

Dialogue – Successful marketing is a two-way dialogue with your customers, not a one-way barrage of messages from you to them. Your marketing should aim to solicit feedback and input from customers. Do you invite feedback via text messaging, email, an evaluation form or audience survey of your show, forums on your web site, evaluation of your teaching, classes etc? It is a vital way of improving what you offer and developing your practice and performance.

Advertising – Find out which media your customers are using and put your presence there. Where do your customers turn for information? This could be a question in your evaluation surveys.

Promoting benefits of dance – Some marketers say “customers do not buy services, they buy solutions”. If you are teaching dance to children or adults tell them what you can do for them and what benefits they will gain.

Does your audience understand what you offer? – Customers often do not understand the intricacies of dance and may be reluctant to ask. They may rely on your published information or seek advice from you. The practitioner who does a better job of explaining the service/performance could be the one most likely to have (repeat) customers.

Volume of communication – Communicating too many messages or too much material can turn people off or cause confusion. In a brochure or advertisement, focus on one or two key points each time and then point your possible prospects and customers to a place where they can get more information - such as your web site. Once you have decided on your key points, then brainstorm the variety of ways you will get that message out. It is said that to get your message across effectively, an audience/customers need to receive it up to seven different ways.

Rational and emotional buying criteria – Customers use both rational and emotional criteria when making any decision and so messages need to appeal to both these aspects.

Differentiation/Positioning – When you offer the same services as your competitors, the key to growing the business is having the ability to differentiate your products and services from theirs. What can you offer that is different or unique, what do you specialise in? This differentiation can also enable a business to increase margins or create additional revenue streams. The heart of positioning is to understand, and be able to communicate, this difference. How you position your business/event will have a direct impact on the types of customers you attract. This is essential when there are several dance schools in the same locale and when there are a variety of dance events in a festival.

Marketing continuity – Business owners often make two major mistakes when it comes to marketing; reducing marketing expenditures during soft economic times; and failing to invest in marketing when business is good. A sustained marketing effort is needed in both good and bad times.

New channels of business – Business can grow through developing complementary products or services and building on what has already been successful – examples include merchandise, workshops related to performance, DVDs, education resource packs for schools.

Collecting information on your customers – Your customer base is one of the most strategic assets in your business. It is important to understand how to grow and utilise this asset. It is vital to use any contact with potential customers to gather their contact details and ask permission to communicate with them again through avenues such as tick boxes surveys or website forms. Your customers often have rich and exciting lives with networks that you can tap into. This can impact on your ability to create more customers and develop products and services for them.

Satisfied customers for referrals – A great number of new clients come to you as referrals from friends and family but few small businesses take a structured approach to using satisfied customers as a channel for new business. You can ask for referrals directly or provide an easy method for customers to recommend, such as emails or web links to forward to a friend. Testimonials via quotes on a web site or brochure are another, more subtle, technique.

Understand why customers leave or are not satisfied – Surveying lost customers to find out why they have taken their business somewhere else or audience feedback about your performance and the ambience around it (venue, buzz) is a major development tool. Surveying lost customers can identify problems in your practice or marketing that you are unaware of, as well as demonstrate how similar services offered by others are more effective. It is best to use an outside resource to survey lost customers and it is a practice that should be conducted at least annually.

Customer and audience regard – How do you regard your customers? A common audience descriptor is 'bums on seats'. Is this really how to think of the people who are purchasing tickets and coming to see your show? They are the people who could make your performance financially viable, be faithful followers of your work, spread the word to their networks or be potential sponsors or donors. Analyse why are you producing your art - for yourself, for a select group of in-the-know, or for the general public? These are essential questions to ask in both targeting your market and being realistic about what following and box office income you are going to attract. Similarly, if you are passionate about dance, is this demonstrated in the teaching and atmosphere of the business or workshop, so others can also share this love of dance? Customers and audience are the reason you are in business so their needs have to be considered in your processes, policies and procedures, not just the needs of your group or staff.

Be flexible – Customers have a wide range of choices and options available and one of the key things they value is flexibility. If your operational procedures are not flexible enough to meet changing customer needs or perceptions, then they will go elsewhere.

Internet and e-marketing – The Internet has become the number one place where people seek information, even for local providers and services, so having your own web site enables you to provide in-depth information about your products and services on a 24 hour basis. An email newsletter is an inexpensive way to keep your name and offerings in front of your customers and prospects on a regular basis. Viral e-marketing can be used to spread information. Ask your readers to pass on your email to friends, family and whanau. The email subject line is very important, it must seem relevant at a glance, stating what, when and where, or the email may never be opened. There is good information online about how to improve email deliverability e.g tips on how to avoid being stopped by spam software.

Creating true value for customers is best done by ensuring everyone in your organisation has a passion for their audience. Developing a better understanding of their needs and how you meet them makes it clear where you are heading. Have a commitment to your customers and treat them as you like to be treated.

Reference: 17 Costly Marketing Mistakes, by Steven Howard, November 2008. www.howard-marketing.com.

