

Marketing & Sales in The Modern Firm[®]



Why marketing and sales are important in a modern firm

A sound marketing and sales model is important to attract your ideal clients and support continued firm growth. If you don't have prior training in marketing and sales, don't despair. You're in the same position as the majority of firms within the accounting profession.

We developed this eBook to help you solve this common pain point. Use this document as a guide to simplify the overall concept and help you become fluent in the basics of marketing and sales.

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Marketing basics

When people speak about marketing, most of the time they're really talking about communication. That is, "getting the word out." But this is only one aspect of the total marketing picture. Marketing in its truest sense is a strategic process of satisfying consumer needs and desires. The time-honored way of viewing the big picture of marketing is summed up with the four Ps: Product, Price, Place and Promotion.

The four Ps offer a high-level overview of marketing, with all requiring some level of strategic planning at the partner level. When it comes to promotion, the majority of these tasks can be effectively delegated to front-line staff for day-to-day management—provided partners are aware of the marketing activities planned and staff members are properly educated on your firm's messaging.

■ Product

Offer products or services that are specifically designed to satisfy the needs and desires of the consumers you want to engage with.

■ Price

Optimize your products or services to make them affordable for your target consumer and competitive in the marketplace, while maximizing profits.

■ Place

For our purposes, think of place as the geographic territory your firm serves, as well as the means of delivery for your product. For example, delivering services via a web-based, collaborative interface or client center, as opposed to physical office visits and printed documents.

■ Promotion

The communication aspect of marketing comprises the activities associated with telling your story to consumers, persuading them to do business with your firm and motivating them to take action.

Lead with planning

You may be inclined to jump into marketing with a goal of growing your business, but don't get ahead of yourself. Before you get your communication and sales machine running, think through those P-words and ask yourself if you have the following pieces of the marketing puzzle in place first:

■ Identify the right clients

It's important that you know whom you want to serve. Your ideal clients can be as narrow as a specific niche, such as optometrists, or as broad as service-based businesses. For some firms, it can be even broader, covering small businesses in general. It's important that you at least have a clear picture of your firm's ideal clients before you get started with a marketing communications program.

■ Identify the right products

It's impossible to create an effective marketing campaign if you haven't defined what you want to sell. Locate the intersection of what clients desire and what you can most effectively deliver. "Productize" your offerings so they are easily understandable and appropriately priced for your target client base. (And remember, this includes your existing clients, too.)

■ Build a clear delivery model

Once you have identified whom you want to sell to and what you want to sell, it's important to have a clearly defined delivery model. Identify the technologies you'll need to create a modern delivery structure that meets today's tech-savvy, on-demand client expectations.

When you've accomplished these core tasks, you've laid the groundwork for a successful marketing program. You have defined what you want to sell, whom you want as clients and how you will deliver your products.

Set your goals

Before you undertake any strategic activity—including marketing—begin with the end in mind. In other words, set goals based on the needs of your firm. Once again, this requires input from the top—partners or other executive-level staff.

When it comes to goal setting around your business strategies, make it easy with the SMART acronym.

SMART goals are represented in the following image:

S	M	A	R	T
Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
<ul style="list-style-type: none">State what you'll doUse action words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Provide a way to evaluateUse metrics or data targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Stay within your scopeMake it possible to accomplish, attainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ensure it makes sense within your job functionEnsure it improves the business in some way	<ul style="list-style-type: none">State when you'll get it doneBe specific on date or timeframe

For the most success, firms must set measurable, broadly agreed-upon goals.

SMART goals are crucial to the success of your marketing program. Without specific, measurable, agreed-upon, relevant and time-bound goals, you won't be able to gauge the success or shortcomings of your marketing efforts. And without that clarity, your marketing initiatives will wind up with no direction.

Inbound versus outbound marketing and sales

Now that you have your business strategy and goals outlined, let's get down to the business of creating your marketing and sales plan. There are two strategies to consider, and you'll need to decide which best suits your firm. There's the outbound model and the inbound model.

Outbound model

Think of this model as "dialing for dollars." It involves making cold calls (unsolicited sales calls) to a list of prospective clients. Typically, you'll begin by purchasing a prospect list from a list broker. The list is compiled according to the parameters that define your ideal prospect. This is one reason that it's so important to identify your ideal client before you begin your marketing efforts.

