

SMALL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION | a special advertising report

Sending the right message

COMMUNICATING your business message takes careful planning and a deep understanding of what makes your business unique and who you're targeting. Chris Dale, founder and managing director of marketing consultancy MarketingHQ, shares some tips on getting it right.

● WHO ARE YOU?

BEFORE you can expect potential customers to have a clear idea of who you are and what you do, it's important to figure it out for yourself.

A strong brand and identity which differentiates you from competitors is key, says Mr Dale: "A common mistake small businesses make is having too many messages, or messages they think differentiate them from others but don't really appear that way to the consumer."

For example, saying you provide the "best customer service" is a weak way to differentiate yourself as consumers expect good service is a given with anything they pay for. "If you're offering the same thing as the other guy, then you're competing on price alone and reducing your margins," Mr Dale says.

One way to offer a point of difference is to value-add to the service you provide. Mr Dale gives the example of a car dealer. While the cars they offer are the same in other dealerships, providing purchasers with fixed price servicing or free cleaning enhances the experience consumers have with their product.

Conducting market research can reveal some interesting information about what customers think your point of difference is. "You might find out something unique about your product that you didn't realise people were using it for," Mr Dale says.

He gives the example of a US shoe company that was surprised to discover that many of their customers liked their shoes because they didn't squeak. This information enabled them to target their marketing accordingly.

In some instances, small business owners in particular might find their customers are attracted to their personality.

Mr Dale says small businesses owners in this situation should make themselves the face of the business and ensure they're available to the customers.

● BRANDING

CONSISTENCY is probably the most important aspect of branding, says Mr Dale.

But while businesses will spend up on their fitout and their physical presence, many tend to scrimp on their logo. "A lot of people will just knock something out, or get a friend to design it, but I really recommend getting it done professionally, and having it briefed

properly," Mr Dale says. "Logos and brands define businesses, and if it doesn't look professional, it's essentially saying to consumers that your business isn't legitimate."

The importance of consistency applies from the logo through to the product itself.

Big business provides plenty of examples: "When you go to McDonald's and buy a Big Mac, it's the same in North Sydney as it is in Townsville".

● NAMING

IN earlier years, new businesses sought to come up with names that were catchy and unique. Now, in a market where internet search engines are a huge driver of business leads, a name that will optimise your search engine hits is even more important.

"Having a domain name that's keyword rich is really important because it allows you to generate natural traffic," Mr Dale says.

The US lawsuit of pipe and tube machinery company, Universal Tube (Utube.com) versus video sharing site YouTube is one example of why names matter. The former company filed a lawsuit after its site was continually crashed by more than 100,000 web surfers mistaking it for YouTube each day.

However, a name alone won't ensure high search engine ranking, and businesses also need to look at other ways to improve their ranking - for example through putting themselves on social media, blogs and links to their website.

● PUTTING IT OUT THERE

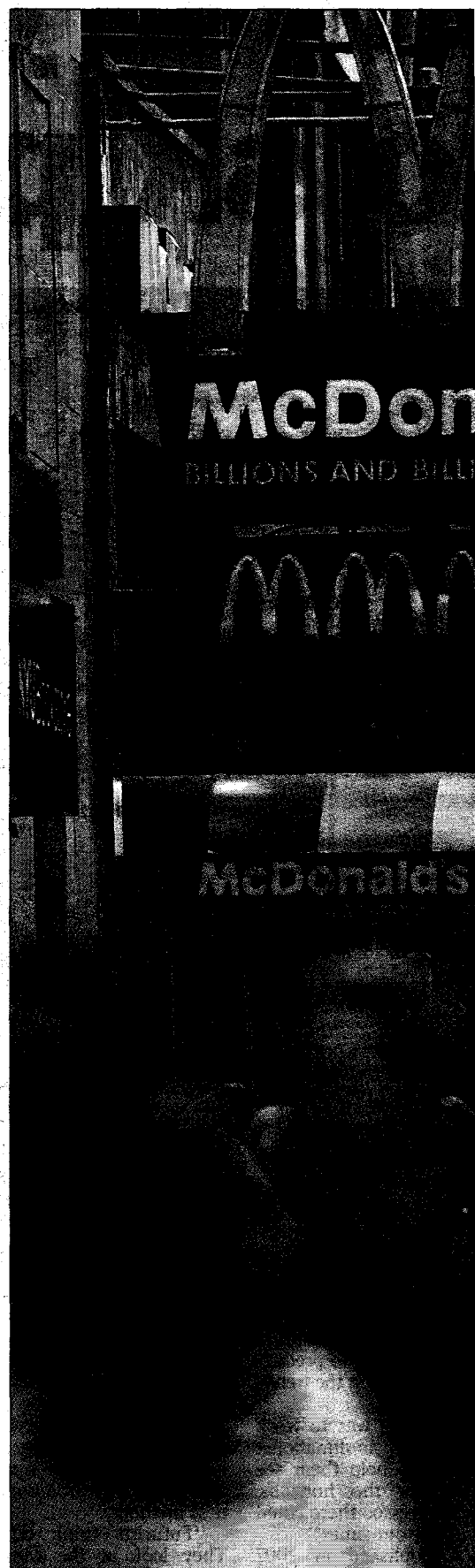
WITH limited advertising budgets, small businesses need to be particularly savvy about how they get their message out into the marketplace. A deep knowledge and understanding of the target market is a useful starting point.

"It's not enough to say you target women aged 25 to 30," Mr Dale says. "You need to know their profile, their lifestyle, their interests and habits."

And while social media is a good cost-effective means of exposure, the efforts might be lost on a market that isn't cyber savvy. "If you're targeting older consumers, there might be no point in doing social media if the group isn't into that medium," Mr Dale says.

Another way to engage with potential customers is by providing them with free helpful advice and interesting information.

On his website, Mr Dale provides free marketing ideas and downloadable E-books. "Because you're providing them with that value, when they identify a need they'll get in contact with you because you've helped them in the past," he says. "It's a way of getting to know people before they become your customers."



Being consistent: Small businesses have lessons to learn from