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Share & Share Alike: The Power of Partner Marketing *by Carol Arnold*

All businesses, regardless of the industry, have other businesses or partners with which they work including suppliers, distributors, or companies they refer clients to, etc. More than likely, just as you are, your partners are seeking to increase their sales and/or awareness cost-effectively. Whether you are a small existing company trying to increase your sales or a new venture seeking to gain traction, pooling resources and joining forces with your partners in the interest of mutual gain can be tremendously effective in garnering sales and awareness on a shoestring.

Depending upon the relationship, such arrangements can mean the simple exchange of web links or larger initiatives such as a joint event. However, critical to the effectiveness of your partner marketing strategy is selecting the right partners with which to work, developing the right marketing initiatives and setting the appropriate goals and expectations.

The Selection Process

The last thing I would want you or anyone to do is read this article and then contact every company you have ever worked with to drum up some joint marketing. Some of your partners may be a fit and others will not. Therefore, following are items you should strongly consider in a partner before pursuing any initiatives.

Is the company in question of like-mind? Do they share your common mission or goals and objectives? While you do not want a company that is identical to you, you do want your partner to have a similar value system and target market. For example, if you have an alternative medicine practice, it probably would not be prudent to align yourself with a pharmaceutical company.

Do they have a positive brand name and/or good reputation in their respective market? This is key. As the old saying goes, "You are the company that you keep." When you align your organization with another, you get the good and the bad. For example, say that a company you work with is well known for having an inferior product; by aligning yourself with that organization you are sending the message that you also have an inferior product. Linking with the wrong partner can damage your business if you do not choose wisely.

Do you trust your contact and their ability to meet goals and make things happen? All good business relationships are based on trust. Consider your history working with this individual and trust your intuition. If you are not comfortable with your contacts or do not trust their ability to fulfill their commitments, then consider seeking another contact or partner altogether. Remember, you will be lending resources

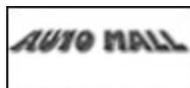
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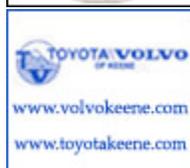
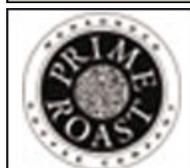
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(perhaps staff time or monetary) to this too and do not want to lose out.

What to Do?

You have made a list of suitable partners so now what? It is best to formulate specific ideas before making contact as people usually respond better to specific ideas rather than just, "Hey, let's do some marketing together." Of importance will be to explain what you would like and what the partner would get in return. The type of initiatives you formulate will vary greatly depending upon the type of relationship you have with the company in question and your resources. Especially if you are a small company working with a much larger partner, it is often best to start small and prove yourself as a good partner first before shooting for the moon since you may be riding on their coat tails. Following is a list of ten cost-effective ideas to consider exploring.

1. Provide an article or advertisement for newsletters.
2. Plan and market a joint seminar or event.
3. Exchange customer lists.
4. Do a press release announcing your partnership.
5. Split a booth at a tradeshow.
6. Share an advertisement in a publication read by mutual target markets.
7. Include product or service information (flyer, brochure, etc.) in each other's shipments or at their location.
8. Cross-link web sites.
9. Share a joint direct mail or email campaign.
10. Gather complementary products and services (yours coupled with others) and promote them as a package.

The opportunities here are endless! For example, say that you own or manage a music school. Seek to partner with organizations that also have an interest or footprint in this area and together put on and promote a music event sharing costs and resources. Another example...let's say that your product is now available at a store it wasn't previously. Do a joint press release to local publications announcing that you have partnered with this particular store and they are now making your product available to their customers. This is inexpensive to do and both parties win.

Setting Goals & Expectations

Upon the selection of your partner(s) and the identification of specific initiatives, you will want to outline all of the details of the initiative including what, when, where, how much and the goals you wish to achieve. Then, share this information with your partner to ensure you both are on the same page and divide and conquer. For example, if you are doing a joint seminar, consider all of the ways you can promote such a seminar through both of your resources. If you run weekly ads with a newspaper and the client has a newsletter, be sure to

consider both vehicles for promoting your event. In addition, you will want to divvy up costs fairly and ensure that these expenditures are in the budget of all involved. With so much going on a daily basis, it is also very important to set deadlines for each step to ensure critical elements are completed and constantly revisit each line item to ensure that items are being accomplished. I highly recommend signing a contract, which stipulates all of the details so that should your partners fail to hold up their end of the deal you have recourse.

If done correctly, partner marketing can be a powerful tool for increasing your sales and awareness. In fact, many large companies such as Microsoft have entire departments dedicated to marketing with their thousands of partners. By sharing costs and resources, companies can make their existing resources go even further and can cost-effectively achieve their goals. As the old adage goes, two heads are truly better than one.

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