

February 2012

Contributions in Education and Outreach

No. 3b



Wood-based Entrepreneurs Toolkit: Communicating Effectively With Your Customers

Eric Hansen and John McIsaac

Forest Research Laboratory
College of Forestry
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author appreciates the technical review provided by Bob Govett, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point; Larry Swan, USFS State and Private Forestry; David Smith, Department of Wood Science and Engineering, OSU; and David Stallcop, Vanport International, Inc., Boring, OR.

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Please indicate author(s), title, and publication number if known.

Creative direction by Rami Hansen

Editing, word processing, design, and layout by Forestry Communications Group.

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This is a publication of the Oregon Wood Innovation Center (OWIC), Department of Wood Science and Engineering, College of Forestry, Oregon State University.

Abstract

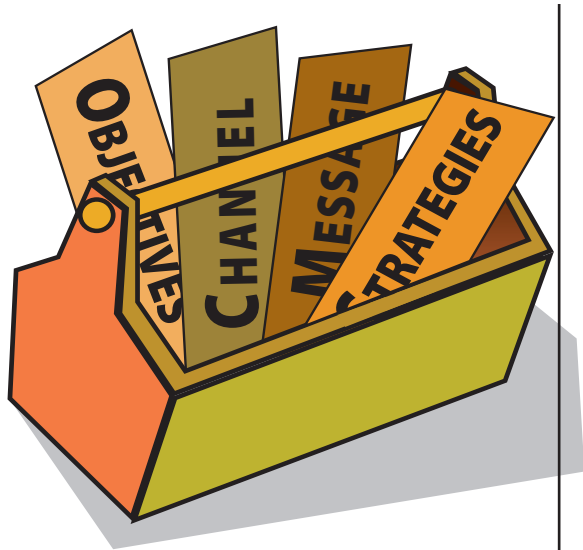
Hansen, Eric, and and John McIsaac. 2012. *Wood-based Entrepreneurs Toolkit: Communicating Effectively with your Customers*. Contributions in Education and Outreach No. 3b, Forest Research Laboratory, Oregon State University, Corvallis.

Effective and consistent communication with your customers is vital and should be approached in a holistic manner driven by customer needs, your marketing strategies, and key characteristics of your operation. This document outlines important principles of marketing communication, illustrated throughout with examples from two small, hypothetical companies. A worksheet is provided for your own communication planning.

Keywords: Communication, advertising

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1 Introduction

Effective and consistent communication with your customers (and sometimes other stakeholders) is vital. You should approach communication in a holistic manner driven by customer needs, your marketing strategies, and key characteristics of your operation. The text that follows explains the basic concepts of marketing communication, outlines the elements of a communication portfolio, and provides two examples of a portfolio. Finally, a worksheet is provided to help you plan your marketing communication efforts.

First, let's explore the basics of communication, and then we will address the construction of a communication portfolio. The fundamental issue of communication, including marketing communication, can be summarized in two questions:

- “What is its effect?”
- “How does it influence knowledge or change opinions, attitudes, or behavior?”

The fundamental elements of communication can be considered to be

- who (sender)
- says what (message)
- through what method (channel)
- to whom (receiver)
- to what effect (sender's objective)
- with what feedback from the receiver (customers).

These basic components of communication—*sender, message, channel, receiver, and feedback*—are all components of the model of marketing communication planning shown in Figure 1.

In a small operation you are the *sender*.

