



Sales & Marketing: How to sell more, more, more

Let the best ideas of Canada's fastest-growing companies lead you to sales and marketing success.

What does it take to outrun the competition? Canada's Fastest-Growing Companies have used diverse sales and marketing tactics to do so, everything from throwing wild parties to empowering techies to deliver the sales pitch. Here are their best ideas:

Stop chasing marginal clients

You'll sell more if you focus on your most lucrative customers. But to do that, you'll need to spend time up front identifying those customers, and not allow yourself to become distracted by chasing after less promising prospects.

In the spring of 2009, [RIFCO Inc.](#) (No. 71 on this year's PROFIT 100) noticed an upsurge in calls from auto dealerships on the hunt for financing for vehicle buyers. Bill Graham, president and CEO of the Red Deer, Alta.-based firm — which supplies dealerships with auto-purchase loans for customers to whom the banks won't lend — says the recession had put many rival lenders out of business. There was just one problem with this influx of new potential clients. "As an indirect lender, the dealerships have a lot of control over our business," says Graham. "And we didn't want to be dealing with just anybody."

RIFCO decided to put in the hours needed to figure out which dealerships it did want to deal with, and its sales reps tripled the amount of time they spent pre-qualifying dealerships. For instance, sales reps asked each one not only how much business it did but how much of that business RIFCO could count on if the two were to work together. If a dealership wasn't prepared to commit a large enough slice of its loan portfolio to RIFCO (Graham won't reveal how much), the sales team was instructed to stop pursuing that relationship. Instead, the firm focused on those dealerships that had agreed to give RIFCO more business.

The result? Over the past year, RIFCO's average sales volume per dealership has soared by 50%.

Make bloggers your BFFs

Want to get more out of your PR expenditures while generating some low-cost buzz? Harness the power of the blogosphere, recommends David Mandelstam, president and CEO of [Sangoma Technologies Inc.](#) (No. 142), a Markham, Ont.-based manufacturer of tele-phony hardware.

A PR firm helped him identify the best-read blogs on the tech industry. Mandelstam now sends press releases to a handful of influential bloggers three or four days before a release's official launch. He then follows up with a personal phone call to discuss the news.

"Bloggers are more likely to cover your business if you give them a scoop," says Mandelstam. He cites as examples securing a contract with a major international client, providing a service in a new way or hiring a well-known talent from a rival company. "A blogger's capital is interesting information."

This tactic costs little — the time required to write and e-mail a press release, and then make a phone call. And the payoff is tremendous, says Mandelstam. He says after a renowned blogger posts news about Sangoma, four or five prospective customers or potential investors per day call his firm. That compares with just one call a week at other times from people in these two categories.

Go postal for prospects

In the age of WTME (way too much e-mail), good old-fashioned direct mail can be a surprisingly effective way to get noticed. [360 Visibility Inc.](#) (No. 117) had generated few sales leads from its e-mail and telemarketing campaigns, so it switched to a new tactic its president, Lynn Cooke, calls "high-impact direct mail."

The company sent postcard mailers to the 3,000 businesses located closest to its offices in Vaughan, Ont.

offering a "blind date" with one of 360 Visibility's enterprise-software consultants. Cooke says the firm got a solid response rate to the mail out's offer of a free consultation of 40 to 60 minutes in return for a coffee date.

As well, to attract attention from hard-to-impress marketing communications agencies, Cooke's team created "360° Boxes" that include a company brochure and a small object — be it a cork, a cookie or even a calculator — that moves around when the box is shaken. The idea was to make the recipients so curious about what was rattling around inside the box that they would open it.

This method is costly: Cooke estimates her firm couriers up to 5,000 boxes to agencies each year. But she says this tactic yields a 4% response rate, versus just 1% from previous e-mail and telemarketing efforts.

Sex it up

Putting two barely clothed male models in a shower in the middle of a crowded trade show while serving booth guests espresso and liquor hot shots might not be the right sales tactic for everyone. But for [Leeza Distribution Inc.](#) (No. 98), wild party stunts such as its shower-themed trade-show booth at the 2009 Interior Design Show (IDS) have helped fuel rapid growth. Mark Hanna, president of the Montreal-based distributor of high-end countertop and flooring surfaces, says throwing risqué parties is a practical way for style- or design-oriented companies like his to build an image as a creative trendsetter.

This year, the firm bypassed the influential IDS altogether. Leeza instead hosted a "Seven Sins" party before the convention that featured stripper poles, half-naked models in body paint and strip poker. Hanna says that there's a method to this party madness. "Parties give us the chance to showcase our core values of passion, risk and creativity," he says. "And they give us a cool factor that distinguishes us from our competition."

Leeza budgets \$50,000 to \$90,000 per party, whether on a convention floor or at an exclusive nightclub. Hanna says the return has been well worth it. For Leeza's two most recent parties, it set targets for the number and value of contracts it wanted to secure, and met those goals within a few days.

