

20 sales and marketing tips from **The Taskmaster**



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Introduction

There isn't much point devising a product or service if you have no idea how to market and sell it.

While you may think that your competitors won't be attempting the same strategy as you, the chances are there will be some crossover. To give yourself the edge, your business needs to do the simple things well, alongside some lateral thinking.

To help ensure that you keep your nose ahead of the competition, we have compiled the 20 best Taskmaster tips on sales and marketing.

Taskmaster is StartupSmart's resident goal-setter, delivering insightful advice and demanding ever greater efforts from the site's readers every day.

As the head of the eponymous Taskmaster Enterprises, he may now be enjoying the long lunches of business success, but Taskmaster still has an innate understanding of how smart start-ups can break into the big time.

So, read his tips, feel suitably chastened and buck up your sales and marketing efforts.

Oliver Milman,
StartupSmart editor



1

Google your competitor

It's OK, you can admit it – you like to Google your own name, don't you? It's something every entrepreneur does from time to time, just to see how they are being seen in the big bad world of the internet.

Heck, I even Google Taskmaster every now and again (apparently I am a fictional comic book character, as well as a suave business advice guru).

But today I want you to stop Googling yourself and spend 10 minutes Googling the name of your biggest competitor.

Why, I hear you say? Because there is a lot you can learn from this exercise, and not just your rival's web address.

From a simple Google search you'll see:

- Where they rank for their own company name (you might be surprised by this, as their Wikipedia entry or a story in a news website may actually rank higher).
- What Google Ad Words advertising is around them (you might see an opportunity to put your ads there and piggy back off their traffic).
- What news sites or blogs are mentioning their name.
- What other companies they have affiliate or distribution deals with.
- Info about their social media strategies (if and how often they Tweet or post on Facebook, for example).
- What directories they have listed themselves on (and whether you need to be on these directories too).

In a few minutes and you'll learn a lot about their Google strategy. And don't forget to run their name through other search engines such as Bing and Yahoo while you're at it.

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2

Survey your customers

One of the easiest ways to conduct market research is one that many companies choose to ignore – the old-fashioned customer survey.

But a simple and cheap web survey is a great way to quickly take the temperature of your clients, find out what they like and don't like about your business and make some solid improvements.

If you are looking to keep costs down, a great place to start is a free online survey tool such as Web Monkey. Get an account, take a look at how it all works and you are away.

A good tip is to keep your survey short and focus on one area, such as customer support, your website or your logistics. Ask a few basic questions that give customers the chance to rate you and provide more detailed comments (particularly on problems or issues they may have noticed).

Another great tip is to offer some sort of incentive – a discount, a freebie or a prize all work well.

Finally, once you've analysed the info, send out an email sharing some of the results and the actions you plan to take. That way, the customers will know their opinion really matters.

It's cheap, easy and potentially extremely valuable.

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3

Write out your company's story

Entrepreneurs have to learn the art of selling themselves and their company very early on. You might be pitching to an investor or a lender, you might be selling to a prospective customer or you might be just explaining why you look so tired at a dinner party.

Lots of people have their elevator pitch right – that's the quick sentence or two that sums up what their business – but fewer are skilled in telling the story of their business.

The story of your business involves your background, your reasons for starting the business, where and how you kicked things off and how your company grew from there.

Writing this story down – remember to flesh the funny little anecdotes about your start-up journey, including some of the challenges you had to get over – will help solidify it in your mind for the following audiences:

- Customers and suppliers who want to hear more about you.
- Website visitors (via the About Us page on your website).
- Journalists.
- People at networking events.
- Potential investors, customers and suppliers.

Having a great story adds to the power of you brand, it makes your marketing better and it can really help you engage with the market.

But if you want it to be articulate and well presented, write it down.

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4

Make today a selling day

The Taskmaster says ‘it’s time to start selling’ While the start-up entrepreneur has got to work across accounts, HR, business strategy and purchasing, you should never lose sight of the fact that your most important job is selling your product and service.

It’s tough, I know. Here at Taskmaster enterprises, I often find that my day is chewed up by tasks such as meetings, paperwork and office politics that the job of actually meeting with current and prospective clients falls by the wayside.

When this happens, I have to take a stand. I pick a day, clear my diary of all non-selling tasks and focus like the devil on selling. I make appointments to meet new customers (always with a decision maker, mind you), I make time to cold call a few new prospects and I take a current customer out for a coffee or lunch.

Yes, I have great sales people, but there is nothing like letting clients see the passion and belief of the founder.

Founders open doors, and founders close deals.

