

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH



Working exclusively in sign and print innovation, business development and the sale of sign and print businesses offers me somewhat of a unique insight into the dynamics and heartbeat of what's happening in the industry. Over the last five decades we have witnessed many inconsistencies and a great deal of innovation. These have always been cornerstones to the general conversations that we have with clients.

Most of this dialogue we have with customers comes with inevitable questions like, 'Are you finding the industry generally busy around the traps?' This leads to, "We are dead quiet; do you have any suggestions as to a solution for us?"

Other questions we get asked include:

- There seems to be a lot of price driven business happening now, are you finding the same?
- I'm having difficulty finding good-quality people to fill roles in my business, do you know of any?
- With the cost of goods going up it appears to me our customers are expecting prices to be decreasing, are you hearing the same?
- Workplace, health and safety issues and the business needing to be compliant is killing us, what are other people doing to solve this problem?
- There is a ridiculous amount of companies going into insolvency currently, what is the solution or protection we need to put in place?
- I'm thinking of selling my business what do you think it's worth?

I'm confident you understand my point. These and many more questions continually occur with suppliers, colleagues and customers. Nothing has ever changed! The questions are asked and answered ... but are they?

There's an old saying I appreciate, "There is no simple answer to a complex question!" It is reasonable to therefore assume there is no simple, one size fits all solution to the predictable questions that are generally asked when the going gets tough. Sure, there is the retort, "the tough get going!"

Going where, or even how do they get going?

A good example of the paradoxical catch 22. The definition of a catch 22 is a situation whereby there is no good quality solution available due to the factors and the way they relate to each other. The example I like is, "you have to spend money to make money!"

Or is it simply that rule 101 of marketing isn't being applied? It is our view that, where the tough get going to is in fact marketing.

Having been presenting seminars to the sign and print industry for over 20 years, I generally finish my presentation with asking one question to the audience. That question is, "How many people here spend more than 1% of their turnover on marketing?" The show of hands generally indicates it is less than 3-5% of the audience. Considering most people who attend seminars are generally wishing to enhance their knowledge and skills, it is therefore reasonable to consider they do work on the business to improve it.

So, if you accept that as a baseline, then 95% of the marketplace you are competing against do not do any marketing. In my observations, around 5 to 10% of the customers who we do business with are exceptional and highly profitable businesses. A simple conclusion is that they consider marketing critical and in fact, an everyday occurrence or consideration.

Invigorate your business with these ideas

We are not presenting these in any order as each business's individual circumstances will dictate the priority of how any of the ideas are best used, adapted and fine-tuned. A

suggestion is to read through all the ideas below, add a few of your own and then prioritise them so you get the biggest bang for your buck.

Think of it this way, it is not necessarily about pushing your products or your services. It is in fact, more about adding value to your customers' business. If you think the business you are involved in is making signs or print then let me suggest that's only part of it. We suggest you are in the business of showcasing your customers' brand, image, logo and products to their customers. Once you take that perspective, we suggest you will see how the vision should be through your customers' eyes and how it benefits them, which in turn is the by-product of you helping them.

Take a good look at yourself

Step back, and take a good look at your own business appeal. There is very little point in putting in a lot of work to show your customers how you can improve their branding, image and sales, if your own presence in the marketplace isn't first rate. Step outside and have a look at the front of your building, review the look of your motor vehicles, how is your own personal presentation? Be constructive as to your view on how you should be perceived by your customers.

Be consistent

Never confuse your image with your own personal desire to be creative with each new sign you create. Design ego often gets in the way and it's very easy for a sign and print company to end up with an array of several different design concepts across their own signage and branding. Create a classic



image for your business and stick with it for a period of time. A revamp of your branding isn't a bad thing, however several variations or reincarnations of your own image at the same time sends a very bad message to your clients.

SM – Social Media Presence

If you choose not to be on social media and use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube, then you do so at your own peril and for your own reasons. Unless you have a profound reason why not, we can promise you this ... your successful competitors will have a social media presence! Just to quote one statistic – Instagram has 1 billion users and over 100 million views per day. There are compiler products that will enable you to post once and have that post sent to several platforms. We would certainly agree that social media has a particular demographic of the marketplace driven not just by age, but by content and its value to the reader.

