

Write a marketing plan

Marketing is a key part of business success. You need to decide which customers to target. You need to work out how you will REACH and win new customers. You need to make sure that you keep existing customers happy. And you need to keep reviewing and improving everything you do to stay ahead of the competition.

A good marketing plan starts by looking at your overall strategy, and the business environment you operate in. It builds on your own strengths and weaknesses to work out what your marketing strategy should be. It sets out clear objectives and explains how you will achieve them. Perhaps most importantly it looks at how you can ensure that your plan becomes reality.

This guide outlines the key areas to look at and what to include in an effective marketing plan.

Marketing plan summary and introduction

Your marketing plan should start with an executive summary. The summary gives a quick overview of the main points of the plan.

Although the executive summary appears at the beginning of the plan, you should write it last. Writing the summary is a good opportunity to check that your plan makes sense and that you haven't missed any important points.

Business strategy

It's a good idea to introduce the main body of the plan with a reminder of your overall business strategy, including:

What your business is about (your business mission)

Your key business objectives

Your broad strategy for achieving those objectives

This helps to ensure that your marketing plan, your marketing strategy and your overall business strategy all work together. For example, suppose your business strategy is based on providing premium quality products and service. Your marketing strategy and plan will need to take this into account, targeting customers who appreciate quality, promoting your product in ways that help build the right image and so on.

External and internal analysis for your marketing plan

Understanding the environment your business operates in is a key part of planning. A PEST analysis helps you to identify the main opportunities and threats in your market:

Political and legal changes such as new regulations

Economic factors such as interest rates, exchange rates and consumer confidence

Social factors such as changing attitudes and lifestyles, and the ageing population

Technological factors such as new materials and growing use of the Internet

You also need to understand your own internal strengths and weaknesses. For example, the main strengths of a new business might be an original product and enthusiastic employees. The main weaknesses might be the lack of an existing customer base and limited financial resources.

A SWOT analysis combines the external and internal analysis to summarise your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. You need to look for opportunities that play to your strengths. You also need to decide what to do about threats to your business and how you can overcome important weaknesses.

For example, your SWOT analysis might help you identify the most promising customers to target. You might decide to look at ways of using the Internet to reach customers. And you might start to investigate ways of raising additional investment to overcome your financial weakness.

Your marketing objectives

Your marketing objectives should be based on understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and the business environment you operate in. They should also be linked to your overall business strategy.

For example, suppose your business objectives include increasing sales by 10 per cent over the next year. Your marketing objectives might include targeting a promising new market segment to help achieve this growth.

Objectives should always be SMART:

Specific. For example, you might set an objective of getting ten new customers.
Measurable. Whatever your objective is, you need to be able to check whether you have reached it or not when you review your plan.

Achievable. While you should set targets that stretch you, there is no point in being too ambitious.

Realistic. You must have the resources you need to achieve the objective. The key resources are usually people and money.

Time-bound. You should set a deadline for achieving the objective. For example, you might aim to get ten new customers within the next 12 months.

Marketing strategy for your marketing plan

Your marketing plan is how you put your marketing strategy into practice. It's worth highlighting the main points of your strategy in the plan.

If you understand the market well, you can probably break it down into different segments - groups of similar customers. For example, you can break the business market down into businesses of the same sector and of a similar size. For more information, see our guide on how to segment your customers.

For each segment, you need to look at what customers want, what you can offer and what the competition is like. You want to identify segments where you have a competitive advantage. At the same time, you should assess whether you can expect high enough sales to make the segment worthwhile.

Often, the most promising segments are those where you have existing customers. If you are targeting new customers, you need to be sure that you will be able to reach them.

Once you have decided what your target market is, you also need to decide how you will position yourself in it. For example, you might offer a high quality product at a premium price or a flexible local service. Some businesses try to build a strong brand and image to help them stand out. Whatever your strategy, you want to differentiate yourself from the competition.

Plan your marketing tactics

Once you have decided what your marketing objectives are, and your strategy for meeting them, you need to plan how you will make the strategy a reality.

Many businesses find it helpful to think in terms of the 4 Ps:

Product. What your product offers that your customers value, and whether/how you should change your product to meet customer needs.

Pricing. For example, you might aim simply to match the competition, or charge a premium price for a quality product and service. You might have to choose either to make relatively few high margin sales, or sell more but with lower unit profits.

Place. How and where you sell. This may include using different distribution channels. For example, you might sell over the Internet or sell through retailers.

Promotion. How you reach your customers and potential customers. For example, you might use advertising, PR, direct mail and personal selling. If you sell a service, you can extend this to 7 Ps:

People. For example, you need to ensure that your employees have the right training.

Processes. The right processes will ensure that you offer a consistent service that suits your customers.

Physical evidence. The appearance of your employees and premises can affect how customers see your service. Even the quality of paperwork, such as invoices, makes a difference.

Implementation of your marketing plan

Your marketing plan must do more than just say what you want to happen. It must include how you will make sure that it happens.

The plan should include a schedule of key tasks. This sets out what will be done, and by when. Without a schedule, it's all too easy to get bogged down dealing with day-to-day tasks and lose sight of what you are trying to achieve.

It should also assess what resources you need. For example, you might need to think about what brochures you need, and whether they need to be available for digital distribution (by email or from your website). You might also need to look at how much time it takes to sell to customers and whether you have enough salespeople.

The cost of everything in the plan needs to be included in a budget. If your finances are limited, your plan will need to take that into account. You may also want to link your marketing budget to your sales forecast.

Control

As well as setting out the schedule, the plan needs to say how it will be controlled. You need an individual who takes responsibility for pushing things along. A good schedule and budget should make it easy to monitor progress. When things fall behind schedule, or costs overrun, you need to be ready to do something about it and to adapt your plan accordingly.

From time to time, you need to stand back and ask whether the plan is working. What can you learn from your mistakes? How can you use what you know to make a better plan for the future?

Tips for writing a marketing plan

It is important for a marketing plan to:

Set clear, realistic and measurable targets - for example, increasing sales by 10 per cent

Include deadlines for meeting targets

Provide a budget for each marketing activity

Specify who is responsible for each activity

Poorly thought-out objectives will cause problems. For example, you might set

a target for the number of new enquiries. But if none of these enquiries turn into sales, you will have increased costs without any benefits.

Link to your strategy

Assess the business environment to identify the opportunities and threats that you face. Look for where you can capitalise on your strengths or where you need to overcome a weakness.

Every part of your business must work together. For example, if you have limited cashflow you should avoid seeking large orders from customers who demand extended credit or that will involve you in heavy up-front costs.

Remember to focus on your long-term strategy. Reducing customer service might boost short-term profits, but next year you might not have any customers left.

Make it happen

A plan will not happen by itself. You need to make someone responsible for monitoring progress and chasing up overdue activities. Reviewing progress will also help you learn from your mistakes so that you can improve your plans for the future.