So if you find yourself getting bogged down in non revenue-generating tasks, put your foot down and say, it’s time to sell.

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5

Set up a weekly email for customers

The Taskmaster says send an email! In some businesses – particularly service businesses – finding an excuse to talk to your customers regularly is a crucial first step in the sales process.

Common reasons for getting in touch with customers might include a special offer or sale, a reminder about a seasonal promotion (for example, at tax time or Christmas sale) or information about an event.

However, this means communication with customers is hardly regular, and customers won't have you front of mind.

One way to get around this is to set up a regular weekly email for customers. But instead of focussing on sales and special offers, add a bit of value to their day by linking to articles about your industry, commenting on recent developments and generally showing a little thought leadership.

This will ensure they actually read the email, and don't just discard it as a sales pitch.

Of course, you will need to do it properly – make sure customers have the ability to opt in, and make sure you don't breach any spam rules.

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6

Become an industry news source

I must admit that there are times when Twitter and Facebook get me confused.

I understand that everyone out there wants to know exactly what is happening in the life of the Taskmaster at all times, but I just don't understand why I want to know about the meal people are eating, or what they think about a particular TV show, or what dress-up costume their "cute" little kid just put on.

Anyway, there is one thing I love getting from Twitter, and that's great links to industry trends, interesting stories from around the world and breaking news.

So for those struggling to think of suitable Twitter content, why not use your account to position yourself as an industry news source?

When you come across a news story, an interesting blog or feature or even a slideshow that catches your eye, simply shoot it out via Twitter and help your followers keep up.

They'll appreciate your hard work, re-Tweet you and help build your following (and personal branding) further.

It's an easy way to look good on Twitter, and a way to get some value out of all those hours you spend reading online!

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7

Get involved in your company's social media campaign

It's one of the great truths of customer service – customers love talking to the boss. No one sells better than the boss, no one builds relationships like the boss and no one solves customer problems like the boss.

And yet I've noticed that many bosses are reluctant to get personally involved in the social media strategy of their business. They will dedicate resources to social media, but quite often they'll leave the actual Facebook updates and Twitter posts to someone else.

But while social media can be time consuming, your customers are likely to react really positively to seeing the owner of the company get involved. It helps put a face and a personality to the business that customers love.

If you feel you can't commit to monitoring social media on a 24 hour a basis, that's okay. Just one post a day (or even better, one response to a customer's post) is a good start.

Alternatively, you could advertise the fact that you'll be online on social media for one particular hour a week – ready, willing and able to accept comments, questions and criticism.

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8

Prepare for a cold call

Okay, it's time to get ready to attack one of the toughest things in business – the dreaded cold call.

Now, cold calling is something of a dark art and many entrepreneurs (and even some sales people) actively try to avoid making them. This is mainly because it can be hard work and – let's face it – a little depressing if the rejections end up coming thick and fast.

However, skilled practitioners do have a big tip – do your research beforehand, to give yourself a good chance of success.

Obviously, you want to try and find out what your target does, what size they are, who the key decision-makers are and, perhaps most importantly, how your product or service can help them. Are they in a growth phase? Are they exporting? Are they under pressure from rivals?

And if you really want to go the extra mile, have a bit of a look at their competitors and what they are doing – this might give you another way to aim your pitch.

The idea here is to “warm” that call up as much as possible, such that you can establish your credibility and start building a relationship.

Of course, don't let the research process run forever... that's just putting off actually making the call.

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9

Make that cold call

Right, time to stop procrastinating. Yesterday I gave you some tips about how to prepare for a cold call, but now it's time for the rubber to hit the road. You've got to pick up that phone and actually ring someone.

There are lots of tips for cold calling, but the best advice I have received is around demonstrating some empathy with the client you are trying to land.

So instead of saying, "Can I have a moment of your time?" it's good to try and start with something like, "I think I can help you with..."

This suggests that you've done your homework before the call, you are not going to waste their time, and you've put some thought into actually helping them.

From there, demonstrate your knowledge about the company, the industry and how your product can help them. Make the client realise that you are not there for a quick sale, but rather for a long-term relationship.

It won't work every time, and you need to be prepared for some cold calls to go wrong. But this is a skill that is invaluable, and something business owners need to have a go at.

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10

Comment on an industry trend

There are many ways to be seen as an industry thought leader. You can appear at conferences, you can join the board of an industry association, or you can write a book. Heck, you can even get yourself a blog on a leading website like StartupSmart.

But what you will need to have for all these forums is content. It's fine to get a platform to share your views, but you better make sure you've got some views to share.

