

By Mary Blye Howe

It's a lucky IB owner indeed who can thrive without advertising. From *Yellow Pages* to billboards, radio to newspapers, ads are critical sales generators for many a small business. But advertising is expensive, so you want to make certain you are spending your ad dollars wisely.

Whether you use a professional ad agency (a smart move for most small businesses) or prefer to go it alone, decisions on where your ads should run, what they should say and how much you should spend ultimately rest on the business owner's shoulders. That's you.

What works for one small business may not work for another, and it's impossible for anyone to guarantee results. A look at what other IB owners and ad pros are doing and saying about their ad efforts can help you get the most from your own advertising dollars.

DIRECTING YOUR ADVERTISING

Start here: What do your customers want? That's right, *customers*, not prospects. Look first to your current customers, not potential customers. Ask yourself what types of people frequent your business. If your business is still building a solid base, focus first on current types of customers — only more of 'em. That's where your ad dollars are most likely to achieve maximum pull. Then go after market segments you're not yet reaching to expand your base.

Consider Jim Butler, co-owner and president of Travel Agents International in Phoenix. His research showed that Arizonans travel often to Mexico and California. So his advertising revolves around travel to those destinations. "Arizona residents do travel to Europe or

elsewhere and we periodically run advertisements for just about every place in the world," Butler says. But his first advertising goal is to make his phone ring.

Talk to or survey your customers to learn about their lifestyles. Ask them how your business has or hasn't met their needs. Compile a customer list by Zip Code to determine where most of them live. Use what you learn in targeting your ads. If you use an agency, sharing what you know with the ad pros will help produce peak results.

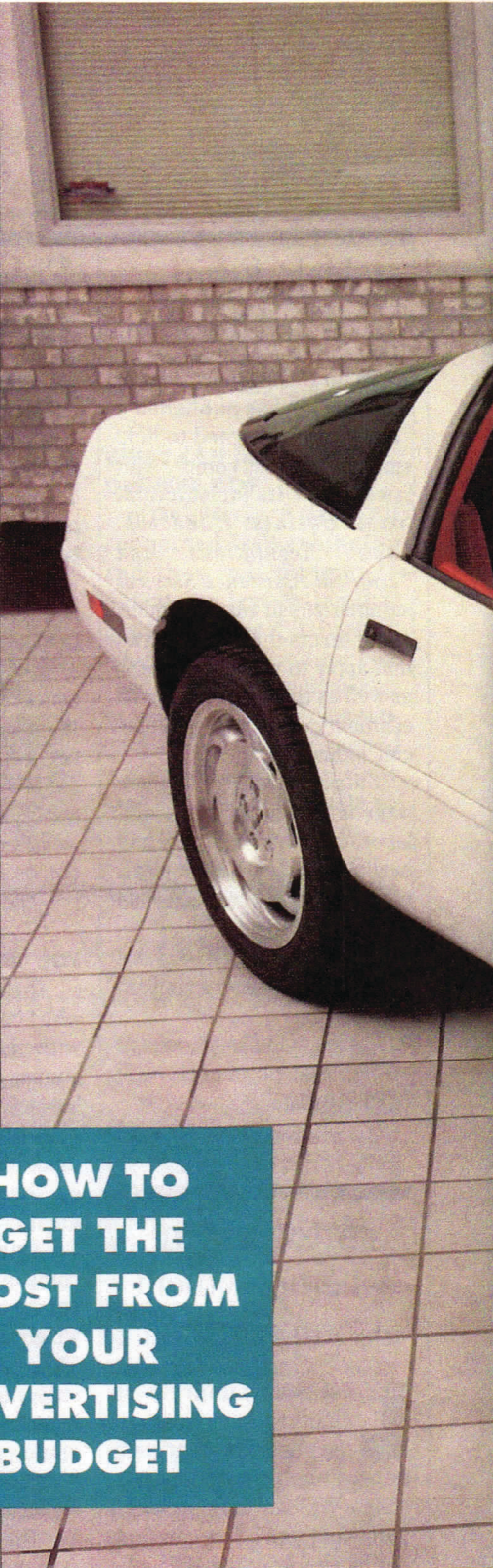
"The key to a good ad is understanding your current customers," says George Arnold, president of EvansGroup, Inc., a Dallas ad agency. "To do that, business owners need to spend a lot of time talking to customers; really getting to know them."

Greg Weeks, owner of Glen Weeks Chevrolet-Pontiac-GEO in West Frankfort, IL, uses every opportunity to learn about his customers and focus his advertising. For example, as he test drives a customer's car offered for trade-in, Weeks checks which stations the customer's radio is set on. He finds the two or three most popular choices and runs his radio ads there.

TEST, TEST, TEST

To avoid blunders, start small. Test mail 1,000 brochures; not 10,000. When you see what works, roll it out. But remember, most successful advertising is based on repetition. Look for signs of success; not a windfall from one or two ads. Readers or listeners may respond to your ad the fifth or sixth time they see or hear it, not the first.

