

THE SIX KEYS TO COMMON SENSE MARKETING

Good marketing is a cornerstone of business success. You can be the best multi-tasker, accountant, even negotiator, but if you don't have a sound marketing strategy based on meeting the needs of a clearly defined target market, you aren't going to sell much of anything to anybody. And like it or not, a business has to sell stuff to survive.

While developing marketing strategy requires considerable research and thought on the part of the entrepreneur, it's not rocket science. There are some basic common sense principles at work. In fact, although some experts out there will tell you differently, a lot of marketing boils down to concepts that you already know and, in fact, most likely already use in your day-to-day lives. The secret is in knowing how to use them to maximize business potential.

Women's Enterprise Centre has identified six keys to common sense marketing.

Marketing Key #1: Specialists make more than generalists

Intuitively this makes sense, doesn't it? Let's look at an example. Let's say that Jayne owns a high-end gift store and has concentrated for several years now on gathering a unique collection of quality art and collectors' items. She is to the point, today, where her eye for beautiful, one-of-a-kind pieces and her talent in getting them are well known to the public, other retailers and the media - and also to the many satisfied customers she's served over the years. Jayne has won awards for the quality and flare of her shop.

Sally, on the other hand, also owns a gift store but has never liked to put all her eggs in one basket. Gifts are gifts and people have very different tastes, she always says. She's not about to cater to any one type. Over the last few years, Sally has sold some high-end stock, some middle-of-the-road stock, some trinkets and even a novelty item or two. She prides herself on the variety in her store. She is known as a multi-purpose gift seller and does, in fact, offer all manner of items in all different price ranges, many of them at the lower end of the scale.

So now, let's say that my friend Jennifer and I are talking over lunch one day and I mention to Jennifer that I've finally put away enough money to buy my spouse a really extravagant gift. I have a vision in my mind of something unique, with real character and elegance - something he will really value. I want an extraordinary gift and I don't want to scrimp. I ask Jennifer if she can recommend a store to me. Whose store do you think she'll send me to?

If you said Jayne's, you're right.

What if I had said to Jennifer that I had a party to go to and was looking for a modest gift for the hostess? Say I told her I needed something nice but didn't want to spend a lot of money. Who do you think she'd refer me to then?

Most likely Sally. You see there are markets for both stores. The difficulty, from a small business standpoint, is that un-specialized enterprises like Sally's – and particularly those that attempt to compete on the basis of price – must rely on high volume sales to turn a profit. And quite often, a small business just doesn't have the resources to support high volume sales. Success is more likely to come from a premium price/high quality strategy that may well generate lower unit sales volumes overall.

The specialists-make-more-than-generalists key hinges on the fact that there is a higher perceived value attached to specialists. The thinking is that if that's all a business does, they must do it very well. As a result, specialists get more and better referrals than generalists. People are comfortable referring others to companies they are confident will do a good job. Happily, a specialist with a reputation for doing good work builds a whole contingent of unpaid sales people that is constantly drumming up new customers and work for them.

Marketing Key #2: Work the Marketing Success Pyramid

Some of the best ideas for a business fail, not because they are bad ideas, but simply because the business owner didn't know who to sell her products and services to, how to reach those people and what to say to them when she did.

Bottom line, if you don't do your homework, the result is often a lot of wasted time, energy and money.

Whatever product or service your business provides, you must find the right market to sell to – the people that have a legitimate need for what you have to offer and that will appreciate those things that you do particularly well.

Finding that market *and getting to know them* requires research. There's no getting around it: research is critical to effective marketing strategy and action.

Let's look at an example. Amy owns a family hair salon in a busy strip mall location that offers hair styling as well as basic aesthetic services like manicures and pedicures. She thinks that if she adds facials and massage services it will increase her revenues substantially.

After all, many other salons in her town have done so in the past few years and they are thriving. So, she hires another aesthetician and a massage therapist and leases the space next door to expand her business.

