

Differentiating Yourself from Competitors

When businesses look for ways to distinguish themselves from their competition, the first thing that usually comes to mind is price, followed by quality and perhaps, service. Offering lower prices than competitors is not usually a feasible strategy as many costs continue to rise. You may develop a loyal following until you go out of business. Competing based on quality and service is possible, if you have the resources to back up your claims. There are other ways to gain a competitive advantage, however, and we will discuss a few of them here.

Create a community around your product and its use. Social media and content marketing are good tools for doing this and you don't need the marketing budget of a Harley Davidson or Apple Computer to get it done. For example, through a blog you can offer helpful information to your customers and prospects not designed to sell your product, but to enhance their knowledge of issues relevant to them. A flower shop owner could blog about the care, presentation and process of selecting flowers for different occasions as one of many topics related to flowers and the occasions that they are purchased for. When people come to view you as a source of valuable information, purchasing from you can become a simple matter of course without your having to sell. Their perception of you changes from a vendor to an advisor.

Creating a community around your business can also involve establishing a forum where your customers can communicate with each other to share information, tips and support. Again, blog is one of the easiest ways to do this, though it requires some time to set-up and maintain. For certain types of businesses with a customer base that is passionate about the use of the product, a blog or forum (in LinkedIn for example) can develop a large following. In addition, you can ask those following you if any of them would be willing to do articles or posts. This helps reduce your workload and gets your user community even more engaged with you on a level beyond simply purchasing from you. They can become your advocates and sing your praises in a way that you could never do yourself.

Yet another way to stand out is to bundle your product or service with a complementary offering. The complementary product can be one you create or get access to from another vendor. The idea is that you provide an additional resource that improves some aspect of the buyer's experience with your product. For example, a retailer of barbecue grills could include a DVD on the maintenance of the grills and cooking tips. A income tax preparation service might provide a consultation or document on how to reduce taxes in the coming year.

As the book *Tuned In* (by Craig Stull, Phil Myers and David Meerman Scott) points out, you can create a different experience for your buyers in terms of how they find you, product packaging, the purchasing experience, the product use experience and the product service experience. You may not be able to use all of these methods as points of distinction, but even using one or two can set your business apart from competitors.

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