After your list is compiled, you or your staff will act as sales development reps (SDRs). SDRs attempt to make contact with prospects to give a brief, high-level sales pitch and persuade them to set up appointments to discuss details in person with a firm principal.

In the outbound model, the nurturing cycle is usually much longer, because your prospects aren't thoroughly acquainted with your firm (although it's possible they have some cursory awareness from previous advertising or word of mouth). Additionally, it is often harder to get the actual decision maker on the phone. If you are calling a doctor, for example, chances of getting her on the phone for a sales call are slim. Likewise, many business owners have their time and access guarded by administrative assistants who serve as "gatekeepers" to screen calls and messages.

Inbound model

In this model, instead of cold calling prospects, you try to entice interested prospects to make contact with you. This is often done by digital and direct mail marketing. For example, you have identified that dentists are an ideal client for your firm, and that you would like to grow your dental practice niche in the area of outsourced client accounting services. These might be monthly recurring clients that fall into your sweet spot. The goal of an inbound sales model is to entice prospects to take some form of action that indicates interest. When they do, they become a sales lead.

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Before you make a decision on the type of sales model to adopt, consider that the inbound sales model feels less intrusive and more respectful of a prospect's time. The prospect still gains awareness of your brand via exposure to direct and digital marketing communications. When they take an action, such as viewing an email or clicking a link, they're showing an interest in learning more—prompting you to nurture that interest and progressively convert them into a client.

Building your list

Whether you're using the inbound or outbound sales model, it's necessary to start with a calling or mailing list. Your list comprises people who fit certain criteria that you've specified. For example, your criteria may include geographic region and demographic information such as industry category, annual revenue and headcount. This process is called segmentation, and it's essential to your success in direct marketing.

Good communication boils down to two questions: 1) What should my message say? and 2) Who should receive it? Good segmentation focuses on the latter, assuring that you're targeting only those people for whom your message is relevant, which will yield better results. Segmentation applies to your communication with existing clients as well. Not every offer or message will be relevant to all of your clients. Segmenting your list according to sensibly applied criteria or data points will cut down on superfluous communication and marketing clutter and will improve your results.

When it comes to lists, you have options in creating or acquiring records. We'll use the example of building a list of optometrists here:

■ List purchase

If you want a list of all optometrists in the state of Indiana, you can purchase a mailing list from a broker. This is the most expeditious approach, but also the most expensive in terms of out-of-pocket costs. Be aware, however, that emailing prospects without their express permission is a violation of federal anti-spam laws.

■ Professional associations

Another method is to gather lists available through professional associations such as a state or national optometry association. For prospects in non-specific sectors, local and state chambers of commerce are often a

source for member directories. This can be a tough process, because organizations are often bound by privacy policies that prohibit transferring member records to third parties.

■ Organic list building

You can build your lists organically in-firm as well. This method is slow, but yields high-quality leads. You can begin by assigning a staff person to do a simple Google or LinkedIn search of optometrists in your service area and then build your list manually.

■ Gated content

Another organic method of list building is to provide high-quality gated materials. That is, resources that are of interest to your target audience that can be downloaded free from your website in exchange for names and email addresses. You can deploy your social media channels to help promote your content and drive visitors to your website. Additionally, some email service providers offer the ability to embed forms on your social channels to sign up subscribers.

■ Onsite events

Yet another method of organic list building is leveraging onsite events. For example, if your firm has a presence at events such as trade shows or business after-hours, you can offer a promotional giveaway drawing as an incentive for people to complete entry forms and sign up for your list.

A high-quality list is crucial for the success of direct marketing. However, there are some stumbling blocks to watch out for. The most significant is that commercial email is a form of permission-based marketing. That is, you must have consent from the people on your list before you send email solicitations to them. Gaining permission is as simple as having them check an opt-in box on a paper or electronic form. Without consent, you run the risk of being flagged as a spammer.

Prospects versus leads

When it comes to people, we differentiate between those we think will be interested in our offer (prospects) and those who tell us they're interested by taking action (leads).

