



Bearing the Maltese (Marketing Industry) Cross

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Some years ago I read a very good book on advertising. It was an eye-opener into an advertising world that many would kill or die for. It energised me into offering new (well, new for me, and possibly for most businesses I had come across in Malta) services that would, I thought, make the difference: both for my clients' marketing competitiveness and for the success of my agency. That is when I had my second eye-opener, or should I say rude awakening. I had, after all, broken one of the cardinal rules of marketing: do not try to sell something people don't want - it is a waste of time.

As is to be expected, the book I was referring to was not written by a Maltese. Nor was it referring to the Maltese market. In fact, there is very little published about the Maltese marketing and advertising industries. The drought extends even to dissertations and theses, as far as I could check. While I was doing my own management project, I tried finding information on the local marketing and advertising industries from the University of Malta, and came up with shockingly little. This, in spite of the hundreds of local dissertations churned out from the various marketing and advertising related centres, faculties and departments. Conclusion: it is not a popular subject

Ironically, it is a popular subject. The number of students attending Marketing courses is quite phenomenal. In fact, Marketing courses are some of the most popular around. And this is where the chasm between the glitzy, sexy subject in the utopian environment of theory and case studies, and the seemingly drab local marketing environment becomes most evident. I have seen many marketing "graduates" applying for sales jobs, for example, with the poorly disguised hope that they can move onto a marketing role as quickly as possible. They rarely do. If they are good at sales, they are kept there. If they are bad at sales, they are kicked out. Businesses to invest to increase sales, yet they have much less enthusiasm (to put it

mildly) for marketing or advertising.

So is there no hope? I believe there is, but it is a slow process. I do not think that many businesses in Malta will ever become marketing and advertising savvy like the ones one reads about in marketing text books. However, which businessman doesn't want to be more competitive? Actually I do remember a case or two of traders telling me that they have too much business and that they'd rather have less. Well, ok, you get all sorts. But in general, business people are interested in increasing sales and maximising profits. Therefore they would be interested in marketing and advertising IF they can see the benefit. Keep in mind also that

most owner-managers are D-I-Y people, the jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none stock, who will do things themselves if they think they are capable of doing it. Especially if it means bargaining to reduce prices and getting “better” deals, and avoiding paying commissions. And why not? It’s their money after all. Maybe one could point out that part of the reason for their lack of growth is exactly that they keep trying to do everything themselves, instead of finding people who know how to do it better, and freeing up their time to do what they are good at. But that is another story...

Things are also changing. With more Maltese companies seeing the opportunities of growing beyond our shores, and widening our markets ten or a hundred-fold, certain issues become inevitable. Whilst a small market of a few thousands can be reached through direct selling, it is rarely the case when the market runs in the millions. It is too expensive to try to sell directly to each person. Hence the cost-effectiveness of using other marketing channels such as advertising (and actually

agreeing to pay for the service) becomes a more palatable option. This would in turn make local advertising agencies sharper and ready to invest more to provide a better service. Hence what has been mostly a negative spiral can be turned, at least for some, into a positive one.

So the best way I can think of to improve the marketing scene is to help people see the benefits of good marketing strategies, and the faults of bad or non-existing ones. Practical suggestions that lead to tangible results, of course, help.

Is it a Mea Culpa?

So, for example, how many times have you made an advertising campaign and felt that you did not get a good return on the money spent? Did you try to look at possible reasons why you got a bad deal? Don’t just blame everything on some vague scapegoat like the slow economy, or on your competition. Even with a slow economy, and especially since it is a factor you know about, there are ways to cater for it, to get

the most out of your campaign. Some things you can control, and others you can’t. It is much better to spend your time, money and energy developing what you can control, than wasting time on the things you can’t.

There are many reasons why a campaign can go wrong, and some of them, admittedly, are beyond anyone’s control. It is difficult, or impossible, to manage to predict and control all the possible factors that could affect the positive or negative outcome of your campaign. The least you can do, however, is be aware of a number of issues that can hinder the success of your investment, or, if you can afford to, employ/contract someone who has the relevant expertise to do it for you. Of course, this would create one of the most ostentatious of moral dilemmas that the Maltese business man has to face: who can he trust with his spending money?

To be fair with the Maltese owner-manager, the lack of trust and the lack of belief and know-how in anything marketing and advertising is not an actual Maltese trait. It is however, a trait in small companies, as was discovered in a number of studies in different countries. Therefore, although this deficit is not a cultural trait, it is still a reality, stemming from our size. Malta is like a bee-hive of small and micro companies. Even the larger ones find it difficult to shake off this attitude. Most if not all of their managers come

Some pointers towards an effective publicity campaign

- Set some money aside, and make a plan.
- Research which media are best suited for your sales
- Test your advertising materials BEFORE you use them.
- Keep track of where the enquiries are coming from.
- Advertise in the low season, but keep the largest chunk of your budget for the high season.
- Make sure you have a strong message in your advertising.
- Make sure that your enquiries are turned into sales.

from a small company mentality, or deal mostly with people from small companies, whether professionally or socially.

There are many rules and guidelines that one can try to stick to, for a more effective marketing and advertising effort. What shall follow are only a few, and they are by no means exhaustive or formulaic. Although nothing is written in stone, some are definite no-no's. Some are just plain common sense, but then, everyone knows how common that is. So here goes...

Some Do's and Don't's

- Do check that what you are selling actually has value. It makes everything a bit easier.
- Do not try to sell ice cubes to Eskimos, or sand in the desert. It is much easier to sell something people actually have a need or desire for.
- Do not assume your product/service is good, or will sell, because you think so. Listen to your customers

or prospective customers. They have to buy your product or service, not you. Listening to what they think can give you many insights and save you a lot of time, money and effort.

- Do make sure that you deliver what you promise. You can fool a lot of people once, a few people often, but you cannot fool everyone all the time.
- Don't buy advertising because the salesperson happens to be very attractive. There are better ways of how to waste your money.
- Do not write an essay on a billboard. Or make the text too small. Cars drive by. They do not stop to read, it's dangerous anyway.
- Do at least a rough plan of how you will be marketing your product/service and how much that will cost.
- Do not measure all advertising by how many people call in the first hour. Some forms of advertising do not work that way. Decide beforehand if you

want short-term or long-term results, and organise everything accordingly.

- Do check which media reach your target market. No, not all media reach everyone, and no, you don't want to reach everyone with one campaign.
- Do not make it difficult for people to read your ads. You want people to read them, don't you?
- Don't let the ad become a work of art at the cost of losing the message. You are trying to sell, or at least communicate a message, not for people to say "how pretty" and move on.
- Do you think size matters? The bigger the advert, the more people will see it. Yes, but careful. Double the size doesn't mean double the readers.
- Do not create a flood if you can't control the pressure. There's no sense in making a massive campaign and then having people waiting for hours and getting fed up because your sales department couldn't handle the flow.