

# AutoLaundry<sup>news</sup>

THE VOICE OF THE CAR CARE INDUSTRY

## MARKETING

# Outmarket

## The Big Guys

By Jay Siff

**I**f you're a small, independent car wash, you're probably convinced you can't compete in the marketing arena against multi-location competitors with their large ad budgets and greater visibility. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

Small, independent washes can not only survive, but thrive, in an industry increasingly filled with fewer, larger competitors. In fact, independents have unique advantages that can put larger businesses on the defensive. All it takes is an understanding of the advantages — and willingness to leverage them.

In my 15-plus years as a developer of marketing programs for local merchants, I've helped many independents make it against "the big guys" — even against national franchises. Most of the best ideas can be organized around a few key marketing principles every car wash owner or manager should know. Master them, and you can compete against anyone, big or small.

Using the disciplines outlined here, your establishment can attract new customers, regain lost ones, stimulate referrals, increase per-vehicle sales, generate repeat visits, build customer loyalty, and much more. I call them The 10 Commandments of Promotional Marketing:

### 1. Take Your Customer's Point of View

This commandment makes it to the top of the list because it's one of the most fundamental, yet most

often violated, disciplines of all.

How many times have you seen car washes touting "New Management" on window signs or in newspaper ads? Every time I see these words, I'm baffled as to who is supposed to be impressed. The customer? All it does is make me think about how bad the place was under the old regime.

When you promote your business, whether in flyers, on the street, or in a direct mailing, lead with what's in it for your customer — not for you. Don't say, "Buy an exterior wash and get a free wheel brightener." Instead say, "Get free wheel brightener with every exterior wash." People deal in their own self-interest. Make sure your offers reflect that fact.

### 2. Market to Your Current Customers

Every day, scores of people drive into your establishment who have already made the decision to patronize you. These are pre-sold, loyal customers. Allowing them to exit without asking for personal information — especially a street or e-mail address — is a big mistake.

Gathering such info is easier than you think. All you need is an incentive. It might be a "free detailing" drawing for those who drop their business card in a fishbowl, or a free gift certificate e-mailed to patrons who provide their online address.

Once you've built up your mailing list, you can issue any number of powerful promotions to encourage repeat visits or high-

er per-vehicle totals. Your goal is to make these past customers think of you first when their car or truck needs washing. Give them a good reason, and they'll come back again and again.

### 3. Be the Hometown Favorite

The essence of Local Store Marketing is connecting yourself to the pulse of your community. As a locally owned small business, you have opportunities chains often don't notice — or don't care to pursue.

It's a fact that people have a soft spot for neighborhood merchants who support local causes. Sponsor a community event. Spruce up your street frontage with flowers. Allow your employees to donate free washes to their favorite charity. Your support and good will, expressed in ways that are important to your community, will make your wash the go-to place in town.

### 4. Give Away Your Product

Have you ever considered that giving a 100 percent discount one time may be more valuable in the long run than a 10 percent discount offered on 10 occasions?

One of the best ways you can bring in new customers is to offer free washes for people who have just moved into town. These are folks who are trying to feel connected to their new community. What better way to discover the local car wash than to receive a coupon in the mail for a free wash with no strings attached?

You can also use a freebie to bring back past customers — or

to reward continuing patronage. Say you've noticed a customer who comes in four or five times a month for a wash. After a couple months of this, what if you approached the person at the checkout and said, "You're such a good customer, today it's on the house." You don't think that person will tell 10 of his or her best friends about the amazing service he or she received?

## 5. Practice "Four Walls" Marketing

Every part of your wash should be well thought out as to how it promotes your product. This gets people to spend more each time they visit.

Do you promote services where your customers exit their vehicles? At the cash register? Are special offers listed in the restrooms? Four walls marketing extends to the limits of your parking lot or property line as well. Is your street signage readable and well lit?

## 6. Be Outrageous

Wow your customers. Give them a customer experience so unique, so compelling, that they can't resist coming back.

T. Scott Gross, author of *OUTRAGEOUS: Unforgettable Service, Guilt-free Selling*, says that such experiences are created using four simple tactics: have fun, create traffic, involve the product, and do something good for others. And believe it or not, they can be achieved at little or no cost to your business.

Cold Stone Creamery has built a reputation on, among other things, singing servers. Volvo places work gloves in the trunks of its cars next to the spare tire, so owners don't have to dirty their hands when changing a flat. Zappos, the online shoe purveyor, has a 365-day return policy for unworn shoes — no questions asked.

## 7. Create a Swipe File

The old saying, "If you can't think of a good idea, steal one," isn't unprincipled when it comes to marketing. In the marketplace of ideas, strategies from other industries or professions can be of great use if you reshape them to fit your particular needs.

Hang onto ads or direct mail pieces that catch your eye. Take notes on effective promotions from businesses in other fields. Collect new service ideas. Put these items in a folder so you have a ready resource when brainstorming ways to stimulate your sales.

## 8. Track Every Campaign You Run

Since you don't have the luxury of throwing money at advertising, the marketing dollars you do have *must* provide a direct return on investment. And you can't manage what you can't measure!

Ask your new customers how they heard about you to find out if your ads are working. Whenever you run a promotion, collect the coupons or certificates and record day of week, part of day, and additional services rendered. Keep a pad or clipboard by the phone to record information. It's the only way to know which efforts are making you money — and which aren't.

Lastly, if a promotion is working, keep doing it. Too many car washes make changes too quickly. It's okay to *add* to an effective campaign, but don't stop a profitable effort until it's no longer generating results.

## 9. Don't Be the Coupon King


While we're on the subject of coupons, a word to the wise: while discounts and deals work well to stimulate sales, you must be careful not to overdo it and create a "discounter" image. If you do, your

customers will simply become hooked on coupons and wait for the next one to come along. In the meantime, your sales and profit opportunities suffer.

As for delivery media, coupon packs lump you in with scores of other coupons. That only dilutes your offer's uniqueness. Better to come up with a fresh, original idea, then deliver it to your best current and potential customers in a way that you become top-of-mind versus your competition.

## 10. If You Hire Professionals, Hire Proven Winners

If you're convinced you need outside help from a marketing or promotional firm, that's fine. But don't be fooled by empty promises or successes achieved for businesses outside your industry. Check references to ensure that the company in question has a track record of success helping car washes. Otherwise you'll likely be throwing your money away.

Also, guard against attractive promotional pieces that don't sell. Good design alone is never a reason to approve a marketing piece. Remember that a quick, handwritten note can easily outperform a slickly produced mailer. As a small independent, you have to base your decisions on what will generate a solid return. Demand results from every marketing effort you undertake, and you'll find your money well spent. 

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