

## SALES SAVVY FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

### Selling Essentials for Your Service-Based Business

The service industry is one of the fastest growing sectors of the North American economy. From childcare services and adventure tourism to business coaching and computer repair services, a wide range of service-based businesses are meeting the needs of modern consumers. The service sector is strongly supported by two important buying groups - affluent baby boomers willing to spend money on things they don't have time to do and which make them feel better, and the growing number of retirees with considerable disposable income and very specific needs.

There are distinct challenges to selling services compared to products, however. One of the most important is that you are selling something intangible - a service is much harder to market than an actual product. For this reason, it often takes more time and effort to convince customers of the benefits of buying a service compared to a product. How you distinguish yourself from the competition is also quite different from marketing a product-based business. Ultimately your customers should be drawn to the experience of doing business with you as much as they are to the actual service you provide.

#### **Tip #1 – Make It Real!**

***Consumers instinctively want to see, touch, taste or feel what they are buying. You need to turn that intangible service into something tangible.***

For some service professionals this is simple. Graphic artists, commercial writers and interior decorators, for example, can present their portfolio – often through a website – as a means of showcasing their work and provide tangible evidence of their service. If you are a mediator or alternative health practitioner, you can't show your clients a successful divorce settlement or improved health, however, you can make the benefits more obvious by providing tangible testimonials. Your professional designations and/or business memberships noted on your business card or posted on your office door provide credibility. They are a visible reminder of the knowledge and experience your customers are getting when they buy your services.

***When customers cannot see or try out your service before buying, they need to be convinced they are making a quality buying decision.***

If you're selling house cleaning services, for example, you might provide a guaranteed response time and a promise that the job will be done right or done over with no questions asked. Another approach is to provide a physical product in conjunction with your service, like the dentist who provides a toothbrush at every visit (imprinted with their name and contact information) or the interior decorator who provides a bottle of wine to each client to enjoy in their "new home." If you

operate a spa, you could provide a discount coupon after each visit as a thank you and to encourage repeat business.

## **Tip #2 — Be Remarkably Different**

***While accountants, massage therapists and other service professionals can't create an exciting new model of service like a new model of car, how you market and deliver your service can be a major competitive advantage.***

Make sure your target market knows that you will come to their home or office to do their books so that they don't need to take valuable time away from running their business if that is a service you offer. Be sure they are aware of the diverse expertise within your coaching business such as your public speaking ability or the fact you are a Certified Human Resource Development professional. Remind them how you differ from the other spas in your area as the exclusive supplier of that environmentally-friendly skin care line they sampled in your salon.

After seven years operating her successful salon and spa in Port Alberni, Michelle LaPointe was ready to take her business to the next level. She purchased an old heritage house and transformed it into a funky retro style salon and spa while still keeping the traditional twist that attracted her clients in the first place. Along with the new location and new attitude came a new name for the business – EM Salon and Spa. 'EM' stands for Everyone Matters. "I am always looking toward the customer's needs and desires," Michelle says. "I've learned that countless unseen details are often the difference between mediocre and magnificent."

Michelle employs another technique many businesses can use to demonstrate their competitive advantage – formal recognition among her peers. In 2006, she placed fourth in the Small Business BC Business Plan Contest, an achievement that confirmed her business concept and strategy, and showed her customers they were associated with a winner.

## **Tip #3 - Sell the Experience**

***In today's time-strapped society, consumers want to enjoy every waking moment, from the necessary task of meeting with their accountant, to stealing an afternoon to spend at the spa.***

Much has been written about consumer buying choices determined by the actual and perceived "buying experience." The way they are treated can be as important to them as the actual service or product they are purchasing. Make the most of this opportunity by ensuring a pleasant environment in your waiting area with the use of attractive decorating and upbeat music. Use rich textures and colors, exotic plants and appealing scents in your salon treatment rooms or provide a latté for your customers while they have a pedicure. Consumers today are willing to pay for an experience that makes them feel unique, pampered and valued.

Rhonda Johnson, co-owner of Batstar Adventure Tours in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island, exemplifies how to sell an experience and support it with exceptional service. “We provide well organized, relaxed and fun trips to breathtaking wilderness locations,” Rhonda points out. “Guests invest their most valuable commodity – their vacation time – with us, so our mission is to give tremendous value for that time. We make sure every detail is taken care of right down to the selection of tour group members.”

#### **Tip #4 – Cherish Your Client Relationships**

***People tend to buy from people they like and consider trustworthy, credible and honest.***

Your reputation and how you conduct yourself is an extension of the buying experience you provide, and is paramount to the sales process. Building relationships through participation in business groups and community clubs and organizations can fast track your profile and put you top of mind when customers need someone who offers your particular service. Use your networking and presentation skills to let the world know not only what service you offer, but what they can expect in dealing with you.

When Sarah Zimmerman started her business, Saz Communications, in Terrace, she knew her networking skills would be key to both identifying her target market and to her ongoing marketing. “I asked a lot of questions of prospective clients to determine the need,” she says. “I also realize my reputation as a business person is critical to getting hired. I *am* my product.”

It’s equally important to nurture the relationships with the people whose business you’ve already earned in order to keep them as customers. If you have potentially long gaps between the times when you are providing your services – selling their house or doing their books, for example – you can “touch” your customers and remind them you are there and ready to serve them in a number of ways. Regular e-newsletters offering tips and information; thank you notes for the referrals they send you, and taking clients out for coffee on occasion enhance and remind them of the positive experience of doing business with you.

As you become aware of what attracts customers to your service-based business, you will develop a comfortable way of describing what you do, and discover where your time and marketing dollars are best spent. You **are** your business, after all; it is a reflection of your dreams, talents and everything you are.

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*All examples cited are BC business owners who have volunteered or been profiled at Women’s Enterprise Centre events.*