■ Prospects

These are people whom you can reasonably expect would have an interest in purchasing what you're selling—your target audience. If your goal is to add restaurant accounts, for example, your prospects are restaurant owners and managers. If you're focused on selling additional or expanded services to existing clients, then you will consider them as prospects as well, even though they're already known to you and doing business with your firm. To begin communicating with prospects, you need, at a minimum, their name and at least one contact data point (e.g., phone number, email address or mailing address).

■ Leads

A lead is a prospect that responds to your communication in a way that shows interest. You might generate a lead through an online web form, a social media response, an email or some other form of communicated interest.

Qualifying your leads

Qualification is the process of evaluating each lead's potential for becoming a client. Qualified leads are prospects that meet the criteria of your ideal client—specific demographic, geographic and behavioral characteristics that make a person or company more likely to become a happy client and one whom you actually want to serve. In some organizations, initial high-level qualification is done by a marketing team, prior to handing leads off to a sales team. The sales team may then apply additional criteria to further qualify leads that will make good candidates for a successful sale.

These are often referred to as marketing-qualified leads (MQLs) and sales-qualified leads (SQLs), respectively.

Lead qualification is an important process. It helps your marketing and sales team focus efforts on the leads that offer the most favorable odds for success. It also helps assure that new accounts are inherently good fits with your firm and most likely to become happy clients at least and raving fans at best.

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Traditionally, prospects go through manual qualification during direct marketing activities. Contemporary marketing automation now allows prospects to become MQLs or SQLs through triggered online behaviors.

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Sales opportunities

Simply put, sales opportunities are people or accounts that have been qualified. This means that you have made personal contact with the person and talked about their needs or pain points. You've assessed their fit with your firm and have identified a solution that's right for them—an opportunity to close a sale. All that remains is to nurture them to the finish line and persuade them to buy.

Content: Creating your message

Developing and delivering content is the means to nurture your prospects into taking action (i.e., showing interest). Good content helps prospects move along the path toward becoming a customer, a process referred to as the “customer journey.” Providing the right content at the right time will facilitate that journey.

Content development may be the most challenging aspect of marketing for most accounting firms, because they lack time, resources and the wherewithal to create and assemble content. The easiest way to think about content is in these main buckets:

■ Pure marketing communication

This is straight-up marketing—inviting prospects to respond to an offer or other call to action. These messages can be delivered through any traditional or digital media, including direct mail and email, social media, search engines or any other means of advertising.

■ Content marketing

This is where your firm provides helpful, informational and educational content that is so valuable that your prospects are willing to share their contact information to access it. This content often comprises materials such as eBooks, how-to guides, tips or niche-specific information.

■ Educational events

This is a highly specialized offshoot of content marketing that requires a great deal more effort. It could be a monthly webinar inviting your niche email list to listen in while you explain something of significant value to them, such as the implications of tax reform or best practices for starting a new business. You will design the content to appeal to your ideal client. When responding to the call to action, prospects provide their contact information, which you then add to your lists for future marketing initiatives and nurturing.

Many firms have found great success in hosting the above events in-person, either at an offsite

conference facility or at their own offices, if sufficiently equipped. Other firms have found that online events work better in terms of convenience for their audience. Find the solution that works best for your firm.

The all-important call to action (CTA)

Quality content is essential in capturing the interest of your prospects and convincing them to respond through a CTA. The CTA is a statement—along with a mechanism, such as a link, form or downloadable assets—that invites and enables response and engagement from the person receiving your message.

A good CTA will encourage the prospect to take a clearly defined next step to act on your message or offer. For example, a CTA on your website may read, “Download our free small business startup guide now” with a link to access the resource. Your marketing messages may have several CTAs that speak to a variety of prospective clients.

Build a referral network

No guide to accounting firm marketing and sales would be complete without mentioning the power of referrals. You have likely experienced the impact of referrals on your firm, as have the overwhelming majority of firm owners across the country. In fact, in a 2018 nationwide survey conducted by Rootworks, more than 88 percent of respondents reported that most of their business growth was the result of referrals.

Clearly, giving your clients a good experience is worth a lot. But your clients aren't the only source for quality referrals. In addition to existing clients, many firms have developed an extensive referral network that includes partners in financial services (e.g., banks, brokers and financial planners), as well as other professional services, such as attorneys and insurance agents.