So it's time to start by writing a simple comment piece on a major trend in your industry. It might a problem you are seeing crop up a lot within your customer base, or a more macro demographic trend that is affecting your competitors or your business. It might be positive or negative. It might be your take on a well-known issue, or something new that you've spotted.

The key here is to get your thoughts down on paper, get someone in the office to proofread it and then get it out there. Put it on your blog, send it to your customers, send it in to your industry association's publication.

Let people see that you are an up and coming industry leader and they will respond.

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11

Give part of your product away

Start-up entrepreneurs are always looking for ways to get a sales spike, and a resultant boost in profit. It's never easy, but one way might be to give your product away – or at least some of it.

The “freemium” model is a favourite of the software industry, from Adobe through to app developers.

The idea being that if you give a basic or cut down version of your product away to customers and they love it, they will then be more likely to pay for a version with extra features and functionality.

Services businesses use the model a lot too – everyone's seen companies offering an initial consultation for free, which are of course followed by a series of consultations that you must pay for.

The point is, being willing to give something away gets you an introduction to customers that, ironically, money can't really buy.

Yes, you'll need to develop a model that allows you to recoup the cost of this free product or service at a later date, but giving stuff away might just be the sales boost you've been looking for.

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Make SEO a personal priority

Depending on how tech-savvy you are, you are either completely on top of your website’s SEO strategy or you may be struggling to understand what search engine optimisation is.

Whichever category you find yourself in, starting today you are going to make SEO a personal priority in your business.

By way of explanation from our resident SEO guru Wai Hong Fong, SEO is “the active process of optimising a website in order to increase traffic directed to the site from search engines”.

In other words, the better your SEO is, the more traffic you get from Google and the more leads you create.

Many start-up entrepreneurs get actively involved in SEO themselves, while others will outsource it to experts. But even if you do outsource your SEO strategy, a working knowledge of the where your site stands now and how it can improve is essential.

As a starting point, make sure you never miss Wai Hong’s great column, [SEO for Start-ups](#).

But secondly, make sure you know how your site is tracking. A great tool for this is the free service provided by [Website Grader](#). You simply pop in your URL and you get a score out of 100 according to the strength of your site’s SEO.

Take the score and the report (if you don’t want to use this site, there are lots more like it), sit down with your team and brainstorm ways to boost your rankings. As I say, it’s crucial that you as the owner of the business make it clear this really is a priority.

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13

Get to know your spam responsibilities

Nobody likes receiving email or SMS spam, least of all a busy entrepreneur like me.

And yet more than seven years after the introduction of the Spam Act, companies are still falling foul of the spam regulator, otherwise known as the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

Just this week, airline Virgin Blue was hit with a \$110,000 fine for breaching the Act by sending people emails after they had unsubscribed from the company's email database.

So the regulator is watching and any breaches of the Act will be punished severely. Given this, entrepreneurs need to make sure they and their teams are right on top of potential issues if they are using email marketing.

The key things you need to do to avoid an email marketing campaign being treated as spam is to ensure you have the consent of the recipient, identify yourself as a business and ensure recipients have the ability to unsubscribe from future messages.

If you are looking for further information about other tricks and traps that you can fall into, head for [ACMA's webpage on spam and start reading](#).

This is crucial stuff for your reputation and, if you get it wrong, your bottom line.

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14

Come up with a left-field marketing idea

On Monday morning (Australian time) hundreds of millions of Americans will tune in to watch the Super Bowl, the pinnacle of the NFL season.

It's a huge television event but it's not all about the football (or gridiron as we often call it). Indeed, much of the focus is on the 30-second television commercials that are shown at half-time.

The air-time alone can cost up to \$3 million, and companies go all out to develop these ads – in 1984, to celebrate the release of its Mac computer, Apple had its ad directed by Ridley Scott.

Now, these ads are usually out of reach of start-ups, although US group buying site Groupon, which recently raise \$US950 million, is doing one this year.

But why not use these ads (they will be all over YouTube next week) to come up with some left-field marketing ideas for your business.

Perhaps it's not a television commercial, but think about what you can do to stand out from your competitors.

Could you add a witty tag line to your promotional materials?

Could you do a funny YouTube video in the office?

Could you get a mascot?

Is there a cause that your company could attach itself to, to help build your profile?

Is there a way to show off your product or service in an unusual environment?

Watching top-class marketing is always a great way to get inspiration.

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15

Find a sales mentor

How many mentors does a start-up entrepreneur want or need? My short answer is that you can never have too many.

When I was starting Taskmaster Enterprises, I had one mentor who could guide me through the start-up process and the early days of my business.