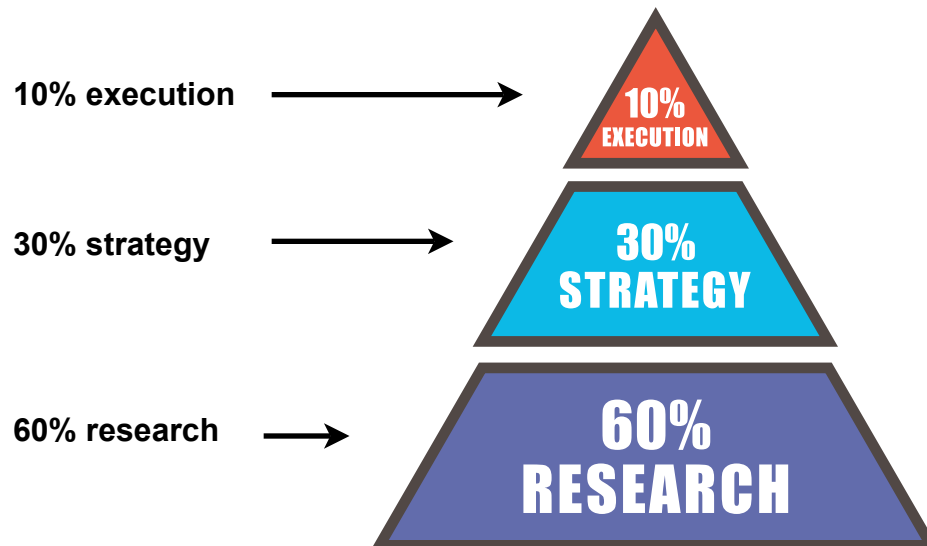
The added cost of the new salaries and space leave her with little marketing budget to promote the new services, so she focuses on her existing clientele with in-store sign-age and word-of-mouth to let people know about them.

After six months, the new services have not significantly increased either her client numbers or her sales, and the additional costs are negatively affecting her bottom line. Amy is not sure why the new services have not been successful.

To understand why let's look at the second key to common sense marketing:

Work the Marketing Success Pyramid

This key states that marketing success comes from:



Research = identifying and coming to understand your best potential customers

Strategy = figuring out the best message to deliver to the best customer at the best time and in the best way

Execution (or tactics) = delivering the message

The only sure way to arrive at good marketing is through research.

Otherwise, it's hit-and-miss - trial-and error.

To work the marketing success pyramid you need to:

- start with a little internal research: what do you want to accomplish with your marketing; what are your personal and business goals?
- break the big market into manageable chunks; divide it up into groups that differ from each other according to when, where, how and/or why they would buy from you
- pick your target group or groups: those people whose wants and needs are matched particularly well to your strengths and your goals
- decide what you want to say to your target customers: create a message
- figure out how and when to say it so that you reach your target customers when they are making a buying decision: plan your tactics
- follow your plan
- track your outcomes

Let's take a little closer look at these steps.

It is very important that your marketing strategy, whatever it is – and whatever it is likely to produce – is consistent with your priorities and your motivators.

If, for example, you need a certain level of income, your marketing strategy is going to have to support that. If you need a certain amount of time with your family, it will have to support that too.

Once you look internally, it's time to look outside – to the marketplace. Who are all the people who might buy your products and services? How can you break this large group into smaller groups that differ from each other in terms of either why or how they would buy your products and services?

Separate potential customers from each other according to their purchasing motivations and behavior specific to your products and services. This is called market segmentation.

People who are new to marketing often segment their market according to the tried and true demographic characteristics: gender, income, age, and location.

But unless those factors are relevant to how, when, where or why a person would buy from you, they are not valid segmenting characteristics for your business.

In Amy's case, her personal and business goals were to provide new services for her existing clientele and increase the volume and revenue of her business. She didn't conduct research that would have helped her to understand her existing clientele and to judge whether or not the new services would appeal to them.

In fact, she had no idea who the new services might appeal to or why. She mistakenly looked at all salon customers as a generic bunch with all the same needs and motivations. If the customers at other salons wanted these new services, then surely hers would, too.

