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Published January 21st, 2008

## Growing Your Business in a Tough Economy

By *Sophie Braccini*



Jackie Lopey Photo courtesy of Spin Decorating

Jackie Lopey is the owner of Spin Decorating, has been a marketing executive for seventeen years and is a crusader for her fellow small business owners. With the support of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, she designed a free workshop for business owners titled "Growing Your Business in a Tough Economy." A group of eight business owners met once a month for three months and built a hands-on marketing strategy, each tailored to his or her own company.

Lopey believes that a support group is very useful for small business owners. "When you have your own business you have to do everything yourself and marketing is one of the tasks that might fall into the cracks," explains Lopey. The workshop utilized the book "Word of Mouth Marketing," by Andy Sernovitz, with hands-on case studies. The participants were a diverse group, including David Selvig Construction, White Song US-China Marketing and Rob the Realtor.

The first meeting was dedicated to identifying each business' Unique Purchase Appeal, or UPA. A UPA is the exclusive characteristics that will set any business apart from its competition. An effective UPA is the first communication tool; it has to be credible, quantifiable and sustainable over time. "To say 'Simply the best quality' doesn't work," explained Lopey, "you are not proving anything in your sentence." On the other hand saying something like "10% off for every day late" is measurable.

In order to define their own UPA, Lopey had participants call their customers and ask them three simple questions: 1) Why do you do business with us? 2) What do you like best about what we do? and 3) What things don't you like about our competitors?

David Selvig found the exercise of calling his customers very useful. "We found why they chose us, they valued the attention we pay to details, our honesty, our respect for their budget and our friendliness," he said. Selvig wanted his UPA to include "customer service, reliability, honesty." Lopey recommended adding a guarantee or a third party endorsement to make it more credible, "quantifying your UPA is very important, it has to be independently verifiable," she insisted.

Once the UPAs were finely tuned, the group focused on how to get the word out about their businesses. Lopey recommended the first step, to form a mental image of their typical customer, "you need to know the demographic elements (age, income...), the psychographics (attitude, life style...) and the needs and wants of your targeted customers," she said, "then decide on the type of campaign that will be adapted to them and most cost effective."

Song White found this advice very useful. "Before, I focused more on doing/delivering my translation work (English-Chinese) than communicating with my customers," says the Chinese-American business woman, "the importance of understanding the customers is obvious, but how to understand them is another thing. Jackie and other members at the workshop shared different ways of how-to's that were very helpful."

As a case study, the group brainstormed how to use the tradition of Holiday Appreciation Gifts to further their businesses. "If you decide to send your customers a gift at the end of the year, be sure to send a message that will be supporting your UPA," advised Lopey. She recommended that each advertising or marketing campaign have a financial goal attached to it and that business owners track the results. She also presented some word of mouth marketing tactics with which each participant was encouraged to experiment before the next session.

When she came back for the last session on December 17th Tamara Selvig talked about the "Try Lafayette First" campaign that she and her husband had decided to participate in as a word of mouth marketing tactic. Rob the Realtor had started experimenting with a blog, giving free advice to customers, and others mentioned donating supplies to Habitat for Humanity.

The bulk of the meeting was spent defining the elements of a marketing plan for 2009. "You can picture your marketing plan as a funnel," said Lopey, "at the top is the larger market and at the exit are your customers. The funnel represent the sales cycle, it's a machine unique to each business that needs to be tweaked all the time." The machine can be as simple as this: how many people do you need to talk to have one lead, then how many leads do you need to sign one client? Tracking is the key to fine-tuning the funnel.

To conclude, each participant developed a marketing plan for 2009. First they defined a sales and revenue goal, then they quantified how they were going to reach that goal (marketing, PR, advertising, sales) and established a time and dollar budget associated with meeting those goals.

The participants said the workshop changed their vision and motivation to create and monitor their marketing plan, and thanked Lopey for her efforts. "I enjoy positive actions and working with the group," said Lopey, "I believe that if you help other people it will come back to you, not necessarily directly but it does come back."

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