

Help and advice



Leo Aspden on marketing in a weak economy

Cutting your nose could spite your face!

HEADLINES about the global financial markets and economic downturn are sadly all too familiar. I read recently that the king of all brands Coca-Cola is cutting its international marketing spend by \$500m over the next three years for the 'long term health of the business.'

Major house builders, manufacturers and retailers are all looking to reduce spending until they see light at the end of the tunnel.

But businesses should be warned not to throw the baby out with the bath water, 'the baby' being the competitive edge of eroded by first class customer service. As boar drooms around the globe consider ways of taking cost out of the business they should also consider how customers interact with their business.

Cost or investment: Is marketing a cost to the business or an investment? Whichever side your company sits on this fence determines its approach to marketing and ultimately the quality of service it provides to customers.

Cutting spending may be a justified necessity in certain areas, but management must have a clear understanding of the expectations and needs of its customers.

When things get tough many businesses revert to crude spontaneous tactics to generate short term extra sales. But they would be better advised to seek the true value that good marketing can bring by understanding their

target market and audience, the key drivers to purchase and how customers want to be serviced.

Customer service: When the squeeze is on it is easier to alienate your customers. Some companies have already reduced spend on in-house teams. Okay, but how effectively can you still service your customer's needs? How long will it take you to deal with their enquiry, or respond with samples or literature? When customer confidence is lost, it's much harder to regain.

How about that all important shop window, your website? Most businesses recognise the need for a website, but few have a planned website maintenance and update program. If the content on your website is no longer relevant or up to date, often you don't get a second chance, because potential customers just browse on, probably to your competitors.

I recently had a meeting with a view to joining a particular business trade body, to be followed up with what I understood to be a meeting to confirm everything and join up. The buying signals were all there! Yes I would like to go ahead (couldn't be more obvious!)

However, the follow up call was made by a third party caller who wanted to arrange for someone to come to see me to explain all the benefits (again, as I still needed convincing).

After finally convincing them I just wanted to go ahead, the appointment still had to be set.

I asked for confirmation to be sent by email. The email did not arrive and the meeting had to be rearranged. The call centre operative then became obviously more frustrated when it was difficult to find a convenient date that would suit his client, not me! That is simply poor customer service; it's as simple as that.

The way forward: In short, businesses need to ensure that marketing assists them in understanding who they should target, with what messages and how. Short term increasing of promotions may provide some light relief but may only be delaying the inevitable.

I recently read a comment from a marketing colleague, which suggests that when things get tough, firms should 'look after their best people, their best products and their best customers.' I absolutely endorse this and would highly recommend that businesses invest time ensuring that they understand who these three groups are within their own organisation. **CFJ**

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Dids MacDonald on patents within the flooring sector



Taking a lesson from James Dyson

MANY top flooring firms invest in patents to protect the technology behind a successful brand. Key players have recognised that patents are an essential ingredient in the intellectual capital which underpins their continuing success and position in the market place.

Frederick Mostert in his excellent book *From Edison to Ipod*, says: 'A patent essentially protects an invention, typically new or improved products or processes in the field of science and technology. Patent protection generally covers functional or technical features of these products and processes.'

Inventor James Dyson, for example, based his business survival strategy around the filing of and the worldwide patent protection of his inventions.

This he started in 1980 and his place within world markets has been assured and made stronger as a result. Dyson explains the importance he places on inventions on his website www.dyson.co.uk.

Should you apply for a patent?: If you invest heavily in a new product or process which you believe is completely novel, do consider a patent strategy. Novelty is a key criterion for a patent to be granted.

The other criterion for an invention to be patentable is an inventive step – which means that it must be something more than just an obvious modification of something that has already been disclosed to the public.

Applying for a patent can be protracted and expensive so beware. Only 25% of patents applied for are granted, so risk assessment is key.

Going to market without adequate protection could leave your company open to competitors who may steal the intellectual property.

Also remember that, if you require finance, most investors insist on a registered patent right to offer all round security.

The invention must be functional or technical and must be capable

of being made or used in an industry. Above all you must not have made your invention public in any way.

Some inventors 'test' the market at an exhibition or through other routes and the consequences have been catastrophic when they discover that they cannot now apply for a patent.

However, discussions with patent agents, intellectual property lawyers or national or international IP offices are completely confidential and will not render your patent having been disclosed in public.

How to make a patent application: Firstly consider what markets you want protection in. You need a patent for each country you want protection for.

Normally, start in the UK; then seek to extend the patent to other countries; you must make a second application to cover other countries within 12 months of your first application.

Before applying for a patent:

1. Write a detailed specification

containing a full description and drawings describing and illustrating all the aspects of your invention. Describe all the features of your invention. You may not add further information once the application has been filed;

2. Ensure that your patent specification enables the reader to fully understand your invention and put it into practice;

3. File claims of the patent within 12 months of applying. The claims set out the breadth of your invention;

4. Your patent specifications are complex technical documents and should be drafted by IP experts or patent agents. **CFJ**

Next month I will explain what must happen for a patent to be granted?

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