk to the decision maker," says marketing consultant Pope.

## Build Your Credibility

Giving a quick pitch over the phone or in e-mail can be a first step toward building credibility over time. The Web can help you, too.

Last spring Enquiro, a Canadian search marketing firm, asked North American buyers if they would research b-to-b purchase decisions online, and 85 percent said they would. The study also found that a vendor Web site is one of the most important influencers in a purchase decision.

"If you have a good Web presence, you have begun to establish credibility immediately," says Jim Smith, CEO of Ychange International, a Portland, Ore.-based small-business marketing consultancy. "It's kind of like using a Web site not necessarily as your storefront, but as a top piece of marketing collateral."

Participants of the Enquiro survey said the kind of facts they want to see on a vendor's Web site include pricing, product information, technical specifications and information on customer service. Consider also adding a blog to your site and contributing to the blogs of others to help you showcase your knowledge and experience.

## Communicate With Customers And Prospects

Schramm, who provides virtual business support for micro-businesses, is a proponent of using a "nurture program."

With such a program, businesses use direct mail to communicate every month with a small group of ideal customers, perhaps 100 to 200. The direct mail pieces vary and don't always include an offer. They may be about the business, for instance, or educational or customer case studies.

"You get those touches that are required for people to even remember they've heard of you, and they get a comfort level and understanding of what your business does . . . and they kick into the sales cycle," Schramm says. "That is a very cost-effective way for small businesses to market."

Also think about sending e-mail newsletters to potential clients, and enable visitors to sign up for them when visiting your Web site.

Gaddis, who is president of a marketing firm, is also a longhorn cattle rancher, and offers this tip: "If I were to do an e-mail thing tomorrow about longhorns, I would really kind of talk about the history of the breed, trends going on as far as longhorns, maybe their market use. I think there are some things we'd want to do to show expertise and understanding of that, but not be selling them all the time."

Be sure to send materials of value to stave off a backlash.

"The difference between junk mail and valued mail is entirely in the perception of the recipient," Schramm says. "That's why you put some effort into making sure you have a targeted list of people whom you have a reasonable expectation would want to hear from you."

You may find it helpful to send out promotional gifts to prospects. If you do, be sure to include all your company's contact information and send items your targets could regularly use.

When honing your marketing communications, avoid the common mistake of going after a segment that is too large for your budget.

"If you're targeting a market of 100,000 people and you have \$5,000 to spend on marketing, that's going to be hard," says Schramm. "If you're targeting a market of 1,000 people and you have \$5,000, that's not so hard."

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## Promote Your Business

Of course, it's also important to promote yourself in places or media where potential clients are searching for your kind of products and services.

That may mean booths at trade shows should be part of your marketing mix. Or, perhaps place ads in the print or digital versions of targeted publications like trade magazines and local business journals.

Your prospects are probably searching elsewhere online, too.

Nearly 70 percent of respondents to Enquiro's survey said they use search engines as a primary research resource, so consider buying text-based ads near the search results of keywords related to your business. Many search engines offer a pay-per-click option, which means you pay only when people click on your ad and are directed to your Web site.

You can purchase ads on general-interest search engines – Enquiro's survey found that Google is the preferred engine for the b-to-b purchaser – but you may also find success advertising on engines related to your sector, like ChemIndustry.com.

Choose keywords or keyword phrases people will be using at different stages of the buying cycle, Schramm suggests.

She offers this example regarding customer relationship management (CRM) software: When buyers are researching the problem, they may type in phrases like “stay in touch with customers” or “manage customer contacts.” When they know the solution, they might search on “crm software” or “client database.” When comparing alternatives, they could use “microsoft crm vendors” or “saleslogix vs. microsoft crm.”

You'll also want to have your Web site pop up among the search results, which is a harder proposition than purchasing nearby text ads. Making your site search engine friendly – like including important keywords in the first paragraphs – can help your site achieve good placement.

Ultimately though, while search engine marketing and your other promotional efforts can lead to sales, don't forget to keep your current customers happy.

“One of the great truths of b-to-b is that it is more expensive to get a new customer than to keep a customer,” says Pope. “You will absolutely get more return on each dollar you invest in your current customers than you will get on the dollars you invest in acquiring new customers.” ■

Mindy Charski is a Dallas-based freelance writer who promotes her services on her Web site, [www.mindycharski.com](http://www.mindycharski.com), at conferences, and in an industry-specific online directory.

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