Turns out her existing clientele weren't looking for the new services and, by focusing her promotional efforts on them, Amy never reached other segments of the market that might be.

Worse yet, she may have confused some of her established customers by bringing in services that didn't interest them and, perhaps, by failing to ask them or anticipate what they would like.

Had Amy conducted market research, she might have learned that the most likely clients for facials and massages are professional women. Perhaps it is these women who go to spas regularly for appearance reasons and a retreat-like experience from the hustle and bustle of work responsibilities.

She may have learned from her research that another high-volume market segment for massages and facials are high-income, unemployed women with the time and money to pamper themselves.

She might have identified several market segments overall: people who get massages and facials as an infrequent treat and pay their own way; those who get them infrequently with gift certificates, as a treat from someone else; those who get them occasionally with friends/spouses/groups as a social outing; those who get them regularly for therapeutic reasons, etc.

With all this knowledge, Amy could have made an informed choice: cater to her existing clientele with new services they would appreciate; or, target a new market segment.

Ways in which she can do both is: design her salon to offer the kind of experience clients would want, create a message that would appeal to those people and deliver that message through vehicles they are most likely to come in contact with.

It comes down to this: a business has to focus on its customers - who they are and what they need. The only way to find this out is through research.

Once you understand your target customers, you're in a position to speak directly to them and their needs, not only through promotion, but also through the types of products and services you offer, how you present them, your prices, your location, everything about your business. That's your strategy.

What to say, who to say it to and when and how to say it so that it produces the desired result which often, in the case of business, is a sale, are your tactics.

If you've done all your research and planning, the actual implementation of your marketing tactics is little more than a formality. All the work has already been done and the guesswork has been, as much as it can be, eliminated. Now you just follow your plan.

You do want to make sure, when you implement your plan, that you have ways of tracking your results. That's how you know whether your strategy is sound and you are following the right path with your tactics. Is the plan working? If it is – great! You've got a strong foundation to build on.

If it isn't, you have a good indication that something is off. Either the target market you selected can't support your goals for the company, or you don't understand them well enough to reach them effectively when they're making the buying decision. Hence, you will find yourself back at the drawing board.

Marketing Key #3: Find and Focus on Heavy Users

The third key to common sense marketing is to find and focus on heavy users. Small businesses have limited resources and it's just not possible for them to be all things to all people. If you are a soloist (i.e. you have no employees) you are probably keenly aware of the fact that there's only so much of you to go around.

That's true not only of your time and energy, but also of your money. You have to pick and choose who you're going to market to so that you get the best return on that investment of time, energy *and* money.

Finding and focusing on heavy users means concentrating your efforts on those customers who have the potential to buy the most from you. It's the widely-accepted '80/20' rule, or Pareto principle, and it applies just as well to marketing as it does to anything else.

Basically, the 80/20 rule dictates that 80 per cent of your business revenues will be generated by 20 per cent of your customers. That's because, of all the people who may buy from you, there is a core group for whom a precise match exists between what you offer and what they need. That match has, as its foundation, an appreciation on the part of those customers for the things that you do particularly well.

It also takes into account your ability to reach and communicate effectively with those customers at the time they are making their buying decision; and your ability to supply your product or service in the way they want to receive it.

The flip side of the 80/20 rule is that 20 per cent of the potential customers with whom you don't have a good match, could use up 80 per cent of your resources should you attempt to convince them that you do. Why? Because the match isn't there and no amount of bending over backwards is going to change that. Not unless you're willing to change your business entirely and cater to a different group.

Here's an example. Let's say that Joan is an artist who produces and sells one-of-a-kind sculptures that often grace the front of prestigious office buildings. Joan can produce 10 sculptures in any given year.

Joan has a friend who loves her work and wants to help her connect with some important contacts. She invites Joan to a dinner party with ten people, two of whom are developers of high-profile commercial properties and would have a need and appreciation for the sculptures that Joan creates. In fact, together, these two developers would probably be able to purchase eight of Joan's 10 sculptures. The other eight people at the party are from a variety of professions, some of whom might consider purchasing a sculpture, but likely no more than two.

