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Marketing with Permission

I can get more cooperation with a kind word and a gun than I can with only a kind word.

—Al Capone

One of the main reasons that accountants and other professionals sometimes don't like to sell is because they worry about being pushy. That is, they don't want to impose on others or be pushy about selling their services. That's where one of the newer concepts in marketing comes in. *Permission marketing* was developed by author Seth Godin for online marketing in a book of the same name. However, the permission concept applies to most of marketing, online or offline.

In brief, in permission marketing, you ask permission to stay in touch with prospects and clients. Prospects opt in to receive information from you. In Godin's model, you offer people rewards for receiving messages from you, such as money, free reports, or products.

Standing Out in a Crowded Marketplace

Every decision maker is subjected to thousands of advertising messages every day. Out of the thousands of messages, a few bits of information may be retained. But they are hard to distinguish amid the clutter of impersonal messages that swamp us.

As an accountant, you are not just affected by marketing and sales attempts of other accountants, consultants, tax lawyers, and other competitors. You are competing for the *attention* of your prospects and clients. "In Dallas-Fort Worth, there are thousands of practicing accountants competing for every client I have," says Terry Orr. "Permission marketing enables me to get heard through the noise of the marketplace."

And you're not competing just with thousands of commercial messages every day. You are also competing for people's attention with their boss, spouse,

kids, hobbies, and need for sleep. It's a busy world for most people, and their needs for your services are not always high on their lists of priorities.

The better your marketing and sales are, the easier you make it for people to cut through the clutter and distractions in their lives to hire you. They'd like to make a quick, painless decision that improves their situation at no risk to themselves. That's why referrals from people they respect are so effective—they reduce risk and time to decision. Your goal with your other marketing and sales efforts is to help people make the same easy decision. Selling your services is so much easier with permission than without it.

Interruption Marketing

Even if you haven't been aware of Godin's work, you've been applying the concept of permission marketing. And it's when you don't apply it that you can feel pushy. When you try to cultivate people as possible clients, they have to *allow* you to do so. You have to *interest them* in talking with you. You need to enlist their cooperation. The sales methods that are preferable for you are generally less pushy and more inviting for prospects.

Godin refers to traditional marketing and sales efforts as "interruption marketing." Television, radio, and Internet commercials interrupt the program you're enjoying (or the search you're doing). The dinnertime telemarketing call is the classic image of pushy sales. Accountants don't interrupt people as dramatically as this. However, it's worthwhile to rank your marketing techniques on a scale of "interruptability." For instance, sending an unsolicited mailing for your services is more interruptive than offering an invitation to a free seminar on tax issues. When people attend your seminar, they know you will make a sales pitch of some sort, but they are accepting that because of the value of the seminar. (And you can surprise them by keeping your pitch very low key—say, just mentioning that you'd be happy to meet with them individually at no charge to apply the seminar principles to their own situation).

Godin makes the distinction between traditional marketing and permission marketing clear when he says: "Interruption marketers spend all their time interrupting strangers, in an almost pitiful attempt to bolster popularity and capture attention. Permission marketers spend as little time and money talking to strangers as they can. Instead they move as quickly as they can to turn strangers into prospects who choose to 'opt in' to a series of communications." Joe James and David Coker of Coker James in Atlanta, Georgia, have used a permission marketing campaign to aggressively grow their practice for over three years. "We waited for the clients to show up on our door step, we got active in trade groups and we initiated many things. When we began to

use the consistent, low-key approach of seeking permission to sell, our results started to soar,” said James.

Godin tends to pay people fairly explicitly for receiving marketing/sales messages. Pay can include entry into a drawing, coupons, points toward purchases, cash, and so on. Although your offers are likely to be more subtle, you do need to make it worth people’s while to take your calls. Normally, you would “pay” people in some sort of “information currency” about accounting—for instance, a company newsletter or e-zine is very useful for keeping in touch with people. You are giving them useful information and they are reminded of you regularly.

Permission marketing has several good things going for it. It is *anticipated*—people expect to hear from you. It is *personal*—your messages are customized for each individual’s situation. It is *relevant*—your communication includes useful information for the prospect. Exhibit 8.1 shows how this contrasts with typical marketing efforts.

Exhibit 8.1 Permission Marketing versus
Typical Marketing Efforts

	Interruption	Permission
Anticipated	No	Yes
Personal	Seldom	Yes
Relevant	Sometimes	Yes

Permission Develops Prospects

To put permission marketing in a fuller perspective, let’s review a few basics about the overall process of marketing and selling. Doing so will show you how useful the permission concept is.