Turn your doers into sellers

One way to ensure that your sales team stands out from the competition is not to have a sales team at all. That's the approach taken by [IT Weapons Inc.](#) (No. 178), a Brampton, Ont.-based provider of IT consulting and network services.

One of the biggest sales challenges CEO Ted Garner faces when trying to land an IT-consulting project is differentiating his firm in a saturated market. What's more, because the sales cycle for his rivals is months-long and meetings-heavy, potential clients are often "meetinged out" even before his firm has had a chance to sit down with them.

So, right from the company's launch in 2000, Garner cut sales reps out of the equation entirely. Instead, he has technical employees at IT Weapons handle sales calls and informational seminars. This requires hiring techies "who are good at everything, including sales and communicating with customers," says Garner.

He says these employees have proven highly effective at sales, which is one of the keys to his company's rapid growth. Of course, there's no way to run a controlled experiment to discover how quickly IT Weapons would have grown had it used traditional salespeople. But Garner points to two impressive outcomes of the approach his company took.

One is that IT Weapons' sales cycle is roughly half that of his competitors' — just over a month, because his techies are able to answer virtually all a client's technical questions right off the bat. The other is that his customer-attrition rate is "almost nil," even though his company is rarely the least costly choice.

Make Google your sales force

Few entrepreneurial firms can match the sales and marketing budgets of large, established competitors. But online advertising methods such as pay-per-click (PPC) can make effective advertising more affordable for growing companies.

Eight years ago, when Ario Khoshbin began marketing Revanesse, an injectable skin plumper to combat wrinkles, he knew that he lacked both the people and budget to compete with the legions of sales reps employed by his big pharma competitors. So, the managing director of [Prollenium Medical Technologies Inc.](#) (No. 111), an Aurora, Ont.-based manufacturer of cosmetic medical products, opted for a decidedly cheaper method: PPC.

Prollenium markets its products almost exclusively through PPC advertising, care of Google AdWords and Yahoo! Search Marketing. Khoshbin buys specific search terms such as "derma filler" on major search engines and pays only for click-throughs to his website. "It's an extremely effective way to advertise," he says.

For \$2,000 per month, Prollenium draws about 50,000 visitors to its site — up from just 1,000 before it used PPC. Khoshbin estimates that PPC drives 90% of his sales.

"For our first four years of operation, it was the only way we marketed our business," he says. Today, Khoshbin also allocates some of his marketing budget to trade shows, using them for the networking with clients that PPC, of course, can't deliver.

Turn clients into sales reps

The best way to build credibility is to let your customers do it for you, says Kevin North, president and CEO of Toronto-based [Dyadem International Ltd.](#) (No. 136). "Our customers are the best salespeople we have," says North, whose firm develops industrial risk-management software.

For the past three years, the company has woven client testimonials throughout its marketing efforts, including endorsements on Dyadem's website, in case studies and in joint press releases. The firm also teams up with clients to co-host events such as webinars and seminars at which clients brief industry audiences on how Dyadem has helped them overcome specific challenges in managing risk. North says the testimonials have yielded significant year-over-year increases in qualified incoming leads.

North advises against surprising a client by asking for a testimonial at the end of a project. Rather, he or one of his staff plants the seed early on. They tell a new customer that Dyadem markets itself almost exclusively through testimonials, and that it may ask for a good word once it has proven itself to the new customer.

North also advises building "multi-layered" relationships with clients. "You want people from different levels within your organization building relationships with people at different levels in their organization," he says. This helps build a network of supporters within a given client, making it more likely its people will be willing to go to bat for you when you ask.

Set up a private network

As your client roster expands, it becomes tougher to communicate effectively with all of them. "We ran into our limit very quickly," says Doug Walker, a principal at [Green Grass One](#) (No. 89), a buying group and retail-services provider for pro shops at golf courses. The Mississauga, Ont.-based firm has 324 clients, up dramatically from the 40 it serviced in its first year.

The 18 sponsors of Green Grass One count on GGO to deliver a high participation rate among the pro shops for sponsor promotions. But by last year, participation rates were lagging, and GGO concluded it needed a better method than e-mail to communicate with its clients.

So, the firm installed a private social-networking platform called IGLOO. This site not only allows the company to communicate with its customers and suppliers, but for them to communicate with each other.

With this tool, GGO can now post promotions with a single click rather than having to send multiple e-mails, and it's easier to hold contests to boost participation rates for promotions. As well, the pro shops use IGLOO to share marketing tips with each other, such as by posting photos of their promotional displays or product-launch events. Walker says that adopting IGLOO has increased his clients' participation in promotions by 25% to 50%.

"The burden of communicating with our customers has been lessened, but the volume and quality of our communications has increased," says Walker. It took GGO a modest \$15,000 and less than two months to get IGLOO up and running; Walker warns that a purpose-made social networking platform for business can cost up to \$150,000 and take up to six months to roll out. "Buying an existing platform might cost you 10% in functionality," he says, "but it saves you exponentially more."

Offer proof of your claims

Many firms swear that they save their clients money, but IT Weapons is one of the few that actually proves it. The company turns almost every project it completes into a case study demonstrating how it has helped the client cut costs.