Joan knows that she won't have time to get into any kind of meaningful conversation with everyone at the dinner party, but thinks she could realistically do so with two of the guests. Which two do you think Joan should talk to?

If you said the two developers you would, of course, be right.

As straightforward as all this sounds, you, as a business owner, may feel reluctant to focus on a particular group of buyers because:

- A) you haven't yet identified your best customers
- B) you don't have, or don't think you have, the hard evidence that one customer group could possibly represent 80 per cent of your sales
- C) you are afraid that focusing on one group, to the exclusion of others, will alienate too many potential customers
- D) you are having a hard time making the distinction between marketing to a particular group and selling to just one group

The last two points are closely related. You may be thinking: "Aren't the low volume buyers just as important? Isn't their money just as good and, if you add them all up, don't they still make a big difference to my bottom line? Besides, what's the harm in catering to everybody?"

The answers to these questions are "no", "no" and "plenty." Potential customers outside your core group do not represent enough business for you to direct valuable resources toward them. Again, you have limited resources and your time and effort would be best spent on the people who will buy the most.

There is another reason for not attempting to be all things to all people. When you do, you dilute your identity. It becomes hard for potential customers to tell who you are and what you stand for.

You weaken the perceived match between what you offer and the particular needs of your best customer group. Suddenly, when those target customers look at your business, you don't look quite as attractive. You haven't designed everything especially for them. They may even be unsure as to whether or not you're right for them after all.

None of this means that you can't or shouldn't sell to lower-volume customers. If they want to buy from you, the more the better. It just means you shouldn't attempt to speak directly to these customers through your marketing.

Marketing encompasses everything that impacts the way the outside world perceives your products, services and business overall:

- the products and services themselves, including how they are packaged;
- the prices you charge;
- the way you distribute your products and services – anything from personal service at a storefront location to C.O.D. shipping by courier or mail; and,
- the promotion that you do, which includes your advertising.

All these things must be consistent with your best customers' priorities, wants and needs.

So who are your best customers?

In marketing lingo, this group translates to your target market. You've probably heard the term before.

Your target market is generally made up of those customers who:

- buy the most and/or the most often;
- spend the most;
- are the best match to your strengths and your vision for the business;
- are large enough, have enough money, etc. to allow you to achieve your financial goals for your business.

Your job is to identify these customers and find out as much as you possibly can about who they are, where they are, how they buy, when they buy and what makes them tick. Once you have that information you can tailor your business to them.

The selection of an appropriate target market is critical to your marketing success. It allows you to work smarter, not harder – to use your limited resources in the best possible way and to get the results you need to reach your goals. And, think of the stress relief! The sooner you can learn to separate high-potential customers from low-potential, the faster you will grow a profitable business.

Marketing Key #4 Better Marketing = Less Selling

The fourth key to common sense marketing recognizes that better marketing equals less selling. What this means is that *if* you:

- have identified the target market whose needs are a fit to your strengths;
- know who those people are and what makes them tick;
- have figured out how to reach them so that you are top-of-mind at the time they are making their buying decisions; and,
- have developed a message that is meaningful to them,

then the amount of effort you have to spend on selling, in the traditional sense, is minimal. In other words, with a strong marketing strategy, your days of cold calling for new business are probably numbered.

This is good news for many small business owners. Interestingly enough, a lot of entrepreneurs, both successful and unsuccessful, are introverts. These are not people who 'live to sell'. Rather, they are more likely to be people who 'sell to live'. Quite often they got into business because there was a particular thing they were good at or really enjoyed doing: the bookkeeper who is a numbers whiz; the seamstress who adores sewing; or the fitness centre owner who can't get enough exercise. The 'hard sell' wasn't a part of their dream package - and it's probably not part of yours.

