

THE LESSON ROOM | PETE GAMBER

Relational Marketing

I recently pulled into my Corona, Calif., store's parking lot and saw a sign on the lawn that read: "Music Day Care Camp – Affordable Rates." The sign also included contact info. I thought, "What's up with this? The nerve! Somebody's using our foot traffic to build his business." I was steaming. I went to the Web site listed on the sign. As I checked it out, I realized my store and this company's performing arts center concept only had a 15-percent conflict of competition. In fact, our lesson programs were totally different.

The "Music Day Care Camp" sign got me thinking. This company needed my customers to know about its services, but its customers needed to know about ours, too. We offer a lot of stuff this place didn't have, such as drum set, electric guitar and horn lessons. I'll bet the kids who go to this day care have siblings who might want my music lessons. Where does the day care refer its customers to for other kinds of lessons? Where does it refer customers to for print music books and instruments, as well as gear rentals and repairs?

SMALL BUSINESSES UNITE

The economy is going to be tough in 2009, not just for music stores but for almost every small business. That includes independents that teach karate, dance, drama, ice skating, gymnastics, math tutoring and other youth-related services. All of these businesses will be dealing with the economy's "can't afford" from parents and face enrollment drops.

Creative advertising and promotions are key to attracting new students and customers, but with sales and revenue decreases, how much money will be leftover to do this? I realized I needed to have my lesson info in that day care center, and its info should be in my business, instead of on a lawn sign.

MY RELATIONAL MARKETING RESOLUTION

I am going to develop a Kid's Activity Info Center in my store with a sheet music rack filled with community activity fliers. I'll put a business' flier in my store if it displays my flier in its store. This promotion costs us very little — just the time and money of quick-printed fliers and leg work.

I plan to target all those kid-activity businesses, such as dance and karate studios. These places attract parents that are willing to invest in their child's enrichment activities. They are the types of parents that might be looking

for music lessons. Even though all of these small businesses are targeting the same customer type, we, as individual entrepreneurs, don't know how to reach all of these customers in our community.

I'm going to drive to every activity-related business in my area and introduce them to my music store and lesson program. I want to create an independent business network that will let small companies help each other. My customers will know about them, and their customers will know about our music lessons. It's a win-win, low-cost promotion.

Every month, or more, I intend to follow up with these businesses, get their updated fliers and give them more of mine.

I know it's old school, but relational marketing can generate more referrals than e-mails trying to get through spam filters. These businesses know people in the schools, churches, grocery stores and youth soccer teams, and if someone needs music lessons, they will mention you.

We don't offer hula dance lessons, and the hula dance studios don't teach rock guitar, but we can help each other survive the economic storms ahead. Aloha 2009! **MI**

Pete Gamber is the owner of Alta Loma Music in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. He welcomes questions and comments at pete@altalomamusic.com.



Increase your lesson program's visibility by networking with other local, activity-based businesses