As we discussed in Day 6, to be successful, you need to handle three stages of marketing:

1. Find prospects.
2. Develop prospects into clients.
3. Serve clients and develop new business and referrals from them.

Step 1, finding prospects, is covered in other chapters.

Step 2, developing prospects, is the most important area in which permission marketing applies. It can take a long time to turn prospects into clients, and you need their permission to make this conversion go smoothly.

This occurs for several reasons, not least of which is that changing accountants can be difficult for people. However, there is a more basic reason as well: Prospects must trust you enough to let you sell them. Yes, people must have some trust in you even before they allow you to sell. The permission approach opens by helping prospects feel in control and rewards the first small trust step on their part.

Step 3 is also covered in other chapters. Generally when people are clients, you have permission to stay in touch with them.

Developing Prospects into Clients

It is in step 2 that the permission marketing concept is most important and valuable. To carry out step 2, you need to *enlist prospects' cooperation* at some level. You need to obtain their permission to “court” them. It is possible for you to keep in touch with prospects without their real consent. You can seek them out at industry meetings. You can call them on the phone. You can mail them newsletters. But without their cooperation, your efforts may be counterproductive.

Online marketing is the perfect arena to see why enlisting prospects' permission to stay in touch is important. In the online arena, there are laws against contacting people without permission (such mail is known as spam). And it is easier for people to ignore your unwanted contacts. It is in this context that Godin developed the concept of permission marketing. You need to gain prospects' permission to send them e-mails. When people “opt in” to your online newsletter (ezine) or other messages from you, you are legal and prospects should pay more attention to your messages.

Godin lays out four tests of permission marketing:

Four Tests of Permission Marketing

- 1** Each of your marketing efforts should invite prospects or customers to “raise their hands” about their interests. You learn something about them each time they respond.
- 2** You keep a permission database. You can track each communication with prospects and customers and what they gave permission for.
- 3** When people give you permission to communicate with them, you have to have something to say.
- 4** How will you teach people about your services and particularly about how they are unique?

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Once people become clients, you need to work to deepen the communication with these people—again with their permission.

All these permission criteria are applicable to offline marketing efforts as well. They amount to obtaining permission to build a relationship and then having the system in place to follow through with the job.

One-to-One Marketing

Notice that permission marketing has nothing to do with your technical competence in delivering accounting or consulting services. Although some of your communications with clients may be about accounting issues, the permission approach focuses on prospects' granting you permission to communicate with them. This is more about interpersonal relationships than about accounting issues.

The use of a permission approach to build relationships with prospects and clients fits well into what Don Peppers and Martha Rogers of the Peppers and Rogers Consulting Group have called 1–1 marketing. They recommend thinking of each client as unique. Ideally, your marketing would use a different message for each prospect and client based on their unique situation, personality, and so on. Ideally, each client or prospect is a target of one. Although this amount of personalization may seem hard to accomplish, the process emphasizes the specific and interpersonal nature of selling accounting services.

Peppers and Rogers take the 1–1 concept much further. Your goal is *not* to develop a sales message that is tailored perfectly to the client. That is part of the fuller 1–1 process. Your goal is to customize your services for each client. If your services are too generic, clients will buy you as a commodity and be highly price sensitive. That's not what you want.

I know from my years of work that clients take a firm's generic accounting abilities for granted. One of the main things they want is for their accountant to understand their businesses and proactively help them achieve their specific goals. For you to do this, you need to do research on their industries and issues. But you also need to become educated in the specific issues that each business faces.

By 1–1 marketing, Peppers and Rogers mean that the clients invest in *educating you* about their businesses. When they've done this, you are no longer a commodity. Put another way, when you have been educated about the specifics of their situation and needs, your knowledge becomes a unique selling proposition for you. No other accountant can equal your fit for the client. And the client won't want to spend the time training other accountants

about their businesses, so your competition will have a very hard time breaking into your accounts.

Another important concept from 1–1 marketing is the idea of “share of client” versus share of market. When you know your clients really well, you can add new services the clients want. You don’t need to sell them because you are helping them obtain what they want. Your goal is not to increase your share of market by adding new clients; your goal is to increase your share of each client’s business.

Sample Permission Program

At The Rainmaker Academy, I have operated a dozen permission marketing campaigns for our clients. In our permission marketing programs, our team lays out 12 steps that finally result in a sale. Although you may not be able to carry out all the contacts in every case, you can complete the process with interested and qualified clients. Contacts 1 to 4 are letters, starting with an introduction and ending with a gift. You determine the number of letters to send out based on the number of meetings you can handle. About 10 percent of these prospects should “take a meeting” with you.

The Rainmaker version of permission marketing is very intense but very productive. In our version of permission marketing, we are very careful about obtaining and cleansing the databases. They use only experienced business telemarketers to set appointments, and they focus on insuring the accounting firm clients actually close business from the relationships developed.

