

Get in Their Heads—And Stay There

How to Stay Top-of-mind with Key Decision Makers

By Leslie Vickrey, President & Founder, ClearEdge Marketing

Every day you are out in the marketplace working to build your business, reach key decision makers and win new clients. You network, you cold call, you mail letters, you pitch, you e-mail. The hard truth is that not all of those efforts will directly result in new business. Let's be honest: only one in numerous prospecting efforts will lead to an immediate business opportunity. However, the key word is "immediate."

Making a successful contact with a business leader may not be an instant sales win, but it is an instant marketing win. Once you have successfully made your IT services and staffing solutions known to a key decision maker, you have won an important new audience member for your marketing machine. The challenge is to maintain and grow this relationship so that your firm is the first one the prospect thinks of the next time he/she has an IT staffing or solution requirement.

With the constant barrage of advertising, direct mail and SPAM in today's marketplace, you may think winning a top-of-mind position in a business leader's mind is extremely hard, if not impossible. Not true. Strong, honest and value-driven messages can cut through today's poorly directed marketing chatter. It's just a matter of recurring strategic communication or, what we at ClearEdge Marketing like to call, a keep-in-touch or KIT program.

The KIT

KIT programs are as simple as they sound. Focused on speaking to decision makers about industry issues and challenges, they offer your business a way to regularly make contact with prospects and clients using a non-intrusive and value-added medium. A KIT program can leverage a newsletter, article series, case study campaign, blog or combination thereof as the communication vehicle for persistently reaching out to the clients you have and those you are trying to win.

Consistent, informative, creative and personalized. These are the four core traits of a KIT program and the

What You Will Learn

- How to make an impact with prospects and clients through keep-in-touch (KIT) programs
- How to consistently, informatively and creatively distinguish your business by showcasing your internal knowledge and expertise
- How to develop KIT content that can be leveraged across the entire sales cycle

building blocks you can use to help decide the right communication vehicle for your business. Below we will examine these traits and how they can help you build strategic KIT tools and content.

Consistent: Keep It Coming

The KIT program has one primary goal: to keep your prospects and clients consistently in contact with and informed of your business. Therefore, you need to choose a tool or vehicle that your team can easily maintain and that can regularly be produced and delivered. Ideally you want to be in front of decision makers, key prospects and valued clients monthly.

Knowing the need for frequency, consider the options while keeping your resources (internal and external) in mind.

- Is your team able to maintain and deliver a newsletter on a monthly basis?
- Could one of your subject matter experts or a team of subject matter experts put together short articles on industry topics to be distributed monthly?
- Is there a business leader in your organization that could write a regular blog, which you could send links to on a regular basis?

Some vehicles (newsletters, white papers, etc.) require more time and resources while others (a blog) can be quick and simple. Keep in mind that an external resource, such as a freelance writer, designer or editor, can take a significant amount of work off the hands of your internal team. Take time to consider what aspects of design and writing you could outsource and the resulting costs. You may find it's an excellent way to simplify a KIT program from both a time and cost perspective.

Informative: Share Valuable Knowledge

Once you have determined the vehicle that could work for your KIT program from a consistency or frequency standpoint, consider the amount of information you want

to share. If your business is regularly publishing industry articles, white papers, case studies and blogs, and it has an active PR and events calendar, you have enough content available to publish regular newsletters.

If however, like many busy businesses, article and thought leadership publishing is less than frequent, it can be hard to fill a newsletter. Instead consider a monthly business perspective article or thought-piece that can be e-mailed to your prospects. In only a few short paragraphs, you can convey valuable information to a potential client regarding a key industry issue or trend. Case studies are another excellent way to deliver an important message about your services. They also come with the added bonus of serving as a testimonial from an existing, satisfied client.

The key to a successful, informative program is never the volume. A newsletter, with lots of content but little of interest to say is not much value. But a short, humorous blog entry or an article that speaks to an issue the client is facing can be an attention-getting and momentum-building contact tool. Think of how often you have forwarded an article you found of interest to a friend or colleague.

Ensuring that a KIT program is informative and interesting requires planning. Take time to build an editorial calendar so you know in advance what topics you want to cover with each prospect. Brainstorm issues, events and tools/technologies that would be interesting and fun for your audience (clients and prospects) to read about. Look at what industry leaders and business journals are writing about and watch for exciting topics in the news.

An editorial calendar does not have to span an entire year, but should cover a few months in order to help keep your program on schedule and organized. However, nothing is set in stone. If there is a fascinating industry matter to address or a last-minute topic you know will interest your prospect list, be flexible and react. Being informative also requires being in-the-know and aware of marketplace trends.

In addition, always ensure the recipient clearly knows to contact your business for more information. If recipients are reminded that you can offer additional insight, they will begin to register your company as a valuable information and industry resource worth getting to know.

Creative: Make Them Take Note

Another key component of your KIT program should be creative flair. To get people to take notice of your content (be it newsletter, blog, case study or article), you need to have both design and message creativity at work.

While e-mail allows you to more quickly deliver these tools to prospects and clients, be sure you are not giving yourself entirely over to convenience. Online newsletters

and HTML articles can have excellent design elements that make readers sit up and take note. For example, one way to add a simple, interesting design element is to employ e-postcards that lead to the content you want to provide.

As the example above demonstrates, an e-postcard is a small, attention-grabbing teaser that is e-mailed to your prospect. Easy and quick to design, they tell recipients you have an interesting article, newsletter, blog entry or case study for them to read and invite them to “click here” in order to reach the content (be sure to include opt-out clauses if sending mass e-mails and have a system in place to manage your distribution lists). An e-postcard can even include a bit of the content as a way to hook readers, compelling them to click over to your Web site. It’s an excellent way to get prospects familiar with your Web site as well as an opportunity to monitor how many recipients are clicking over to read your content.