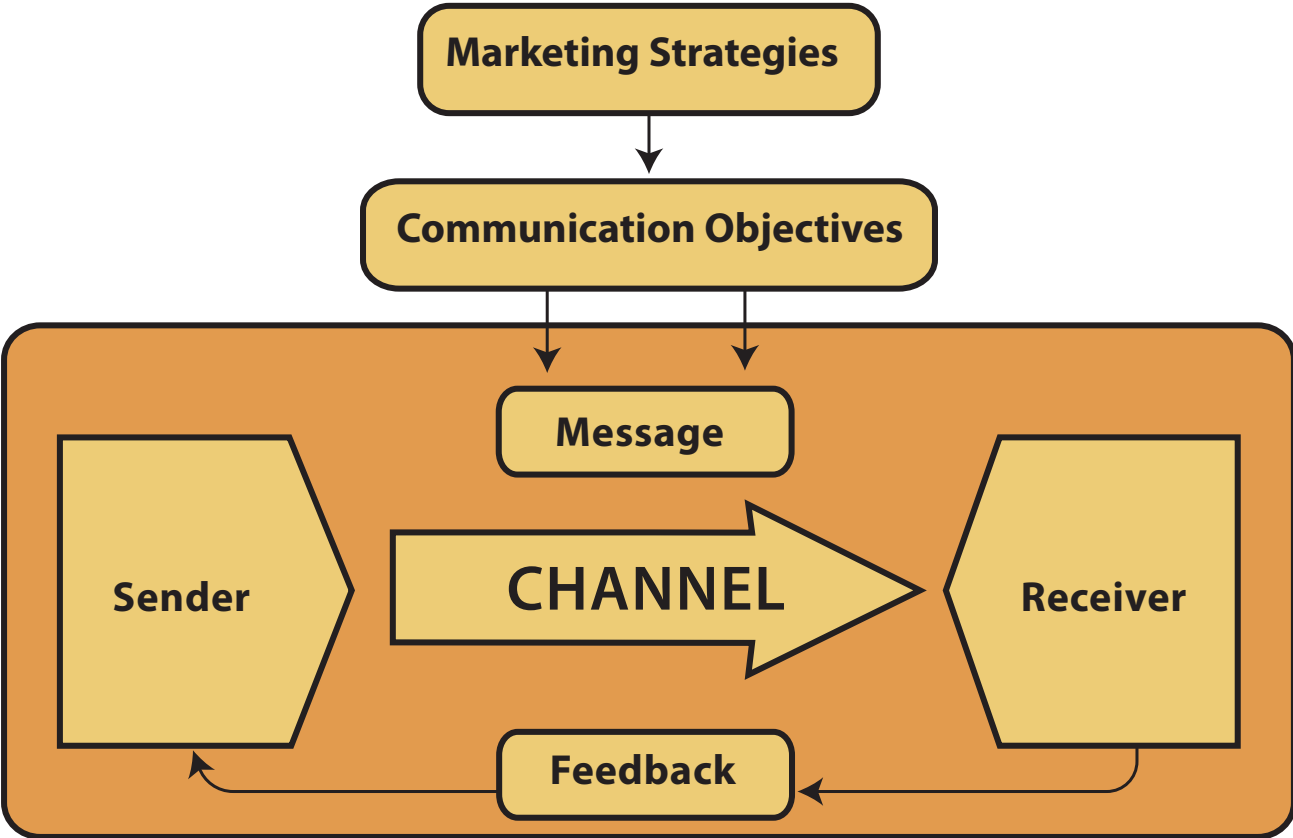
The *message* is the knowledge that you want the receiver to gain. The message might be that you have a new product, or that a special price is available, or that a product has a certain level of quality. When you make a phone call, create an advertisement, or give a presentation, you are sending a message. Throughout your communication activities, you must exercise great care to communicate a cohesive and focused message. Conflicting messages will be unproductive at best and, at worst, will disrupt and weaken the image you have worked to create.

The *receiver* is the company, individual, institution, or stakeholder group you choose to target.

The *channel* is the medium through which the message is sent. The channel is either personal or non-personal. For instance, an advertisement might be in print form, or on the Web, both non-personal forms of communication. A salesperson, however, might provide a verbal (personal) message face-to-face with a client or over the phone. Successful communication depends on choosing appropriate channels that fit the needs of the receiver.

The model of marketing communication planning provides for a *feedback* loop, with communication traveling in both directions. In some forms of marketing communication, there is little likelihood of direct feedback. In personal forms of communication, however, feedback is more likely and is usually highly valuable.

