



# Eating our own dog food

BY BRIAN GREUL

I can't think of a better way to start a column called "Outside the Box" than by writing about how some of us should try harder to use our products. In some businesses, this is called eating your own dog food.

In my office, we have a weekly sales meeting where I talk to my sales reps about the upcoming week. We coordinate strategy, review problems and coach better sales. We do this at 8:30 a.m. on Mondays. And it was at one of these early Monday meetings that we were talking about follow-up calls and leave-behinds. You do follow-up calls right? And you have great leave-behinds?

What started out innocently enough became a full-blown crisis within just a few questions. The first of these awful questions was, "If we don't use them, why should the customer?" Ouch! The next was, "What do I give to a customer to make them remember to buy promotional items from me?" Last, but not least, "How many of our competitors use this item?" After all, we want to be different and unique.

By the time we'd covered these three questions, we realized we weren't taste-testing our own products very well.

## Why Ask Why?

I think part of good business management is looking at your business in the imaginary mirror and asking really hard questions like, "Why?" A lot of people are afraid of that word. It's one of my favorites. It's the key that helps us to discover, uncover and improve. I don't expect to teach you anything magical. But I do hope you'll start asking "Why?" and my other favorite, "Why not?" As in, why not use promotional products to promote my business? And why is this product going to convince my prospect that promotional products work?

We've all come across that customer that tells us that "I don't use that junk." I usually take a deep breath and try to figure out why they wouldn't use persistent, cost-effective advertising that's targeted to a specific audience. We've all heard the pitch: "I've got an ad spot that will stay in front of your customer, have them thanking you for

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the ad, and make the customer remember you when they most need you." What self-respecting marketing pro wouldn't buy this? That's exactly what we're selling, when it's done right.

## Don't Throw Bricks

Too often, customers, and some of us, think we are buying bricks. All we need to do to make them work is throw them at people. Most of the time, it's not that simple. Worse, buying bricks can shatter opportunities that might otherwise be very valuable.

So what is a good salesperson to do? You can't expect to simply hand someone a pen and expect them to understand the advertising value that it represents. In most cases, we need to show clients how to be successful with our products. We need to guide them to quality products from reputable suppliers who can be counted on again and again. By "quality," I mean a crisp, clean imprint, good stock on product, good turnaround times, responsive customer service and a product that does what it should. A letter opener that breaks on the third letter isn't promoting anything in the bottom of the trashcan.

The client can often get a superior product for just a little bit more. Pens can cer-

tainly be a part of your promotional strategy, but you have to send them with a flyer that explains why it is such a good pen. And it should be in a box with a sticker or custom imprint. The power of promotional products is in using them correctly. If I want to catch the attention of high-end restaurant owners, I would laser-engage a message on a piece of stemware, put my card inside and put it in a suitable box. Now, simply sending this out may not do much good. I'm going to need to follow up on it by calling. I also have to make sure I only send it to qualified prospects.

Interestingly, this is the same issue our clients face: sending the right product to the right customer or prospect to trigger a specific action.

## Use It or Lose It

When you use promotional products to build your own business, you'll sell more and have fewer problems convincing your clients to use them. First, use them in-house. When a client asks what pen we recommend, we recommend the brand we use in our own offices. We can immediately tell them what a great, long-lasting pen it is.

Then, send the right promotional items to your target audience to promote your business.

It's an excellent eye-opener. The key is to find products that your customers will appreciate, keep and have around when they need you. Depending on the type of customer, this can range from a letter opener to a custom-engraved item. One of the things I like about trying to solve this particular challenge is that it puts you smack in the customer's world, in which they, too, try to understand what makes their customer tick and how to get them to do something with a message printed on an item they receive.

As you move forward in your business, try to use more of the products that you sell. If it's not good enough for you, why is it good enough for your customer? If it's too expensive for you, why is it cheap enough for your customer? As an added bonus, many suppliers offer special pricing for self-promos. Many are simply thrilled that you are going to use their product. They know, just like I do, that when you use something, you are more likely to sell it. ▲



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