It's important to know that marketing and selling are not the same thing, although they are often discussed as if they are. In fact, there are fundamental differences between the two. Marketing is all about strategy, two-way communication and forming a relationship with customers. You learn about your target market, what they want and need, and then you try to match everything about your business as closely as possible to those wants and needs while staying true to your own strengths, principles and goals.

Selling, on the other hand, is an activity. I present you with my product or service and you decide whether or not you want to buy it. Many would argue that it's not quite as simple as that but the fact is that marketing is much more multi-dimensional than sales. When you look at marketing as a way of developing a relationship with your customers, you can see that good marketing involves finding a way to effectively communicate with them.

So, for all you introverts out there who find it difficult to "push" your product or service and feel you just can't sell, relax! Concentrate on communication and on finding common ground.

The fear of rejection

For many people, even communication can be scary when there's a risk that the person we're talking with might reject us. This is as true in business communication as it is in personal. It is not unusual for us to have difficulty separating the things that we say and do, our business, our products and services, from our selves.

What this means is that when you are attempting to communicate the value of what you offer to someone else, and there's a chance they are going to say they don't want it, you get nervous. If they reject what you're offering, *you'll* feel rejected too and that will make you unhappy. It's a rare person who chooses to be unhappy.

Fear of rejection is said to be the number one human fear. It is the reason that things go unspoken in all manner of relationships - including those between a business person and a potential customer. Even if you happen to be an extrovert, you may find it difficult to put yourself on the line and risk rejection. It has nothing to do with whether or not you believe in your product or service. It has everything to do with offering a piece of yourself to another person who may turn it down.

The good news is that if you've done your homework, and you have strong evidence that the person you're approaching needs and/or can benefit from your products and services, the odds of you being rejected are considerably reduced. Still, there's a chance. What if... they say no?

No one likes to face rejection. In order to be successful in business, though, you have to learn not to take the 'no's' personally. Maybe there wasn't a match after all. Or maybe there's a better way to communicate. Either way, you're still intact and will live to tell the tale. Better yet, you have some new information that you can use to evaluate and improve your marketing.

It is the inability to separate objective reality from emotion that immobilizes many people and keeps them from communicating effectively with potential customers. Always remember, you are not a failure because someone doesn't want to buy from you in any given instance. If you believe that you are, though, your fear of rejection can overwhelm you. It can become so consuming that it begins to colour all of your communication.

You might find yourself subconsciously giving up before you've started, asking why you'd even bother approaching potential customers when you know they're going to say no. Or, when you do approach them, you might lose your focus, get distracted, begin to mumble, forget that you're just trying to communicate a match between a benefit and a need - and render yourself ineffective.

You don't go into business for that kind of torture or stress. Wrapped up in a nice little package, now you're dealing with, not only a specific fear of rejection, but:

- fear of failure;
- poor self image/lack of confidence;
- a fear of criticism; and
- presentation anxiety

When our fears take hold of us we may revert to procrastination. Have you ever put off calling a potential customer by telling yourself: "I'll call later - it's too early (it's lunch time or it's too late in the day). It's just not a good time to talk to them; they probably aren't in a very good mood. Next week will be better..."?

When you take a step back from all this it can seem a little silly, can't it? How could the simple act of communicating information that you believe will only be helpful to another person, create so much dysfunction? Let's look at an example.

Lisa Smith just loves miniature dogs. It was this love that led her to open "Little Daisies", a successful online store specializing in supplying the owners of tiny pets with teensyweensy, little outfits and other supplies. After four years of robust online sales, Lisa feels she is ready to tackle the retail market. She wants to open her first 'real' store in Vancouver, in an area that is highly populated with small pets - an area where she believes demand for her products will be high.

Lisa reviews her sales records and does a considerable amount of market research to discover that Vancouver's Yaletown district houses a large number of small pets and their owners. Perfect, she thinks, deciding to go for it and follow through on her plans to open a retail store. She finds a bright storefront space and sets up shop, only to discover a few days later that there are two other pet stores in the neighbourhood.