Track results. Ernest Weckesser, owner of Green Tree Press, Inc. in Erie, PA, uses codes to track the effectiveness of his



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Winning The A



Greg Weeks, a car dealer, checks radio station buttons on trade-ins to find which stations his customers listen to.

magazine ads. "It's important to devise codes that show when and where the ad ran," Weckesser says. "If you run an ad in the July issue of a local magazine and another one in August, assign codes that tell you which is working best." If July out-draws August by a wide margin, consider dropping the August ad next year.

If customers respond by mail, a coded address can work. For example, adding a department number you've assigned to a particular ad or offer tells you where the response is coming from. Another easy way to keep records is to simply instruct the customer to mail or bring the ad in with them.

ADS THAT HAVE ZING

While different ad designs work for different types of businesses, many IB owners try to cram too much into their ads. A straightforward ad with a simple design works best for Bonnie Everts, president of Pesco, Inc., an 18-employee pest control business in Indianapolis. "We like lots of white space," she says, "no cute phrases, no splashes of pictures or words all over the place. We simply list the services we offer that will catch someone's eye."

There are exceptions. Arnold, the Dallas ad agency owner, says that information-packed newspaper ads can work since readers often take more time studying the newspaper. But for other types of print ads, Arnold recommends only one or two simple thoughts. Any more will only confuse the consumer.

Tout what makes you stand out from your competition. Pay attention to ads that catch *your* attention. A monetary offer attracts attention, but a few lines about your quality service may be the secret to success.

If service is big on your list, be specific. Michael Altshuler, owner of Adrian-Lewis, Inc., a

R. D. Renken

Ad Dollar Derby

copier sales, supply and service firm in Folsom, NJ, keys on customer needs. He advertises four-hour service, factory-trained technicians, a leasing option, supplies, ease of purchase, guarantees and trade-ins. Customers know they'll get Altshuler's products quickly and professionally, with a guarantee.

List services that you know people appreciate. And be sure you can deliver. Waiting in line irritates people, so perhaps you can advertise that you have enough staff to prevent long lines. If your business invests extra time to help customers understand and find the products they need, work that into your ads. Do you have the largest supply in town of some much-needed product? Maybe you work evening hours or weekends. Let customers know.

Since Americans are increasingly health and diet conscious, Rusty Coco, co-owner of Jason's Deli in Beaumont, TX, often advertises the healthy items on his menu. "We promote foods that are currently popular — a fresh salad bar, hot soups in the winter, light catering in May during graduation," says Coco.

USE YOUR BUSINESS LOGO

Many IB owners find that using their logo, motto or both on all their advertising also pays off. If you don't already have a good logo, hire a professional design or advertising firm to help you produce one. It's too important an element to chance doing it yourself.

Some IB owners like to use a personal photograph in their ads. "When you give a person a business card with your picture on it, they won't throw it away as easily," says Harold Dielmann, owner of Gateway Cellular Communications, Creve Coeur, MO. "If you're going to have personal contact with your customers, seeing your picture on an ad will help. It personalizes your business." But snapshots are out. Get a professional photo.

Coco uses photos of his deli, the food and sometimes customers and employees as well to enhance his ads. "What better way to advertise than using the people you've actually reached?" he says. "It's real." Potential customers get to peek inside the business before they've actually been there.

In the end, what you sell may be more important than how your ads look or where they run. But then again, if not enough people know about you, nothing else will really matter. **IB**

Mary Blye Howe is a freelance writer and IB owner in Duncanville, TX.

Ad Experience At Work

RADIO

After nearly two decades in business, Jeff Cohen says he's used about every form of advertising there is for his Miami-based business, Pizza Loft.

The one move that he says put his business "on the map" three years ago was a decision to advertise on WIOD talk radio in Miami. The first year Cohen went to radio, sales doubled. And business is still growing. But finding the right station is crucial, says Cohen, who chose airtime on a popular talkshow hosted by a local personality. Cohen is certain that his pizza buyers tune to the show.

On recommendation of radio station WHKO, Mark Rodgers, owner of Rodgers Pontiac in Dayton, OH, changed his ad placement strategy. Rodgers had been scattering his radio spots over a two-week period. But the station suggested he concentrate his spots in a single week instead. "It was definitely more effective," says Rodgers. Cohen agrees. He runs about 24 spots per month, all in a single week.

DIRECT MAIL

Peter O'Hara, owner of Pudgie's Famous Chicken in Woodbury, NY, socks about 28 percent of his advertising budget into direct mail, via an outside direct mail service. The reason: It provides one of his best returns per ad dollar spent. O'Hara says that four-color mailings get the best response — hands down.

Numerous companies can help you with direct mail advertising and prices vary widely. One direct mail firm in Dallas says that its typical small business customer spends between \$500 and \$1,500 per month to start.

TELEVISION

TV ads may not be affordable for the average small business owner. But some use it for a limited period of time, opt for non-prime-time spots or advertise on less



Jeff Cohen

expensive local cable channels. Limited TV use worked for Soundtrack, an electronics store in Denver. "Television created name recognition for our company that wasn't there before," says Dave Workman, president.

