

Ask SCORE

By Hal Theiste

There is a new Byline on this column starting today. Willy Campbell, who has so faithfully and expertly done this column since its inception, has decided to change his focus to other of his myriad interests. This includes more time on the tennis court, now that his knee is more reliable. I've been asked to carry on the work that he started of providing tips on how to get the most pleasure and profit out of the challenge of owning a small business. While I do not pretend to be able to fill Willy's shoes, I hope that you'll find the column will continue the tradition of caring about the backbone of America – the small business community – and that you'll benefit from the ideas and suggestions presented here. Willy, we'll miss you greatly, but we know we can count on you to continue the caring and support you have demonstrated for the small businesses in our beloved Sandhills. To begin this phase of the series I've chosen an important basic of business:

Make Your Marketing Materials Bring Your Business to Life

You never get a second chance to make a good impression, so don't stint when preparing identity and marketing materials for your business. Even something as small as an attractive business card will speak volumes about your approach to serving customers. So it makes sense for your brochures, information packets, Web pages and even stationery to convey a message of professionalism, talent and dependability. Let them present your business in the best possible light.

Of course, the types of identity materials you require are governed by the nature of your business and target market. Keep current on how similar businesses present their image to get in front of customers. Then decide how much you can afford. While you shouldn't scrimp on identity materials, spending extra money for elaborate pieces does not always guarantee results. Many commercial printers and copy centers offer designs that are both economical and effective. You may also be able to create some identity materials yourself using desktop publishing software, preprinted paper products and high quality home printers.

Here are the four most common types of identity materials:

1. Business cards. The most versatile tool in an entrepreneur's marketing arsenal, business cards may be handed to prospective clients, attached to mailings, posted on community bulletin boards and converted into print advertisements. While creative designs and paper will help your cards stand out, keep the content simple: your name and title, your company name and logo (if any), address, phone numbers, email and Web site. Consider including a brief slogan or tagline describing what your business does. Often overlooked is the fact that there is a back side to a business card – you may wish to take advantage of this “free space” for a special message.
2. Brochures. A simple, well-designed brochure can be a powerful way to tell customers about what your business does, your qualifications and resources, and (if appropriate) a price and delivery schedule. Keep your messages and themes brief and to the point. Brochures are intended to pique the customers' interest, not tell the whole story. Use inserts to supplement the basic brochure if you've got information that changes periodically and you cannot afford full-scale reprints of the entire brochure.
3. Stationery. Nearly every type of business needs stationery to communicate with customers, employees, vendors, consultants, colleagues and everybody else. Business letterhead is simply a must for your invoice, financial statements and other administrative filings. Strive for design consistency among the pieces by using the same typeface, logo or logotype, and colors.
4. Web pages. When marketing your services/products on the Internet, lay out your electronic pages in much the same way as your printed materials. Organizing material in an 8 1/2 x 11 inch format makes it easier for customers to download and print key data. And you'll be certain that your company's essential information appears on every page.

Want other ideas for creating the right image for your small business? Contact the Sandhills Chapter of SCORE “Counselors to America's Small Business”. SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association of expert business counselors who provide free and confidential business counseling to small business owners. The Sandhills Chapter is very active in counseling, mentoring and presenting free business seminars. You can reach the Chapter via the web at www.sandhillsscore.org or by calling 910-692-3926.

Remember – send your business questions to me at www.contact@sandhillsscore.org and don't forget to provide a way to contact you. I may not be able to answer all of them in this column but every one will receive a personal answer from one of our Sandhills SCORE counselors!