Figure 1. Model of Marketing Communication Planning.



Examples: Caveman Lumber and Wood-n-kitchen Accessories

These examples illustrate how the elements of the Marketing Communication Model can be incorporated into marketing communication plans for two different companies.



Caveman Lumber is a fictitious, medium-sized softwood lumber company run by Niko Smith. The company is located in western Oregon and saws only Douglas-fir. A key to the company's success is the use of technology and a reputation for higher than average quality. Generally, customers are located on the West Coast of the United States.



Wood-n-kitchen Accessories is a two-person operation in rural Oregon. The company creates a range of unique wooden kitchen accessories. The newest addition to its product line is a cutting board made from a combination of certified bamboo and exotic tropical hardwoods.

Follow the yellow and gold **Caveman Lumber** and **Wood-n-kitchen** sidebars to see how these companies implement some of the most important aspects of marketing communication.

2 What is marketing communication?

Marketing communication can be broadly defined as managing information flows to the market, in the market, and from the market (some of which is outside your control). A narrower definition might be that marketing communication is the communication effort designed to create sales.

When you begin to contemplate how marketing communication should be developed, you should already have a firm grasp on your marketing strategies (See CEO 3a, *Strategic Marketing*¹). Your communication objectives flow from your marketing strategies, especially your products and core competencies, and these influence your messages. When customer strategies are identified, they in turn define the receiver shown in the model. Customers

(receivers), by their unique characteristics, in turn define the possible channels. The model of Marketing Communication Planning should be used to guide decisions on integrating various aspects of the communications portfolio.

You should choose communication channels and messages to steer purchasing decisions towards your products. Your customer, in turn, is searching for information in order to make relevant product choices. It is important that you realize the possibility of conflict between the two views and plan your communications portfolio accordingly.

1. *Wood-based Entrepreneurs Toolkit: Strategic Marketing*. Contributions in Education and Outreach No. 3a. Forest Research Laboratory. College of Forestry. Oregon State University. Corvallis, Oregon



Stage 1

Caveman Lumber

Marketing Strategy*

- Product – commodity
- Customer – as many customer groups as possible
- Market area – regional
- Core competencies – process efficiency and reputation for product quality

Communication Objectives

- Maintain marketplace reputation
- Be the “top-of-mind” supplier

* see– CEO 3a



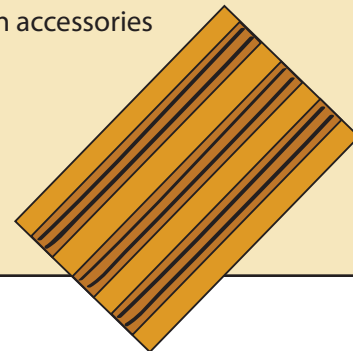
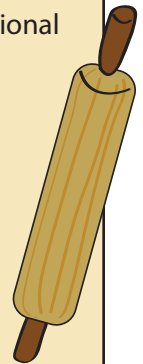
Wood-n-kitchen Accessories

Marketing Strategy*

- Product – specialty
- Customer – few, well-specified customer groups
- Market area – regional
- Core competencies – truly unique product, local producer

Communication Objectives

- Heighten awareness among local/regional interior designers and decorators
- position Wood-n-kitchen as a respected, trusted provider of sustainable, environmentally healthy kitchen accessories



The planning task of marketing communication can be analyzed through Figure 1, which shows the connections between communication and marketing strategies.

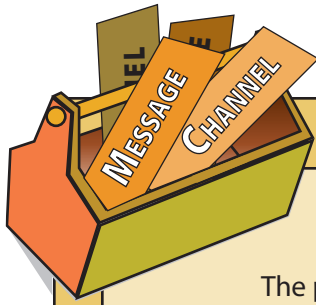
Marketing communication planning can be seen as having two stages:

Stage 1. Deriving communication objectives from marketing strategies and outlining the company’s communication portfolio based on strategic marketing context.