Suddenly, what seemed like the perfect location now seems 'iffy' at best. Lisa is having second thoughts, wondering if there really is a market for her store after all. Dejected, she believes she may have been wrong to expand.

A few curious potential customers come into Lisa's store and she smiles at them, secretly afraid to engage in conversation for fear they will turn right around and leave. And, in fact, they do leave, not because she spoke to them, but because she didn't. Fred, down the street is much more welcoming. He likes to chat with people about their pets and, although he doesn't have the little extras that the miniatures' owners are looking for, he makes them feel important and appreciated.

Lucky for Lisa, Fred is a good guy. He has more than enough business and knows that Lisa runs a specialty shop that is no threat to his own much larger pet supply store. He goes to see Lisa, compliments her on the great concept she has and encourages her to put out a neighbourhood flyer letting people know what she has to offer them.

Fred suggests that Lisa include in there a reference to the Little Daisy online store because many of the local residents have likely already purchased from her there.

Lisa is very grateful for Fred's help but says that she thinks maybe she should wait awhile to get established before she starts putting out flyers. In truth, she dreads doing any kind of formal advertising in case it confirms that there really is no market for her in Yaletown. She even questions Fred's motives, thinking that maybe he's encouraging her, just to watch her fail.

Lisa doesn't put the flyer out. With the same certainty she once had that her retail business would succeed, she is now convinced that it will fail. And that's just what would have happened, were it not for Fred who, seeing Lisa's shop as complementary to his own, refers many customers to her as a part of his own customer service. These are customers that would have otherwise never known Lisa was there.

Mastering the art of communication

How do you master the art of the customer communication? First, you have to identify and come to understand the potential customers whose wants and needs closely match what is best about your products and services. Once that's done, all that remains is to communicate the match. 'Selling' becomes easy and effortless because you're talking to people whose best interests lie in what you are selling. Rejection is minimized. You get enough successes under your belt to feel confident in your communication.

Targeting the right audience is the best way to overcome fears of business failure.

A couple of tricks you can use to ease the way include:

- **Thinking optimistically.** Fortunately, entrepreneurs tend to be an optimistic bunch and research has shown that people who are optimistic generally outsell and outperform their pessimistic cousins. Sadly, pessimists often view themselves as realistic - completely justified in what can be an overly cautious and fearful approach to communication. Pessimists give up quicker and miss opportunities that can lead to success.
- **Understanding the nature of communication.** It is a creative process. Good communicators know that in order to be successful they must be receptive to different circumstances, personalities and information. They must be flexible and, yes, creative, in tailoring their message to the audience so that it will be heard. Whether that message comes through telephone calls, advertising, signage, displays, written presentations or slide shows, it's important that it be framed in a way that is meaningful to the audience. How can you set the stage so the connection is made? It can be very challenging - and also a lot of fun.

A few other tips for effective communication with potential customers are:

- Build long-term relationships with your existing clients who will provide repeat business, good references and referrals.
- Develop your ability to speak clearly and sincerely about your product or service.
- Know your products and services inside and out and understand what makes them unique and desirable to your target market.
- Seek out mentors who have an affinity for business development. Model them.
- Become a very good listener - successful communicators listen to and understand the needs of their customers.
- Learn how to handle rejection.
- Know what to say when a customer asks why they should buy.
- Be able to close a sale.

Don't let the fear of rejection hold you back from communicating with your customers. When done effectively, it can have a huge impact on your sales revenue. Such a simple thing - but still so critical to making those connections and forming the customer relationships that lead to success. And isn't *connected* and *successful* exactly where you want to be?

Marketing Key #5: Be Customer Focused

Small businesses often develop out of something their owners are either good at or passionate about. The best small businesses usually stem from a little of both. In your case, it might have been a service that challenged and rewarded you creatively, or a product that you loved to make. Or, maybe it was an item that you looked for in the marketplace, something you really needed, and couldn't find. Whatever got the ball rolling, it is often the case that we start businesses based on our own values, priorities, motivations and tastes. And, that's a good thing.

