



How do I write a Marketing Plan?

Introduction

Marketing is a key part of business success. You need to decide which customers to target. You need to work out how you will reach and win new customers. You need to make sure that you keep existing customers happy. And you need to keep reviewing and improving everything you do to stay ahead of the competition.

Your marketing plan should be the reference document you use as a basis to execute your marketing strategy. It sets out clear objectives and explains how you will achieve them. Perhaps most importantly it looks at how you can ensure that your plan becomes reality.

Remember that marketing in itself will not guarantee sales, but by adopting a well-researched and coherent plan, you have a much better chance of building long-term, profitable relationships. This guide outlines the key areas to look at and what to include in an effective marketing plan.

Marketing plan summary and introduction

Your marketing plan should start with an executive summary. The summary gives a quick overview of the main points of the plan. Although the executive summary appears at the beginning of the plan, you should write it last. Writing the summary is a good opportunity to check that your plan makes sense and that you haven't missed any important points.

Business strategy

It's a good idea to introduce the main body of the plan with a reminder of your overall business strategy, including:

- What your business is about (your business mission)
- Your key business objectives
- Your broad strategy for achieving those objectives

This helps to ensure that your marketing plan, your marketing strategy and your overall business strategy all work together. For example, suppose your business strategy is based on providing premium quality products and service. Your marketing strategy and plan will need to take this into account, targeting customers who appreciate quality, promoting your product in ways that help build the right image and so on.

External and internal analysis for your marketing plan

Understanding the environment your business operates in is a key part of planning and will allow you to discern the threats and opportunities associated with your area of business. A PEST analysis helps you to identify the main opportunities and threats in your market:

- Political and legal changes such as new regulations
- Economic factors such as interest rates and consumer confidence
- Social factors such as changing attitudes and lifestyles, and the aging population
- Technology factors such as new materials and growing use of the internet.

You also need to understand your own internal strengths and weaknesses. For example, the main strengths of a new business might be an original product and enthusiastic employees. The main weaknesses might be the lack of an existing customer base and limited financial resources. A SWOT analysis combines the external and internal analysis to summarise your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. You need to look for opportunities that play to your strengths. You also need to decide what to do about threats to your business and how you can overcome important weaknesses.

For example, your SWOT analysis might help you identify the most promising customers to target. You might decide to look at ways of using the internet to reach customers. And you might start to investigate ways of raising additional investment to overcome your financial weakness.

Your marketing objectives

Your marketing objectives should be based on understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and the business environment you operate in. They should also be linked to your overall business strategy.

For example, suppose your business objectives include increasing sales by 10 per cent over the next year. Your marketing objectives might include targeting a promising new market segment to help achieve this growth.

Objectives should always be SMART:

- Specific - for example you might set an objective of getting 10 new customers
- Measurable –whatever your objective is you need to know if you have reached it or not when you review your plan
- Achievable - You must have the resources you need to achieve your objective. The key resources are usually people and money
- Realistic - targets should stretch you, not demotivate you because they are unreasonable
- Time bound - You should set a deadline for achieving the objective. For example you might aim to get 10 new customers within the next 10 months

Marketing strategy for your marketing plan

Your marketing plan is how you put your marketing strategy into practice. It should therefore be a practical reflection of your strategy.

If you understand the market well, you can probably break it down into different segments - groups of similar customers. For example, you can break the business market down into businesses operating in the same sector and/or of a similar size.

For each segment, you need to look at what customers want, what you can offer and what the competition is like. You want to identify segments where you have a competitive advantage. At the same time, you should assess whether you can expect high enough returns to make the segment worthwhile.

Often, the most promising segments are those where you have existing customers. See what you can do to expand sales to these customers. If you are targeting new customers, you need to be sure that you have the resources to reach them effectively.

Once you have decided what your target market is, you also need to decide how you will position yourself in it. For example, you might offer a high quality product at a premium price or a flexible local service. Some businesses try to build a strong brand and image to help them stand out.

Whatever your strategy, you need to differentiate yourself from the competition to encourage customers to choose your business first.

Plan your marketing tactics

Once you have decided what your marketing objectives are, and your strategy for meeting them, you need to plan how you will make the strategy a reality.

Many businesses find it helpful to think in terms of the four Ps:

- Product - what your product offers that your customers value, and whether/how you should change your product to meet
- Pricing - for example, you might aim simply to match the competition, or charge a premium price for a quality product and service. You might have to choose either to make relatively few high margin sales, or sell more but with lower unit profits. Remember that some customers may seek a low price to meet their budgets, while others may view a low price as an indication of quality levels.
- Place - how and where you sell. This may include using different distribution channels. For example, you might sell over the internet or sell through retailers.
- Promotion - how you reach your customers and potential customers. For example, you might use advertising, PR, direct mail and personal selling.

For a more comprehensive approach you can extend this to seven Ps:

- People - for example, you need to ensure that your employees have the right training.
- Processes - the right processes will ensure that you offer a consistent service that suits your customers.
- Physical evidence - the appearance of your employees and premises can affect how customers see your business. Even the quality of paperwork, such as invoices, makes a difference.

Implementation of your marketing plan

Your marketing plan must do more than just say what you want to happen. It must describe each step required to make sure that it happens.

The plan should therefore include a schedule of key tasks. This sets out what will be done, and by when. Refer to the schedule as often as possible to avoid losing sight of your objectives under the daily workload.

It should also assess what resources you need. For example, you might need to think about what brochures you need, and whether they need to be available for digital distribution (by email or from your website). You might also need to look at how much time it takes to sell to customers and whether you have enough salespeople.

The cost of everything in the plan needs to be included in a budget. If your finances are limited, your plan will need to take that into account. Don't spread your marketing activities too thinly - it is better to concentrate your resources to make the most of your budget. You may also want to link your marketing budget to your sales forecast.

Control

As well as setting out the schedule, the plan needs to say how it will be controlled. You need an individual who takes responsibility for pushing things along. A good schedule and budget should make it easy to monitor progress. When things fall behind schedule, or costs overrun, you need to be ready to do something about it and to adapt your plan accordingly.

From time to time, you need to stand back and ask whether the plan is working. What can you learn from your mistakes? How can you use what you know to make a better plan for the future?

Tips for writing a marketing plan

It is important for a marketing plan to:

- set clear, realistic and measurable targets - for example, increasing sales by 10 per cent
- include deadlines for meeting targets
- provide a budget for each marketing activity
- specify who is responsible for each activity

Make sure you think through each of your objectives logically. For example, you might set a target for the number of new enquiries. But if you don't provide the resources and training to follow up these enquiries and turn them into sales, you will have increased costs without any benefits.

Link to your strategy

Assess the business environment to identify the opportunities and threats that you face. Look for where you can capitalise on your strengths or where you need to overcome a weakness.

All parts of your business must work together. For example, if you have limited cash flow you should avoid seeking large orders from customers who demand extended credit or that will involve you in heavy, up-front costs.

Remember to focus on your long-term strategy. Reducing customer service might boost short-term profits, but next year you might not have any customers left.

Make it happen

A plan will not happen by itself. You need to make someone responsible for monitoring progress and chasing up overdue activities. Reviewing progress will also help you learn from your mistakes so that you can improve your plans for the future.

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