Stage 2. Creating detailed plans for communication targets (receiver), messages, and channels.

Stage 1 is clearly your task (see sidebar). Stage 2 may also be your task or it may be something that is outsourced to an advertising agency or consultant that has knowledge and skills to plan and execute marketing communication campaigns.

The marketing communication plan is a compatible combination of the concepts seen in the communication model. The success of the plan depends on how well you understand the various concepts of communication and their interdependence.



Stage 2

Caveman Lumber

The plan outlined below integrates the various forms of communication and links appropriately back to the company's overall marketing strategies.

Message

Despite the current economy, Caveman Lumber is as strong as ever, and is maintaining its tradition of excellence.

Channels

Personal Contact

- Caveman Lumber employs two inside salespeople. Their salaries and travel represent the bulk of the communication investment by the company. The salespeople spend most of their time at the mill, but do attend association meetings and represent the company at two or three trade shows per year.

Public Relations

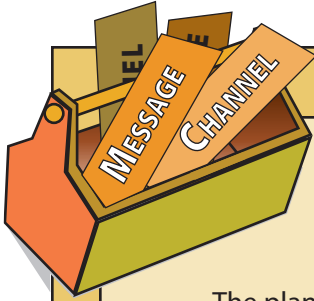
- Niko actively interacts with members of the local and regional media. He has established a strong relationship with the editors of several homebuilding journals. He uses these relationships to facilitate press releases whenever the company has a significant development, such as the addition of new machinery.
- Any messaging that goes to trade journals can be adapted for Facebook™ and LinkedIn™ use.
- Facebook™ makes sense for Caveman Lumber because the company has a large number of regular customers and offers frequent specials and promotions.
- LinkedIn™ is great for networking with peers and sharing industry experiences, but is not yet a great selling tool.

Advertising

- The company has a basic website with limited interactivity. Primarily, the site is informational about the company, with overview information of products. The site allows the harvesting of email addresses from an opt-in form.
- Print ads are placed several times per year in *Merchant Magazine*.

Direct Marketing

- A general company brochure is available via the website, and limited print copies are taken to trade shows.



Stage 2

Wood-n-kitchen Accessories

The plan outlined below integrates the various forms of communication and links appropriately back to the company's overall marketing strategies. Introducing a new product requires an integrated introduction to the marketplace. Introduction will coincide with the annual state fair

Message

Wood-n-kitchen Accessories is the go-to company for locally produced, unique wooden kitchen products

Channels

Personal Contact

- Personal selling will be primarily phone-based, but some in-person selling will be used, for example, in a booth at the state fair.

Public Relations

- Wood-n-kitchen Accessories will use social media such as Facebook™.
- Press releases will be created for both the popular and trade press.

Advertising

- The company website is the primary communication tool and will provide
 - additional pages that highlight the product
 - social media interlinked with the website.

Direct Marketing

- Product brochures will be created that provide an overview of the products, their specifications, and their environmental attributes. A small quantity of brochures will be printed, but most distribution will be done electronically.
- Print ads are too expensive and will not be used.
- Product samples and brochures will be sent to all qualified distributors and retailers.

2.1 Receiver Considerations

A prerequisite to success in marketing communication is a receiver with a need. The receiver must be motivated to seek and use the information in the message—you should never assume your customer is a passive information receiver. It is useful to view your customer as an active information seeker. You can help by making beneficial information easy to find. If a marketing channel intermediary is the target of your communication, for example, you need to assure that the intermediary is motivated to promote your products.

Communication efforts can be designed to pull or push your product to the consumer. By focusing communication efforts on the final consumer, you position your products to be pulled through the marketing channel. An example is an advertisement for your product in a consumer magazine. A push strategy is more typical in the forest products industry, where you would focus your efforts on the members of the marketing channel and attempt to get those companies to push the product through to the final consumer. An example is in-person sales calls to an industrial distributor. Both push and pull communication tactics have their place in your communications plan and they can be combined to suit specific situations. A pull strategy offers more direct control over product and company

image, while a push strategy allows you to benefit from the intermediary's promotional skills. The push strategy is most effective if intermediaries are fully motivated to increase the demand for your products.

