



CEO Network

How To Advertise To Companies

[Klaus Kneale](#), 06.30.09, 07:00 PM EDT

It's not easy to sell your product when your customers are entire corporations.

Advertising is tricky. Designing commercials and ads to keep the average Joe from clicking to another channel or turning to another page is hard. Even more challenging: selling your products and services to whole companies and their top-level buyers. How do you ever get their attention?

Brand-building in that situation isn't easy, and there aren't many resources out there to help you. Most advertising agencies focus on consumer advertising, and most business-to-business companies employ only a small staff devoted to making sales.

In advertising and promoting to companies, you ultimately need only to get to the decision-makers and check-signers. That can be five people within a company of 5,000, or one within a company of 500. A simple challenge like the phenomenon known as ad blindness--an individual's ability to totally ignore anything that looks like an advertisement--becomes a major concern when you have such a small, all-powerful target audience to reach.

This somewhat defeats the idea of mass-media advertising, though it hasn't stopped some companies, like and Accenture. Some people find that the Internet presents a solution. Rob Crumpler's company, BuzzLogic, helps other companies market through social media. He uses a lot of the techniques he teaches other companies, such as ways of making the most of Twitter and Facebook, in doing his own brand-building and marketing. This not only helps him get clients, it shows them that he knows what he's talking about.

Not many businesses can advertise using the services they're advertising, though. Ted Werth is president of a technology service and support company called PlumChoice. He has pulled out all the stops in getting his company's name out. He says that serving "plumtinis" (vodka and grape juice) at events and having a purple-brick-road carpet lead to a party has

helped build his very purple-tinged brand. Fake syringes, pill bottles filled with M&Ms and purple foil envelopes containing Tylenol have told his potential clients that PlumChoice would cure all that ails them.

Some companies rely heavily on word of mouth. Archie Black, chief executive officer of SPS Commerce, which provides electronic data interchange software, is a big fan of this method. His company has become so well-regarded in its sphere that it has expanded beyond straight software to do consulting work as well. "When making a purchase, many start by talking with their peers," says Black. "If we do our job well, our customers are happy to recommend us."

Word of mouth isn't always the best solution, however. Philip Moorcroft, who runs MGPS, an expense management company, finds word of mouth unhelpful. "Companies are fussy about what you say about them," he says, "and they don't like to admit needing us." If your company does crisis management, how many clients of yours will want to admit they had a crisis they had to turn over to you--let alone say how well you handled it?

The coolest, funniest, most inspiring advertising in the world is worthless unless it gets in front of the right people and wins them over. That means it needs to win you a champion within a company who will sell your product or service to the rest of that company. Your choice of whom exactly to target to be that champion depends on the product you're offering, and it can make or break the sale.

Moorcroft aims at getting CEOs on his side before reaching out to chief financial officers, even though he's selling expense management. CFOs seem more likely to close the door on him, because his company can seem like competition for their jobs. But if you sell something that obviously makes the CFO's job easier, he may be the one to go for ahead of the CEO.

In general, most CEOs seem to agree that doing a great job is the best advertisement, even when the companies you do it for don't want to admit to using you. If a CEO remembers your product or service happily and someday whispers, "You should call this guy" to a fellow CEO-in-need, that is worth more than 100 sales calls.