Then I added a mentor who could give me people management skills. I added another who could provide some advice around finance matters and then I added a mentor who could help me with product.

But perhaps the most important mentor I got was a mentor who could teach me about sales.

As every entrepreneur knows, there is lots of information around about sales – lots of books, lots of blogs, lots of coaches, lots of advice – but nothing beats a bit of practical knowledge from another entrepreneur who has actually run sales teams, closed deals, and generated leads when times were tough.

They are an invaluable source of fresh ideas that actually work.

The key things with mentors is to build a team of trusted advisors – sort of like the board you have before you get a formal advisory board.

They can be an invaluable asset.

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16

Investigate a customer complaint

When a business gets a complaint about its product or service the immediate thought is to fix the problem, make the customer happy and get on with life.

That's fair enough but often the cause of the problem isn't properly investigated. The mistake just disappears, everyone's happy and we can all pretend it didn't happen.

Why not take a different approach. Next time a customer complaint arrives fix the problem then launch a full-scale investigation.

Talk to the customer about what went wrong. Talk to the staff involved about how the complaint was handled. Test your processes and people to try to discover where things are breaking down.

Do everything you can to identify the cause of the issue.

When you feel you've got to the cause of the problem, meet with your key staff to extract lessons from the incident and decide what processes you will put in place to ensure it doesn't happen again.

The investigation might take some time but it will be worth it – you'll learn plenty about your business, your people and your product offering.

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17

Set up a staff discount scheme

Last week StartupSmart presented a disturbing story on the scourge of “sweet hearting” – when employees offer family and friends discounts or freebies.

Apparently 43% of staff have done this and think it’s OK. Of course, it’s not. Your dear staff members might feel they are entitled the odd five-finger discount, but it’s actually hurting your bottom line.

One way to get around this problem is to establish a formal staff discount program as a way of rewarding staff, building your customer network and controlling any “sweet hearting” that might be going on behind your back.

There are several ways to do this. A blanket discount on all products (call it 5% or maybe 10%) could be one way to go, although the fact different products have different margins might call for something more sophisticated, where different discounts are applied to different product areas.

If you want to take this a step further, you could even hold special “family and friends” promotions to offer discounts to your employees’ nearest and dearest.

Stop the sweet hearting, start the controlled promotions.

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18

Run a competition

Everyone loves winning a prize. It won't surprise you to know that when I was a young Taskmaster, I went undefeated in my primary school colouring competition for three years running.

So when I started Taskmaster Enterprises, one of the first things I did to raise a bit of profile for my business was to run a competition to win a year's supply of our latest product. It worked a treat.

Today, with social media, running a competition and getting people involved is even easier. Facebook competitions are particularly popular and can spread quickly through the networks of your followers (there are some rules around these, so be careful).

It's best to make sure your competition is a test of skill rather than a lottery-style promotion, for which you may need some sort of license.

Something like "tell us in 25 words or less" or "send in your best photo with our product" or "give us your best idea" can work really well. This style of competition also allows you to engage with your customers, and shows you are listening to them.

Even if you are serviced-based business with a relatively small number of clients, a competition is a great way to generate a little attention and inject some fun into your business.

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19

Update your website content

Most businesses have a spot on their website where they provide users – or at least promise to provide users – with updated content.

It might be under the heading of “latest news”. It might be a company blog. It might even be a prominent spot on the home page where media releases are displayed.

Whatever it is, it’s often at least a few weeks out of date, and possible even a few months. It’s not a good look. It says you are stale, there’s nothing happening at your business and you can’t be bothered updating the site.

What you need to do is very simple – update something!

I know it’s time consuming, and I know it sits below lots of other jobs in order of importance. But starting a blog or a “latest news” section involves a commitment. You cannot just do it once, and then forget about it.

If you are struggling to think of something to write about, just think about what your business has been doing recently. Have you got a new product or staff member? A big new customer? Are you covering a new market?

If so, write about it. Now!

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20

Post on a forum

Depending on what industry you are in, there is likely to be a website where members of the sector gather to get news and exchange views.

Many of these – particularly anything remotely connected with technology – have forums attached, where customers provide reviews, recommendations and criticisms of products.

Most entrepreneurs shy away from these forums, perhaps preferring not to get involved in slanging matches with critics.

But getting in there and talking directly with customers can be a powerful way to build your personal reputation and some brand loyalty.

Answer questions honestly, provide what information you can and be open when you don't have answers. Show that your business is open, transparent and offers a high level of customer service.

Companies often complain they don't get the chance to talk directly with their customers. These forums and websites offer a golden opportunity.

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