Communication efforts must be targeted toward individuals making decisions concerning purchases or end-uses of products. Alternatively, communication can be targeted toward others who influence those decisions. In push tactics intermediaries have a clear economic motive to promote products. Experts and opinion leaders often have a direct influence on customer decisions. You must know where your customers acquire information and on whom they rely. This information is then used when choosing the targets and channels of marketing communication.

In many cases, industrial buying decisions are made by a group of individuals. Consumer decisions are often made by families, where roles are clearly differentiated. For example, certain decisions regarding the selection of materials for single-family homes are made by the wife, while others are made by the husband, and still others are made collaboratively. When you target communication to families or other groups, the roles and communication behavior in the group must be taken into consideration (e.g., who is the right target—initiators, gatekeepers, influencers, deciders, buyers, or users?).



Communication can serve to push or pull your product through the marketing channel.

2.2 Message Considerations

Message content must be directly connected to customer needs. Only information with value to the receiver is effective. Information must benefit the customer and satisfy some need—be it economic, psychological, or social. For instance, reducing economic risk is a typical customer need, which might lead to a quest for information.

The content and form of a message are complicated issues without absolute rules. Messages are often created by a communications specialist in an advertising agency. The following lists some basic requirements for an effective message in marketing communication:

- The message must fit the communication objectives and the chosen marketing strategies behind them.
- A sender must have credibility with the receiver before a message will be received and absorbed.
- The receiver must be exposed to the message and must notice it.
- The message must be designed to meet the emotional and intellectual capabilities of the receiver.
- The receiver must be ready and willing to accept the message; it must be compatible with receiver and attitudes.
- The receiver must have a need for the content of the message.

2.3 Channel Considerations

Customers receive information through all types of channels. Communication channels are frequently divided into personal and non-personal channels. The other important division, between commercial and non-commercial channels, is based on whether you have control, and is sometimes referred to as formal and informal channels.

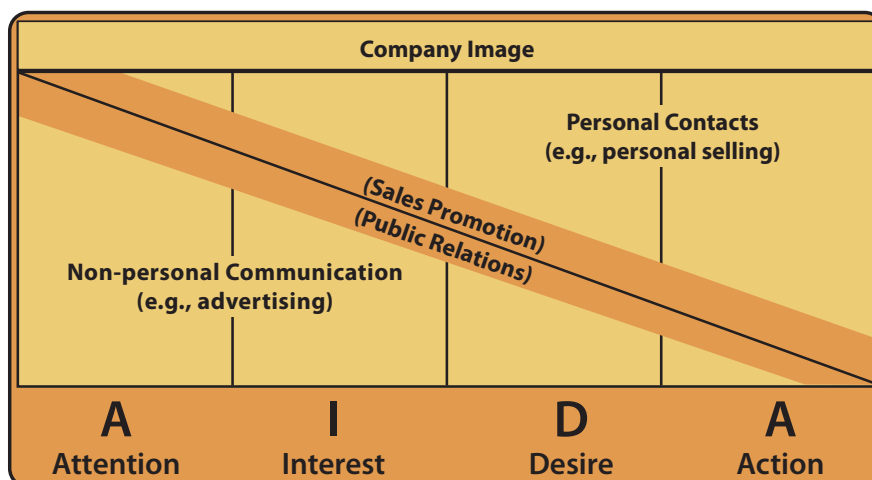
The choice of channel depends on the characteristics of the receiver, but also on the sender, the message, and the communication objective(s). Customers are selective about the sources and channels they use for information acquisition. Customer communication behavior is not accidental or random, but a result of experiences and life-long learning. Generally, selectivity is based on needs, and the receiver concentrates on those sources or channels that have historically been helpful.

