

Drip... Drip... Drip Marketing

Creating a steady revenue stream... one drop at a time

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Looking to build a flow of business for your pipeline? Drip marketing may be the best solution for your company. The term “drip marketing” refers to a deliberate, planned and sequenced system of deploying marketing messages over a period of time. Drip marketing is the opposite of a “marketing blitz,” where marketing efforts are compressed within a short time frame. As with drip irrigation (from which the term originates), the theory behind drip marketing is that the value of repetition – and a slow build – can be as powerful as a highly concentrated rush.

Advocates of drip marketing cite statistics that show that between three and 30 repetitions are required for any message to “take hold” in the human consciousness. As you drip messages to various target audiences, your brand and messages settle in. You should vary your offers and messages, building as you go. Planning for drip marketing needs to be thoughtful, comprehensive and (if the target market is big or diverse enough) carefully segmented by customer category. See the sample drip marketing campaign in the table on page 26 for ideas on how to plan a campaign.

Drip marketing can be an ideal approach for small business owners because it involves an outlay of expense and other resources over time. You learn as you go, refining your tactics and repositioning your marketing efforts to respond to results.

Additionally, drip marketing is a powerful tactic for products and services that require a “right time” to buy. For example, realtors and financial services companies are good candidates for drip marketing. A prospect might not be considering renting new office space or starting his daughter’s college fund on a day when a full-page ad runs. But if the latest mailing in a sequence happens to hit before an office lease is up, the drip marketer has scored. Drip marketing works because awareness and recognition is built over time. Your target sees your brand repeatedly and, consciously or not, registers your messages.

Some business owners and savvy marketers have been drip marketing for years. Jennifer Shaheen, founder of the Technology Therapy Group, started her company’s drip marketing program with sequenced e-marketing messages and then added direct mail and telemarketing. As she read results, she adjusted the frequency and content of her messages. Daily broadcast radio tips will soon be added to the mix. “We get an average of two to three leads per week,” says Shaheen.

Conference developers often use drip marketing, starting months before their events and targeting discrete segments with a combination of direct mail, e-messaging, newsletters and other “reminders.” Steve Etzler, founder of the Business Development Institute, a N.Y.-based event marketing agency, believes technology has given the event business some great new, cost-effective ways to “drip.” “Blogs, podcasts and video clips have been merged into the multi-channel mix of e-mail, phone, direct mail and advertising as effective ways to get a message across,” says Etzler.

Technologies have also expanded the use of drip marketing to those companies that might not have the budget for other types of marketing media. Postcards (especially if they can be produced in large quantities), e-newsletters and targeted online messages are all relatively low-cost media. Another cost-saving strategy is to reserve higher cost media for those market segments that have the highest revenue potential. A drip strategy is different for every company and type of business, depending on goals, budget, message, target market, product and a host of other features. Below are some general principles that hold true regardless of your particular business challenge.

How to Drip

There are four components of a highly effective drip marketing campaign: planning, persistence, pizzazz and powerful systems that support tracking and analysis.

Planning: As with all good marketing, planning a drip campaign requires a thorough understanding of your target

market and how to best reach it. Using the drip irrigation analogy, think about your prospect base as a field and consider which patches have the greatest chance of yielding profitable crops. Most of your effort should be directed to that part of the acreage. But be sure to direct your drip marketing efforts toward those less fertile patches too, perhaps contacting them with lower-cost media or less frequent drips.

Drip marketing can include any combination of printed materials, e-marketing and telemarketing, as well as variations on offers and messages. You may vary your messages to target different segments. Just be sure that whatever you're planning is realistic to execute within your business constraints. Draw up a long-term schedule and figure out the total costs of your plan.

Persistence and patience: Drip marketing works because it entails consistent, well timed messages. If you develop a full-year plan, stick to it. Put systems in place up front that are simple to execute, so you don't have to stop running your business to focus on that next step in the campaign.

You'll need at least 12 months or more to evaluate the overall effectiveness of your plan. That said, if an approach is clearly not working after six months, rethink your market, your creative, your offers and your media. Fine-tune as necessary.

Pizzazz: No one wants to see the same approach from the same company at the same time each month again and again.

Change your offers and copy based on seasonality, segment or even sequence. Some creative drip marketers will even alert their targets up front that they'll be receiving a series of messages over time, giving uninterested prospects a chance to opt out before they start to consider your messages a nuisance. Deliver real value in your communications and make sure your message is useful, unique and not merely promotional. Include news and helpful proprietary tips in your messages to keep them interesting. Your brand, however, should be consistent from drip to drip. Your audience should recognize immediately that a communication comes from your company.

Powerful Tracking/Measurement Systems: Tracking campaigns is critical and relatively simple, with a variety of off-the-shelf customer relationship management and website traffic tracking programs. As your campaign grows and becomes more complex, consider investing in a custom-designed deployment and management system.

If you're working with an external marketing firm, make sure they have the right systems in place to report on results. Be sure to also keep on top of "opt-outs" and customer complaints. A fine line exists between persistence and annoyance.

If responses to your efforts are coming in to multiple people within your company, be sure they are trained on your drip marketing program, so they can be aware of when marketing is going to hit and how they need to keep track of leads. (You might even consider building in an incentive program for accurate tracking.) If your program is not working as effectively as it could be, analyze each component of your efforts – your database, creative, sequence, media and lead quality. Remember, one advantage of drip marketing is that if you don't get your irrigation system right at first, you can move your hose before you face a drought of resources!

A Sample Drip Marketing Plan

Every drip plan will be different, depending on your business objectives, your budget, the type of business you have and a variety of other factors. The following hypothetical plan illustrates the first four months of a simple drip strategy.

Example: Eat Up! Restaurant opened last month and has compiled a list of 300 visitors who have come to the restaurant since the opening and either signed the guest book or entered a sweepstakes. These customers have provided their e-mail addresses and, in some cases, telephone numbers. Objective: Drive repeat visits and increase spending per customer.

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