After wrapping up a project, a staff consultant spends from half a day to two days doing a free "audit" of the client to determine how the service provided has saved the client money for a specific job function. The consultant then writes a brief case study that IT Weapons uses as a sales tool for prospects with similar requirements. IT Weapons bills the consultant's time to its own marketing department.

"Our case studies enable us to sell with truth and proof," says Garner. "It's referral marketing at its most effective."

Unplug sales bottlenecks

The biggest thing holding back your sales effort may be inefficiencies in your own processes. [Mi5 Print & Digital Communications Inc.](#) (No. 99) of Markham, Ont. figured out that its biggest bottleneck was preparing estimates for its commercial printing services. "Our customers were complaining they weren't getting quotes fast enough, our estimators were complaining they were overwhelmed and I was complaining about the company's resources being eaten up by the quotation process," says Mi5 president Derek McGeachie.

The problem was that the sales team, having made the initial customer contact, wasn't empowered to provide quotes. This meant that even simple jobs took up to 24 hours. McGeachie decided to merge the sales and estimating departments, and invest \$100,000 in estimating software. The latter made crafting quotes easy enough for salespeople to handle. They now do their own estimating, while traditional estimators handle incoming calls. Because the bottleneck was so extreme, says McGeachie, his salespeople didn't kick up a fuss about having to add estimating to their duties.

Mi5 can now do estimates — and, often, close deals — on the spot, or within 30 minutes at most. And, says McGeachie, the number of complaints about Mi5's estimating process has fallen to almost zero.

Work now, get paid later

[ThinkWrap Solutions Inc.](#) (No. 18) took a calculated gamble last year, when shrinking consumer spending hit several of its clients hard. The Ottawa-based e-commerce consultancy decided to keep servicing those online retailers, even at a substantial loss, betting that they would reward ThinkWrap once their sales rebounded. Although the company applied this tactic during a recession, some of your clients may hit a rough patch that leaves them strapped for cash even in good times, forcing you to decide whether to stick with them.

ThinkWrap's CEO Steve Byrne chose four longtime clients whose businesses he knew well enough to be confident they would stage a comeback. His firm continued to work for these selected clients at a loss throughout 2009 to help them boost sales and improve their e-commerce systems. ThinkWrap worked for free for 10 weeks to help one struggling firm improve its online store. The cost: \$100,000. In the three other cases, says Byrne, his team provided a total of about \$150,000 worth of free services "to help stressed clients whom we believed would become strategic relationships downstream." ThinkWrap continued to charge its usual rates to other clients that hadn't been as sorely affected by the downturn.

By late 2009, Byrne's newly recovered clients began steering a number of long-term contracts and high-profile projects generating recurring income his way. "We believe these investments will come back to us," says Byrne. "Clients have long memories, especially if you go to bat for them."

Help clients sell to their clients

If your business is supplying components to manufacturers, you probably don't have direct relationships with the end-users of your products. But that doesn't preclude marketing to those end-users. The key is to enlist the manufacturers in the process.

When specialty-door maker [Amdor Inc.](#) (No. 197) ships to the emergency-vehicle manufacturers that use its roll-up doors, it loads more than just the doors onto the trucks. The Burlington, Ont.-based company also includes demonstration videos that the vehicle manufacturers can show to their own clients, such as fire departments. Bruce Whitehouse, Amdor's president, says this encourages end-users to ask for specific optional features made by his firm when they order emergency vehicles.

Amdor absorbs the cost of producing the videos — typically, only a few thousand dollars a pop. And Amdor ensures that the video prominently features the vehicle-maker's branding along with Amdor's. "We employ our customers to do marketing for us," says Whitehouse. "And because their logo is on it, too, there's something in it for them." This cooperative marketing strategy has helped transform a sideline for Amdor — interior cabinet lighting for fire trucks — into a significant sales driver over the past few years.

Practise extreme cold calling

Charles Chang says there's nothing like pitching your business in person to help you land new customers and launch productive and long-lasting relationships with them.

The president of Port Coquitlam, B.C.-based [Sequel Naturals Ltd.](#) (No. 32) should know. During the start-up phase of the whole-food supplements manufacturer he founded in 2001, Chang visited almost 700 health-food stores across North America, racking up almost \$60,000 in travel costs over about 400 travel days.

"It was constant prospecting for two years straight," says Chang. Before he lined up a distribution firm to set up appointments for him with store managers, Chang booked hundreds of meetings on his own, using lists supplied by a health-food industry association he belonged to.

An effort this demanding wouldn't be every CEO's cup of tea. Yet, for a chief executive who has a knack for selling and operates in a sector in which close connections with customers are crucial, cold calling on such a colossal scale can work wonders.

Chang says that by the end of Year 2, he had signed contracts with 1,000 stores, including ones he had met through his distributor contacts. He made such powerful connections during his high-octane prospecting years that most of those relationships have endured to this day.

"There's no substitute for a face-to-face meeting," says Chang. "When people can see your passion, they're more likely to do business with you."