

## **Developing a Business Theme: Ideas for Small Business Image**

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"The ship that sails by every wind never comes into the harbor." Finnish Proverb

Your business should have a theme!

Take a moment to think about your business - not your to-do list, which may seem as long as a fresh roll of toilet paper, but how you wish your customers and community to view your business. The view should make a statement, verbal or visual, telling the world what your business is all about. What it does and what it stands for. Such a statement is your theme - a cornerstone to create goals and strategies so your dreams become reality.

It is so easy to be swamped with daily demands that we don't have time for such lofty ideas as a theme. Or we are so busy trying to stay in business that it is difficult to worry about our image and reputation. But, mundane or luxury, your business has a purpose, a personality and an image. It is a wise entrepreneur who peeks into the crystal ball to see if his or her creation will blossom or wilt. Take out some insurance; develop a theme that can be your road map to your castle in the sky. Just ask yourself: Can I identify reasons why customers want to buy from me? Do I have a plan to create a reputation consistent with my goals? Will my advertising content and strategy foster the image I wish to create? You will find your theme is in your answers.

Quite by chance, I interviewed a once successful business, without a theme, that has lost its way. At one time, it employed close to 200 people. Not anymore. They closed their factory, laid off almost 150 employees, arranged to import their product from Korea, and now struggle to stay afloat. During the last few years, the mass merchants hammered away at the company's gross margins, wiping out any pretense of a profit. The whiplash effect of the ongoing customer demands has management paranoid over the ever-present possibility of losing any sizable customer.

The owner's dreams and goals all disappeared along with their net profit. They are frustrated and nervous in their attempt to break away from the controlling grasp of a few large customers. They operate on hope. They are unsure -and so are the employees - of where the company is "going." A pattern of fear of failure has drowned any pretense of well-formulated short- and long-term goals

Successful entrepreneurs that understand the importance of developing a theme usually have clear

objectives to aim for - and clear objectives mean a better chance of success. More so than muddling your way hoping for the right breaks or allowing a few customers to mold your business as they see fit.

What theme are you trying to present to your customers and the public? I do not have to explain what BMW stands for, and you know McDonald's business philosophy. These companies have a simple message that sums up their goals. And so can you. Size and number of customers do not define your theme - you do.

Here are some sample themes to think about:

\* Create a theme of quality. Everything about your business should reflect quality from housekeeping to customer service.

\* Create a theme of service. Competent, well-trained sales clerks, delivery employees, repair technicians - anyone with customer contact must look and act as professionals.

\* Create a theme of comfort and pleasure. Make your customers feel good about doing business with you. Pay attention to their well-being and the reason they are willing to spend their dollars on your products or services.

\* Create a theme of saving. Not easy. It is a challenge to promote the lowest price in town. You are constantly looking over your shoulder, wondering if the competition is besting you

Look at Home Depot's theme. Inventory - inventory combined with knowledgeable sales help and "low" prices. A one-stop shopping experience for "do-it-yourself" homeowners based on savings and pride of accomplishment.

Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, started with a theme - a shopping home for Middle America offering a large selection of merchandise at reasonable prices. Wal-Mart promotes American homespun values. A place you can trust when spending your money. Wal-Mart would like you to believe that shopping there is like going to church.

Pity poor K-Mart. Management lost its theme trying to be a combination of Wal-Mart and Target. Mixed messages do not work to build customer loyalty. K-Mart acts like a friend you can't quite figure

out.

Back to our original question: Do you have a theme? Or have you survived and succeeded without one. Perhaps your business has a theme you do not know about. Put another way, what do your customers think you stand for - or why do they do business with you? If you know the answer and it is a positive one, capitalize on it in your advertising and merchandising materials

Next week we will look at your theme and how employee training will help to make you rich, or at least comfortable.

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