It's not surprising that there is a tendency among entrepreneurs to believe that their target customers are just like them. "I want and need it. They want and need it. Ergo, we must be alike." You are not alone if, at least in the early stages of your business, you created products and services the way you thought others would want them, based on your own preferences and then embarked on the quest to find customers who would buy them. It's the "If I build it, they will come" scenario. In marketing terms, it's called being product-focused. You are looking at your market from the inside-out.

The fifth key to common sense marketing stresses the importance of reversing that perspective and looking at things from the outside-in. Instead of thinking about what you have to offer, think about who your customers are, what they want and how they want to get it. In other words, be customer-focused. It's not a matter of what you like, what hours you want to work, what location is convenient for you, or what extras you think you can afford to provide.

It is a matter of rolling up your sleeves and finding out everything you can about your target customers and what makes them tick.

Why is it necessary to take a customer-focus in business? Let's look at an example that anyone with kids can probably relate to:

Karen has two teenage children, a son and a daughter. On a sunny day in mid-August, Karen is out shopping and comes across a back-to-school clothing sale in the junior section of a local discount store. She is excited to see some attractive t-shirts and jeans at drastically reduced prices and thinks: "This is a great value! These clothes are good quality so they might actually last the school year, and they even look like the stuff my kids wear. If I buy them now, I won't have to take the kids shopping for school clothes next week. Then I'll really save money!" Karen is a happy mom. She purchases each child a couple of t-shirts and a pair of jeans, then sets out for home expecting hugs of gratitude from her adoring children.

Unfortunately, the kids' reaction is considerably different from the one Karen anticipated. Instead of thanking her, the two youths are downright sullen, scornful of the clothing she has purchased. The stuff she picked out for them is, they say, out of style. They'd be laughed out of school if they wore these clothes. Her daughter says she's not about to wear last year's fashions. Her son's not 'into' anything from a discount store and is only going to wear certain brand names. Karen is confused. To her, the outfits are perfectly suitable for today's teen and she doesn't understand why her children don't like them. A fight ensues with Karen's children refusing to wear the new clothes she has purchased.

Why did Karen's good intentions go so terribly wrong? Because her purchases started with her: her values, her priorities, her perspective. She was attracted to the lower price, the quality of the clothing, and the convenience of getting her shopping done early and alone. She bought what she liked, what she could see her kids wearing, what she thought they needed and wanted. She didn't take the nature and preferences of her target market – in this case her teenage children – into account. The end result was costly for her as she couldn't return the sale items, and stressful for the whole family.

Granted, teenagers can be hard to please and, sometimes, Mother does know best. What we're getting at here is the necessity in business to cater, in every way, to your best potential customers. And, the good news is that, with a little work, you can learn to anticipate their wants and needs.

None of this is meant to suggest that common ground doesn't exist between what your customers are looking for and what you want to provide. Neither does it mean that you don't share similarities. But you need to remember that you are on the opposite side of the consumer fence, and probably too close to your business to be entirely objective about what you offer.

It is difficult for the business owner to see the proverbial forest for the trees. Sometimes, you simply have to get out of your own way and try to look through the eyes of your customers. It can be useful – and kind of fun – to get into the character of a typical customer, if only on paper. Imagine what they look like, act like, live like. What would they want? What would they think they needed? Why would they buy from you? Give yourself a descriptive name and express, in a customer voice, what is appealing about the product or service your company is offering and why.

Another great way to gain their perspective is to go through the 'customer experience'. See what it's like to do business with you – from the moment of first contact to the point of purchase and beyond. If, for example, you have an office or storefront location, walk through the doors as a customer would. What do you see? What does this say about your business? How does it make you feel? How easy is it for you to make a purchase? How pleased do you feel when the purchase is made? If you need service after the sale, is this readily available?

By the time you're finished, you will have a good idea of what you believe drives people to purchase from you; what you think are the benefits customers are seeking from your products and services; and how customers come to make the connection between what they want and what you have.