EDM – Electronic Direct Marketing

One of the best assets that your business can have is a good quality email database of your current customers. Typically, for less than a cent, you can then contact your customers on a regular basis offering a showcase of your business or special offers to help them grow their business. Unlike your social media presence, an EDM is direct, personal and quantifiable. There are a host of good quality low-cost products like Mail Chimp, Constant Contact and a host of companies like us, who can help you put the content together at a very low cost per campaign.

SEO – Search Engine Optimisation and your Website

Nowadays, it's more than just having a website. More to the point, it's about having a website to act as validation. Once you decide what your website is all about, you basically have four main options.

ebrochure – is your website going to be just an online brochure linked to your social media? If so, it is easy and low cost, but definitely a part of the marketing mix.

Transactional website – will it be an online portal where the site offers a transactional value to your customers like download information sheets, survey forms, product templates so that customers can supply work or other value added uses.

Online shopping cart – forget about the failures of the past, as the marketplace is now ready for people to purchase online. Without a doubt the ratio of sales online versus traditional face-to-face sales is increasing daily across all categories. The early failures of online shopping coupled with the huge initial setup costs sent many an early adopter into liquidation. Nowadays, template shopping carts are commonplace, low-cost and reliable.

Design and order online – the Holy Grail of websites for the sign and print industry is offering a full end-to-end service to your customers by delivering products they may choose to design using an online design tool. In extreme cases, these can offer a fully integrated end-to-end purchase to output process including an online payment gateway. That is the future for certain categories across the sign and print manufacturing area.

We would suggest that more than 80% of the sign and print websites we visited are out of date and obviously untouched or even maintained for years. Please, if you do have a website, keep it current otherwise all the SEO effort will be wasted. The fact is, if you are regularly doing SEO work on your site – well, you are going to be found!

Think Mobile and Agile

The typical lifespan estimated for a website is approximately 3 years. It's not unusual to see websites that are completely out of date and irrelevant. If you're thinking about today's users, your website must suit mobile devices. The generally accepted term is having a 'responsive' website. This means your website will scale between a desktop and whatever mobile device is being used. Likewise, by considering how your clients are going to read an email that you sent, then think what that email will look like on a mobile device. The very nature of communication has changed enormously and will continue to challenge

your thinking to how best interact with your customers.

Know your competitors

There is a distinct difference between opposition and competition. A competitor who is proactive in the marketplace, shows leadership and offers an impressive position in the marketplace, is one you can learn from. We are not talking about trying to be a detective, we are suggesting a watchful eye could add value to your own business. As far as opposition goes just forget about them, as you can't run forward if you're always looking over your shoulder. Concentrate on your business and how your business can help your customers grow their business.

Promote referrals

There is an urban legend about the McDonald's phrase, "would you like fries with that?" that it is reputed to claim that this single statement offers a 35% increase of business to the stores who ask that question consistently. You could choose a phrase that fits comfortably with you like, "would you like a promotional banner with that order?" Offer your customer a reason why the banner could be an advantage to their business. Or an alternative is talking to the customer about how pleased they are about what you just supplied them. Then ask if any of their colleagues may need signage and therefore ask for a referral. I learned many years ago from an industry legend 'what you don't ask for, you don't get!'

Build value into your life's work

After 50+ years of having been in this business, I have built, bought and sold many businesses successfully. May I suggest to you that, one day you may want to sell your business. So, what value is that business going to be worth? There is a simple formula, and we sell several businesses every year for our clients. I'd like to leave you with the simple premise - that if you run your business like if it needed to be sold tomorrow - would achieve top dollar for your life's work? Then perhaps you would probably look at it differently. In reality you would probably ensure that everything was prepared, systems in place, you paid yourself the right salary and ensured your business was as they say, "prepared for sale". Then and only then will you achieve what you deserve out of your life's work!

As I stated earlier in this article "you have to spend money to make money!"

We are offering a free 1 to 2-hour consultancy in our office in Pyrmont to discuss your strategy for business growth or direction. Please take our self-assessment test or email me on john@controlzone.com.au with "The tough get going!" in the subject line for a return call and to set up a meeting.