Although the final objective of most marketing communication is increasing demand by influencing purchasing decisions, there are other types of communication objectives as well, such as enhancing company image. Generally, the marketing objective is to take the receiver through a process from awareness to purchase. Different models of this process have been developed, the most basic of which is the AIDA model (often attributed to E. St. Elmo Lewis) that describes the process in terms of Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. Different forms of communication are

appropriate for various steps in the process.

Figure 2 illustrates the connection between forms of communication and response steps. Advertising, for example, is commonly used in an attempt to create awareness, while personal selling is more appropriate for later steps in the process. Communication that conveys a positive company image pervades the entire process.

Figure 2. AIDA Communication Model.



3 The Communication Portfolio

There are multiple methods available to you for communicating with your customers. The suite of methods you choose to employ is your communication portfolio. Generally, a communication portfolio will include the following types of communication in different levels of emphasis:

- Personal selling
- Advertising
- Public relations, including social media
- Sales promotion
- Direct marketing communication

Websites and social media may be most important for most entrepreneurial operations. A communication portfolio must be managed by considering both your overall marketing strategies and your specific communication objectives. In order to achieve your objectives, the whole package must be integrated, well-balanced, and designed to consistently and persistently reach your customers.

Wood-n-kitchen Accessories is an example of how the Marketing Communication Model elements are incorporated into a marketing communication plan for a small specialty manufacturer (see Stage 2 sidebar, p.6).

3.1 Personal Contact

Regardless of your product/market, personal contact with the customer will likely be a very important component of your communication portfolio. Although personal selling is the most important activity in this category, personal contact includes a variety of relationship-building or maintaining activities that occur between buyer and seller. Playing golf with a client is a good example of a relationship building activity that is part of personal contact. Personal selling is critical for most wood products operations and the development of personal selling skills is critical for the entrepreneur. A future publication in this series will address personal selling in more depth.



Playing golf with customers can be an important part of personal contact.

3.2 Website

For a small business, a website can and should be its primary and most important marketing communications vehicle. Because it can be updated instantly to reflect product introductions, promotions and news, it is the quickest conduit of communication with the end user. It can also be designed to capture customer (and potential customer) information. To this end, a company's website should be designed and developed strategically and professionally, with easy navigation. Nothing turns off a prospective customer faster than a poorly executed web presence. And a small business website should be designed on an easy-to-update content management system (CMS) platform that's simple enough so that the business owner can make edits and update the site him/herself.

3.3 Advertising

For the purposes of our discussion, advertising includes traditional forms such as radio, television, and print, as well as tools such as product brochures, catalogs, postcards, and your website and the various information it provides. Depending on the scale of your operations and your own skills, an outside consultant may be needed for developing advertising. Regardless of whether you are doing the work yourself or contracting with a specialist, you must have a solid understanding of the connections between the selected marketing strategies and the message that should be communicated. With that understanding, it becomes clear what must be communicated via whatever form of advertising is logical for your situation.

Print advertising is very common among large forest industry companies because placing ads in trade journals targets specific industry sectors and is often both efficient and economical. However, times are changing quickly and many companies are placing less emphasis on this traditional form of advertising. Instead, they are focusing on electronic means of delivery through a multitude

of mechanisms. Many trade journals are sent free of charge to their target audiences, resulting in large circulation among prospective customers. These journals are sent to specifically qualified individuals who must provide information about



themselves. Comprehensive information about its subscription base allows the journal to position itself as a valuable outlet for potential advertisers. However, if you run a very small operation, meaningful advertising in trade journals may be cost prohibitive.

Brochures are effective in communicating both image (aesthetics) and technical information to end-users (brochures are sometimes referred to as collateral). Engineering properties such as grade or strength can be explained in brochures in order to help ensure proper use. Even those products that don't need detailed supporting technical information usually have some form of promotional brochure. Product brochures are used in direct marketing communication, as outlined below, and by salespeople when making client visits. Product brochures are also used extensively at trade shows and are available via most company websites.