Now, to determine just how in sync your understanding is with the buying motivations of your target market, go out into the marketplace and ask people who fit the profile of your target market why they do or would buy from you. See if what they say agrees with your assumptions. See, too, if there is any difference between the feedback you get from potential and existing customers.

It's a simple fact of human nature that people respond to attention, to genuine interest in and concern for what they want and need. Just by asking the questions, you show that you do. A sales pitch that focuses on your business, your products and your services, without genuine attention to matching benefits to customer needs, will do comparatively little. There is no harder sell than the one that is all about you.

What is important is that you cater your marketing and, in fact, your entire business to what you determine is most appealing to your best potential customers. If you find you can't or don't want to do that, you have either the wrong target or the wrong business. All the marketing in the world probably won't change that. On the other hand, it could be that with just a little tweaking, you can become your customer's dream come true. That's what good marketing is all about.

Marketing Key #6: 7/49 Connections

The last key to common sense marketing involves the theory of 7/49 connections. In a nutshell, that theory states that it can take up to 49 contacts with potential customers before they will actually make a purchase from you.

Think about this in relation to the process of getting to know someone new. Let's say, for example, that you're out taking a leisurely stroll with your good friend Susan. As you walk along, talking about everything from your kids to the new client you just landed, Susan stops. She has recognized the woman walking towards you. "Hi," she says and proceeds to introduce you to this woman, who you have never met before.

The introduction is rather uneventful. You have no background information about the woman and no idea how well - or even how - Susan knows her. You continue on your walk and the new woman passes by you, headed in the opposite direction. You find that by the next day, you can't recall the woman's name. If someone were to ask, you would probably not even remember the introduction by the time the week was out.

In fact, you may run into the same woman in a number of different contexts, each time getting a brief introduction and no particular reason to remember her name, except from repeated exposure to it. Of course, it all depends on the circumstances, including the degree to which you're interested and, as a result, how much attention you give to the introduction.

Say, for example, that Susan prefaces your first introduction to the woman with an explanation that the two of them have been friends for many years. She also says that the woman is active in professional group that you have been seriously considering joining. Now, how likely do you think you are to remember the woman's name?

The same thing happens in business. It's been shown that it can take up to 7 contacts with potential customers before they become familiar with and warm up to your business. That could mean 7 sightings in the newspaper, 7 networking conversations, seven radio mentions – or some combination of these.

On top of that, it can take up to another seven connections, after each 'familiarizing' contact, before a potential customer decides to purchase something from you. When all is said and done, then, it can take up to 49 contacts with a potential customer before that person actually decides to make a purchase from you.

The 7/49 connections theory has some significant implications for marketing:

First, when looking at the annual promotional and marketing budgets for your business, you must know that if you don't have the funds to make at least seven contacts with your target market, you might as well pack up your marbles and go home. You need at least seven contacts just to play.

Second, when deciding on a target market, it's important to segment narrowly enough – and to select a target market small enough - that you are able to reach all or most potential customers at least seven times.

Third, it means that you should never give up after just one marketing campaign. Even if a particular tactic or promotion doesn't appear to have brought in significant results, it may well be paving the way for future sales.

Fourth – and perhaps most important – if you can find a way to speak directly to your target market in a way that is meaningful to them – that directly addresses their needs and wants – the number of contacts required to make a connection with them reduces considerably. Consumers are inundated with information every day and they can't retain it all. When a message is meaningful, it cuts through the clutter and is more likely to be memorable.

It's all about connecting, forming relationships and filling needs. If you know who you can do that with and for; how to speak to them in a way that they will hear you, and what message to deliver, you will have mastered the art of effective marketing. No more hit-and-miss campaigns. You'll be well on your way to a prosperous and growing business.

There you have the six keys to common sense marketing. Let's review them...

1. Specialists make more than generalists.
2. Work the marketing success pyramid:
60% of your success comes from good market research;
30% from sound strategy and,
only 10% from execution.
3. Find and focus on heavy users.
4. Better marketing = less selling.
5. Be customer-focused: work from the outside-in.
6. 7/40 connections.