This 25-year-old business started using television in 1990. Soundtrack wanted to show a "fun" store where it was "interesting to shop." So Workman hired an advertising agency to help with

the tricky task of incorporating humor in Soundtrack's ads. It worked. "We had an incredible two years with sales," says Workman. This IB owner also likes television's "residual effects." You can rotate being on and off the air but people get the feeling you're there all the time, says Workman.

CELEBRITY APPEARANCE

Taylor's Bookstores banks heavily on celebrity appearances for advertising and promotion, with names like General Norman Schwarzkopf, Jimmy Buffett, Tom Landry and Jimmy Connors drawing customers for the Dallas area book seller in 1992. Taylor's schedules about 75 author/celebrity appearances each year at its nine locations.

"It is the single most important thing we do to promote our stores," says marketing manager Patrick Murphy. Because publishers schedule author tours around the country at no cost to bookstores, Taylor's only expense is promotion.

Greg Weeks, of Glen Weeks Chevrolet-Pontiac-GEO in West Frankfort, IL, is also

Elsie Perrott



gung ho on celebrity-type events. Weeks once displayed a race car belonging to Winston Cup Champion Rusty Wallace. About 600 people showed up.

BILLBOARD

Michael Balzano, owner of Wholesale Cabinet Outlet in Branford, CT, says that billboards are a great way to build a small business. "Billboard ads are there all the time," says Balzano. "They can't be turned off or thrown away. They're responsible for 50 to 60 percent of our business."

As with any form of advertising, it's important to target your audience and proceed with a plan. For example, Balzano realizes a particular group of people travels a particular road coming from a particular suburb. So he places his four billboard ads strategically. Pick your location carefully, he advises, and deal with a select group of prospective customers.

YELLOW PAGES

Because *Yellow Pages* competition is stiff, IB owners are always seeking ways to make their ads stand out. "People grab the phone book when they need our service," says Rita Woods, of Vail Valley Plumbing



Michael Balzano

Peter Glass

and Heating in Avon, CO. So a couple of years ago the company increased the size of its ad to a full page, giving it an edge over most of the competition and allowing space to list all of its services.

NEWSPAPER

For June Futrell of Bleyers Sports Mart in Carbondale, IL, sale and saturation are key newspaper concepts. "We've advertised off and on in the newspaper for 25 years," she says. Futrell prefers Sunday placements because that's when people spend time with the paper and read the ads. "If you're going to advertise in the newspaper — if you're going to advertise anywhere — don't do it casually," she says.

Because Bleyers Sports Mart doesn't always advertise, when it *does*, it wants to be noticed. An ad for the company will probably run daily for two or three weeks. And by purchasing multiple ads, Bleyers Sports Mart gets a substantial discount on the space to boot.

MAGAZINES

Magazine ads are one of the few methods Elsie Perrott, owner of Scents & Non-Scents, uses regularly to promote her fragrance business in Sisters, OR.

While ads in broad-based national magazines are generally too expensive and not efficient for small advertisers, local magazines, trade and association magazines can be a cost-effective choice. For example, customers often mention that they've seen Perrott's ad in *Cascades East*, a magazine focusing on central Oregon, and Perrott is convinced that her magazine advertising approach works.

IB Follow-Up File

■ *How to Make Your Advertising Twice as Effective at Half the Cost* by Herschell Gordon Lewis (Dartnell, \$19.95 plus \$4.50 shipping). Call (800) 621-5463.

■ *The Advertising Handbook* by Dell Dennison and Linda Tobey (Self-Counsel Press, \$8.95 plus \$2.50 shipping). Call (800) 663-3007. Includes worksheets for planning an ad agenda, plus choosing the right media and working out an ad budget that fits your business.

■ These two advertising books from John Wiley and Sons offer hands-on help for small business. *Great Print Advertising: Creative Approaches, Strategies and Tactics* by Tony Antin (\$29.95) includes advice on how to critique your own ads and ways to avoid common mistakes. *Do It Yourself Advertising* (\$14.95) by Fred Hahn offers tips on producing great ads, brochures, catalogs and direct mail pieces. Call (800) 225-5945.

■ *Code of Advertising*, published by the Council of Better Business Bureaus, discusses ethics and legalities. The word "sale," for example, should be used to indicate special prices ("a significant reduction from the advertiser's usual and customary price of the merchandise offered") for a limited time. If the price of the product won't rise again, it's a mark-down or clearance, not a sale. Send \$1 for publication #24-125 to the Council of Better Business Bureaus, 4200 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22203.

■ Need an agency? Request a membership roster from the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA). This group is committed to helping small business owners find agencies that "offer adequate staff and experience" and are "ethically operated and... soundly financed." AAAA has over 700 member agencies with about 1,400 offices in the U.S. Write to: AAAA Publications Dept., 666 Third Ave., New York, NY 10017. Or call (212) 682-2500 and ask for the Publications Dept.

■ *Selecting An Advertising Agency: Factors To Consider; Steps To Take* (\$27.50) is a small but concise guide with helpful tips from the Association of National Advertisers. Call (212) 697-5950.



John Lynch