Exhibiting in trade shows is an example of sales promotion.



3.4 Public Relations

Public relations or “PR” is mostly about managing relationships with stakeholders. The following are common tools in PR:

- Social media – in industry is currently being managed as a public relations vehicle. In practice, this means that the management of a Facebook™ page, Twitter™ account, LinkedIn™ account, and other similar social networking tools is treated as a public relations process.
- Press releases – are used to announce introduction of new products or any number of important company events or developments.
- Targeted media lists – of magazines, blogs, and other news sources that serve your customer base with news and product information should be identified. Use a search engine like Google to identify key editors and writers and accumulate a database of contacts.
- Outreach to trade journals and books – is often used to profile the special expertise of a company. Trade journals are continuously searching for good stories. It may not be

difficult to convince an editor to write a story about a change in your operations or your new product. The key from the editor’s perspective is that the development be of interest to the journal’s readership. You can also benefit by authoring articles for trade journals, as opportunities present themselves.

- Conferences – are a forum for current industry issues. The opportunity to speak at a conference and offer your knowledge and expertise to the audience can provide important exposure for your company. Be careful not to turn a technical presentation into a sales pitch, however.
- Sponsorships – of athletic teams, community events, and a wide range of other activities requires financial support, but the benefit is being acknowledged as a supporter of the team or event.

3.5 Sales Promotion

In consumer markets, typical sales promotion tools include coupons, rebates, and contests. Because most forest industry companies operate in a business-to-business environment,

these tools are relatively uncommon. The most common sales promotion tool seen in the industry is the trade show. Companies invest significant time, effort, and money to create an innovative booth that will attract attendees.

Trade shows are very traditional and still very important, but times have changed significantly and trade shows may or may not be appropriate for your operations. Remember, trade shows include state and county fairs and local home shows. When you conduct annual planning you should identify and budget for the trade shows you plan to exhibit in during that year. Typically, companies go to the same shows on a continuing basis. In fact, once they establish their presence at a show, customers expect to see them and their absence might create questions about company commitment.

3.6 Direct Marketing

Many forms of communication can be sent directly to the customer or potential customer via mail, fax, or email. The product brochures discussed above are a common example. Other potential direct items include catalogs, price lists, product samples, postcards, and newsletters.

Postcards are often used as a reminder of upcoming trade shows. They can indicate the location of the company's booth, and sometimes include an invitation to a reception, dinner, or hospitality suite. Direct methods of communication are limited only by your imagination.

There are many other mechanisms for communicating with customers and/or potential customers. Examples include hang tags, POP displays, giveaways, and direct email. These are very specific communications tools and are not discussed further here.

Sponsorship of local events can be important for PR.



4 How do I create and implement a communication plan?

The following pages provide you with a worksheet for developing your own communications portfolio. By carefully analyzing your options and contemplating costs of the various elements, you can begin to create a concrete plan for your ongoing communication efforts.

Communication Portfolio Worksheet

My marketing strategies:

Product Commodity Specialty Custom-made

Customer As many groups as possible Few, well-specified groups

Known (individual) end-users

Market Area Local Regional National Global

Core Competencies

My communication objectives:

Primary message:

Proposed channels (elements of the portfolio)

Personal selling

- How many people of what type will need to invest how much time to accomplish established objectives?

Advertising and collateral

- Website
- Brochure
- Print – targeted at the following journals: _____
- Catalog
- Post card

Public relations

- Social media: _____
- Press releases
- Media relations with trade journals: _____
- Speaking at conferences and industry events: _____
- Sponsorships: _____

Sales promotion

- Trade shows: _____

Direct marketing communication

- Point of purchase display
- Hang tags
- Samples sent to targets
- Price lists
- Newsletters

Now return to the beginning of the worksheet and identify the costs of each proposed element. With this information you can balance your portfolio to assure a logical mix of activities within a reasonable communications budget. There is, of course, no magic formula, but you might consider dedicating around 5% of sales to marketing communications. Hiring a consultant or firm to assist you in communication efforts can start around \$75/hour, but hiring someone on retainer is typical and the costs of this can vary significantly.