Take time and effort when formatting, as the decision makers you are trying to reach have sharp eyes. They will appreciate the level of attention you put into making your communications clean, interesting and noticeable.

The same need for creativity applies to your messages. Articles and case studies should be focused and intelligently written. Today’s PCs are a gateway to endless information (some useful and some useless). Although the information you send will be useful, it will take style and ingenuity to get your prospects to keep reading. Entice them to read your content with a strong, provocative call-to-action, letting them know that they will learn and gain valuable knowledge by taking the time to read your information. If you do not have strong writing talent in house, employ the services of a good editor to ensure both correct grammar and attention-grabbing messages.

Personalized: The High Value of an Individual Touch

You can’t customize an entire program based on one prospect’s needs and issues. However, you can personalize

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your KIT programs in small ways that demonstrate your attentiveness as a service provider. For example, include a cover note with the newsletter/article/case study/etc. that you choose to deliver and tie it back to the prospect's business or a conversation you've shared. Here are some general examples of personalized cover note messages:

- "I thought you might find this article on remote IT management excellence of interest as your organization prepares to open new offices in XXX and XXX."
- "I remembered we both attended a Microsoft networking event last month and thought you'd enjoy these insights from our CIO on the new Microsoft Vista product—it's advantages and challenges. Enjoy!"

Just a small touch of genuine, thoughtful personalization will go a long way in establishing your brand in the mind of a prospective client.

Putting Your Program to Work

Once you have determined a KIT tool or vehicle that your business can consistently, informatively and creatively provide to decision-maker prospects, it's time to put it to work. Brainstorm topics and messages in advance, leverage editorial calendars and employ outside resources (designers, writers, etc.) when needed in order to ensure the quality and frequency of your program. Once these programs are up and running, they are cost effective and easy to maintain. In addition, they allow you to build a library of tools that can be used for future marketing, PR and branding purposes, such as:

- Industry and local events during talks covering similar topics
- Industry journals (print and online) for publication
- Online in a thought leadership library
- Partner newsletters and Web sites

Galmont Consulting, an Illinois-based IT services firm, has been successfully running a customized KIT program for more than two years. Below you will read about its program and the successful results the company has achieved.

How Galmont Consulting Keeps In Touch

Galmont Consulting is an IT services firm focused on providing IT talent and solutions in the areas of software quality assurance (SQA), testing and tool automation. With headquarters in Chicago, this growing firm was determined to help prospective clients distinguish Galmont from its numerous local competitors.

According to President and Founder of Galmont, Jeri Smith, "With our exclusive focus on SQA, testing and tool automation, we have a unique value proposition as an IT services provider. We wanted to be sure prospective clients understood Galmont's deep expertise in these areas."

The solution was a KIT program, which Galmont named the monthly "Spotlight." It was designed to leverage the knowledge of Galmont's senior management team and talented consulting staff. Delivered by e-mail to the prospect lists of the sales and management team members and existing clients, each monthly Spotlight communication consists of a succinct, one-to-two-page article or case study focusing on Galmont's SQA, testing and tool automation experience.



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In order to minimize the workload for its internal team, Galmont enlisted the services of an editor to help structure and finalize content. The month-to-month Spotlight articles cover a range of topics selected to spark the interest of prospects. Previous topics included:

- Top 10 Best Practices in Tool Automation
- The Advantages of Software Testing Outsourcing versus Offshoring
- A Cost-effective Sarbanes-Oxley Validation Strategy

For each topic, subject matter experts from Galmont partner with the editor to develop the content, which once finalized is put into an elegant Galmont-branded HTML template for e-mailing and .PDF for archiving online and leveraging across the sales cycle. The entire process requires no more than two hours of time from Galmont, yet results in a lasting impression in the minds of recipients.

In one case, Galmont had submitted a proposal to a potential client that had questioned the firm's capabilities in a specific area of SQA. That very month, Galmont had a case study slated for its Spotlight article, which outlined a recent, highly successful project in the exact same SQA area. After reading the case study, the prospective client called to say that Galmont had won the account.

"Every month we are sharing our message and expertise with businesses and business leaders across our network," explains Jeri. "It has helped us win business, carve out a strong name in the marketplace and get closer and closer to where we want to be: top-of-mind with every CIO and IT leader in our region who is looking for SQA, testing and tool automation talent and solutions."

The Spotlight articles have also helped Galmont build an online repository of knowledge and industry expertise that continues to build credibility for the company long after the articles have been e-mailed out. Today Galmont sends its Spotlight articles to hundreds of prospects and clients—a number that grows every day.

Always Keep in Touch

All good sales professionals know that keeping in touch with prospects, both new and old, is critical to winning opportunities to compete for business. A consistent, informative, creative and personalized marketing campaign gives businesses a way to continually educate potential clients while demonstrating commitment and persistence. With your company's name and your team's knowledge regularly in front of prospects, a strategic KIT program will make your organization very hard to ignore when an IT services need arises. ❖

Stayed tuned for ClearEdge Marketing's fourth installment in our series of marketing articles when next month we focus on getting in the door at key accounts with Target Account Programs (TAPs).

About the Author

Leslie Vickrey is president and founder of ClearEdge Marketing, a marketing communications firm specializing in the IT services industry. After beginning her career in marketing for well-known companies such as McDonald's Corporation and Junior Achievement, Vickrey quickly found a niche in the technology services industry, where she has worked for the past 10 years managing marketing operations or providing consulting services for companies such as Spherion, TAC Worldwide, Harvey Nash, NACCB, The Armada Group, TransTech, Galmont Consulting, RiverPoint, Pierce Technology and Technisource. For more information, please e-mail lvickrey@clearedgemarketing.com

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