Contact 5 is a phone call designed to obtain a lunch appointment with prospects. Contact 6 is the lunch, where you qualify them as a prospect and try to get them to visit your office for Contact 7. If you are able to move ahead, Contact 8 is a visit to their office, where you gather information to make a solid proposal. This information gathering includes a needs assessment. Contact 9 is a meeting with decision influencers. Contact 10 identifies outside influencers such as bankers, attorneys, and board members. Contact 11 is to present a draft of your proposal, and Contact 12 is to present a formal proposal.

You’ll notice that there is a fair amount of research between the prospect showing interest and you actually making a proposal. Many firms simply put together a stock proposal when the prospect is open to it. Many of these proposals fail because no one has learned the real needs of the prospect, no one has presented a solution to those needs, or no one has asked key influencers for help.

Advancing the Relationship

The general permission marketing concept can be extended to the entire relationship spectrum. At the beginning of a business relationship, you want to enlist potential prospects' permission to become prospects. They are aware of your interest in doing business with them, and they agree to let you stay in touch. If you offer value and match your skills to their needs, eventually they hire you for some task.

There are many models of the stages of relationships with clients. I use the hierarchy of:

Suspects

Prospects

Clients

Former Clients

The key point to remember is that, unlike many sales and marketing efforts, in permission marketing the first business meeting is not the *end* of your marketing efforts. Rather it is the *beginning* of the most important stage. The loyalty you create now drives profits and referrals as you deliver great service and expand the relationship. At first this means taking on additional tasks. But as discussed, later it means adapting your services to clients' needs or developing new services. As you achieve the status of most trusted business advisor, you may even coordinate the services of others to provide needs that you don't do yourself.

At each stage of the developing relationship, you are earning permission to move to the next stage. You are building trust. Done well, you will have an unassailable competitive position. And you'll have clients who value you.

Building Trust

Developing the loyal client base you need for your best possible client relationship relies on building trust. Of course, the best way to build trust is to put the clients' interests first in a very visible way. Interestingly enough, when you put clients first, they reward you with more business. So, paradoxically, when you let clients know they are uppermost in your actions, you benefit yourself the most!

Building trust of this sort takes time for two reasons. First, it takes time for you to demonstrate your commitment to clients' interests. Second, time itself works on your side. A good deal of research has demonstrated that the

more familiar we are with people, the more we like them. This is even truer in uncertain situations. And what could be more uncertain than tax and financial issues!

By consistently staying in touch with clients (and prospects), you have both a chance to give them rewards and a chance to let them get to like you. When you are in touch only when you are billing them, you do not build the trust you need. You need to be in touch more consistently. A newsletter or ezine can do this, but you also need some personal contacts.

It's easy to think of your marketing program in impersonal terms: You contact a large number of people, and some respond. Techniques like advertising and direct mail reinforce this thinking. I think it's more useful to think of your marketing efforts as personal. It's your job to find a few individuals you want to work with and cultivate them. Even more important, from *their* point of view your marketing is very personal. It's about trusting you and how you treat them.

Permission marketing and 1–1 marketing emphasize that what the Godfather said is still true: “All business is personal.” It's up to you to build those relationships that will allow you to build a great business. Once you have permission to engage people, you're on your way, one person at a time. Terry Orr says, “If I try to slam a close on a prospect during our first meeting, he or she will usually clam up. I will never have a chance to develop trust because I did not allow time for the relationship to develop.”

Getting Started

The biggest problems in implementing permission marketing are the same problems of doing effective marketing in general. You need a system. As an individual you can have bursts of sales and marketing activity—you can send mailings, take ads, give speeches, and so on. But your best marketing will be regular and systematic. Once you make a contact, you should have a system to follow up. You should have a number of ways to keep in contact planned.

Adding the permission concept to your marketing system reminds you to involve prospects or clients at each stage. Make sure they are interested in hearing from you, and create clear value for them in each contact. Build the relationships and trust one person at a time for success.

Summary

Although the concept of permission marketing was developed for the Internet, it has been around forever. It has been applied by people who take a personal

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approach to marketing and sales. And as Seth Godin notes, the concept is as old as the concept of dating, where you need permission to pursue your love interest!

To apply permission marketing, you explicitly reward people for receiving communications from you. Doing this reminds you that no one wants to receive a sales pitch. What people want is information that can help them from people who care about them. In addition, you must advance your knowledge of their situation so that you can deliver increasingly relevant information to build a 1–1 relationship. When you’ve achieved this, clients will not want to invest in training your competitors and you will have a solid client base.