



BOB HECHLER

Target Practice

One supplier warns distributors on the importance of clearly targeting their sales efforts.

It's December of a few years ago. I just sold my paint company. I have two children in college with another about to enter. What's next? Enter the advertising specialty industry and begin promoting umbrellas. What else could there be?

It seems like a lifetime has passed since I made that decision, but in reality, it was just less than three years ago. Thrust into an industry of almost equal size to the U.S. paint market, I incorrectly assumed that by simply attaining a reasonable market share, I would help generate a comfortable lifestyle for my partner and me. After all, if you have a great product, it will sell itself, right? Wrong.

The reality is that the promotional products market comprises a diverse, cluttered, multifaceted opportunity with an extremely low barrier to entry, and a rapidly changing distributor and supplier base. A hefty percentage of the products sold rely on price, and the art of selling has been compromised by the often destructive practice of price cutting. This is a shame because it reduces

the importance placed on actually selling. When people are truly selling and partnering with their customers, revenues and profits will surely be better than when they're simply selling commodities based on price. In general, there is a lot going on in the pursuit of the \$18.6 billion dollar market, and an opportunity exists to distributors that want to help reduce the clutter with focused, targeted programs.

I have heard from many distributors that one or more of the following issues

to the customer and industries you want to win business from. In the past, I worked to develop a target marketing program focused on the end-users of paint systems to help the selling process and provide confidence. Why not extend this to promotional products?

We have selected the top 19 buyers of promotional products and created a specific sell sheet for each of those user segments. From the pharmaceutical market and the financial industry to health care, ad agencies and education, we have

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are negatively impacting their business: Their salespeople are leaving, their top customers are sourcing direct or being acquired, there are more distributors working their same geography. Sound familiar?

No matter how big this industry is, or how fast it is growing, to remain competitive, a distributor must constantly increase their sales penetration into existing customer segments, and ideally, concurrently expand into segments they do not sell. The only way to do this is to do strategic selling and marketing.

As I thought about the similarities between my past and the ad specialty industry, I realized that the fundamentals of selling are universal, and sometimes even great salespeople need a little help or boost of confidence. The key is to specifically tailor your marketing efforts

a different and targeted sell sheet for each of the 19 markets to help distributors formulate their sales and marketing plans.

The simple and focused graphics and text will assist distributor salespeople trying to increase sales to existing customers and give them confidence when approaching new segments. We have even included a space on the back page that can be personalized by each distributor to contain their contact information. This feature will help build loyalty among their customer base and position distributors as the expert for specific markets.

And that expertise, along with a little strategic marketing, will help distributors avoid the dangerous price trap that too many unfortunately succumb to. ○

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Do you have an opinion that you'd like to impart to the industry? We want to hear it. The Voice of the People column is the place for industry practitioners to weigh in with their views. Send in an article of about 500 words to Andy Cohen at acohen@asicentral.com. Please include your name, company name and ASI number, as it could be included in a future issue.