Referrals from these sources are generally the highest quality, because they've already been vetted as good clients by other professionals. Cultivate a network for high-quality referrals. You may discover that you can make great headway towards your growth goals, with less effort and expense, via the power of a referral network.

Your four-step marketing and sales plan

Now that we are clear on all the aspects and definitions of a sound marketing and sales program, it's time to put some planning in place.

There's nothing complicated about marketing and sales, but it is oftentimes out of the comfort zone for tax and accounting firms. With this in mind, the remainder of this eBook offers a four-step marketing and sales plan to help demystify the process of growing your business.

1 Set goals and objectives

Before you design a marketing plan, you need to identify desired outcomes—that is, measurable goals and objectives. Starting with this desired outcome, work backward through your plan to chart a path to get there. Goal setting is a strategic activity—at the center of the broader plan and drawn up before launching your marketing and sales program. Once goals are established, they can be subdivided into specific objectives.

Think of objectives as individual steps along the path to your goal. Like goals, objectives should be well-defined, measurable and time-constrained.

Example:
Fred's goal is to generate \$100,000 in new client accounting revenue this year. One of his objectives is to achieve 50 percent of that growth by adding five new optometry clients by the end of the current year.

How did Fred determine this objective?

He believes it's realistic that 50 percent of his \$100,000 revenue goal can be derived from his specialty niche, optometry practices. And he knows that his average client accounting engagement value for an optometry practice is \$10K per year. Simple math dictates that he'll need five new optometry clients to attain that objective of \$50K in new revenue. If three months of the year are consumed by tax work, with no resources available for marketing during those periods, Fred will aim to add a new optometry client about every 60 days throughout the remainder of the year as part of his objective.

Goals and objectives are the purpose of your marketing plan. The strategies, tactics and actions wrapped up in your plan should be intentional and always focused on those goals and objectives.

2 Assign a marketing champion

Someone needs to have day-to-day ownership over your marketing plan, overseeing and coordinating its activities and participants as well as holding people accountable for their individual roles and tasks. Your marketing champion could be a staff person within your firm, or you could explore outsourcing this role to a third party.

One essential tool for this person is the marketing calendar. The calendar is a roadmap to navigate the times, seasons, and cadences of your marketing campaigns and content development. It also serves as a common point of reference for everyone involved in marketing efforts.


3 Develop content

This can be a challenge, due to the skill set involved and the sheer volume of content that may be required. For example, you may need to create content for your website, email campaigns, social media channels, informational webinars, eBooks, how-to guides and fact sheets. Who will take on the task of generating all of this content? Does this person have skills on par with professional writers who know the different technical requirements for writing in different media and for different audiences? How will content development affect the person's core workload? If multiple people are tasked with developing content, how will you ensure that they all write with a unified voice that represents your firm?

These are hard questions to grapple with, and they may point you toward seeking help from a professional writer. There are a number of online resources that serve as hubs for freelance content writers, or you could ask for a referral from another professional services firm. Hiring a professional writer requires diligence in defining your specific content needs, setting deadlines and providing adequate oversight to ensure content is accurate—particularly when it comes to details such as tax code and other technical aspects of advisory services.

4 Evaluate your results and make adjustments

Track your marketing activities, their costs and the results they produce. Then, determine if your activities are measuring up. That is, delivering sufficient qualified leads to meet your sales objectives. If not, be prepared to make tactical shifts either in content or distribution.



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Final words...

If you don't have any prior training in marketing, you're in the same position as the vast majority of people tasked with marketing responsibilities in professional firms everywhere. This eBook is designed to simplify the process for you and help you become fluent in the basics. It may seem overwhelming, but remember, you may only need to win perhaps a dozen new clients to meet your goal for the year. Just keep your activities steady and intentional, and win those clients one at a time.

Marketing is like the heartbeat of an organization. The process of satisfying consumer needs and desires with well-designed products and compelling storytelling is what keeps firms alive, thriving and growing. If marketing stops, so does the heartbeat of the company.

Want to learn more about building a sound marketing and sales program?

At Rootworks, our team is committed to helping our members build successful marketing and sales programs. We are continually developing tools and resources that support our members' efforts in this area, including marketing awareness materials, detailed lessons and personalized coaching.

For more information on Rootworks and our marketing and sales resources, please contact sales at membership@rootworks.com