5 Appendix

The following examples incorporate Marketing Communication Model Elements into marketing plans for two different types of manufacturers.

5.1 Caveman Lumber

Caveman Lumber is a medium-sized softwood lumber company run by Niko Smith. The company is located in western Oregon and saws only Douglas-fir. A key to the company's success is the use of technology and a reputation for higher than average quality. Generally, customers are located on the West Coast of the United States.

The marketing strategy pursued by the company is:

- Product – Commodity
- Customer – as many customer groups as possible
- Market area – regional
- Core competencies – process efficiency and reputation for product quality

Communication objectives: Maintain marketplace reputation and be the top-of-mind supplier.

Primary message: Despite the current economy, Caveman Lumber is as strong as ever and is maintaining its tradition of excellence.

Proposed channels (elements of the portfolio):

- Caveman Lumber employs two inside salespeople. Their salaries and travel represent the bulk of the communication investment by the company. The salespeople spend most of their time at the mill but do attend association meetings and represent the company at two or three trade shows per year.
- Facebook™ makes sense for Caveman Lumber because the company has a large number of regular customers and offers frequent specials and promotions. LinkedIn™ is great for networking with peers and sharing industry experiences, but is not yet a great selling tool.
- The company has a basic website with limited interactivity. Primarily, the site is informational about the company with overview information of products. The site allows harvesting email addresses from an opt-in form.
- A general company brochure is available via the website and limited print copies are taken to trade shows.
- Niko actively interacts with members of the local and regional media. He has established a strong relationship with the editors of several homebuilding journals. He uses these relationships to facilitate press releases whenever the company has a significant development, such as the addition of new machinery. Any messaging that goes to trade journals can be adapted for Facebook™ and LinkedIn™ use.
- Print ads are placed several times per year in *Merchant Magazine*.

The plan outlined above integrates the various forms of communication and links appropriately back to the company's overall marketing strategies.

5.2 Wood-n-kitchen Accessories

Wood-n-kitchen Accessories is a two-person operation in rural Oregon. The company creates a range of unique wooden kitchen accessories. The newest addition to its product line is a cutting board made from a combination of certified bamboo and exotic tropical hardwoods. Introducing a new product requires an integrated introduction to the marketplace. The target audience and objectives for communication efforts come from the marketing strategies developed for the new product. The marketing strategy pursued by the company is:

- Product – specialty
- Customer – few, well-specified customer groups
- Market area – regional
- Core competencies – truly unique product, local producer

Communication objectives: Heighten awareness among local/regional interior designers and decorators; position Wood-n-kitchen as a respected, trusted provider of sustainable, environmentally healthy kitchen accessories

Primary message: Wood-n-kitchen Accessories is the go-to company for locally produced, unique wooden kitchen products

Proposed channels (elements of the portfolio):

- The company website is the primary communication tool and will provide:
 - additional pages that highlight the product
 - Social media interlinked with the website.
- Product brochures will be created that provide an overview of the products, their specifications and their environmental attributes. A small quantity of brochures will be printed, but most distribution will be done electronically.
- Product samples and brochures will be sent to all qualified distributors and retailers.
- Press releases will be created for both the popular and trade press.
- Introduction will coincide with the annual state fair.
- Personal selling will be primarily phone-based, but some in-person selling will be used, for example, at the state fair.
- Print ads are too expensive and will not be used.

The plan outlined above integrates the various forms of communication and links appropriately back to the company's overall marketing strategies.

6 Further Reading/Resources

Austin Entrepreneurship Program at Oregon State University.

<http://www.bus.oregonstate.edu/programs/entrepreneurshipresources.htm>

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Oregon Small Business Development Center Network. <http://www.bizcenter.org/>

Oregon Wood Innovation Center. <http://owic.oregonstate.edu/> Oregon State University. Corvallis, Oregon.

