
Niche Marketing

by Barry Koren, AIA, PhD



A Mercedes is not a Range Rover. Pepsi is not Coke. Most of the time price is not how you choose among competitors. But a lot of people who work in the built environment say that the promotional materials they receive all seem the same. How do you take on an aura and become sought after? How do you get a place in people's minds so that important people know who you are? How do you win recognition when there is so much competition and prospects are so rushed? One way is to find a niche and then do what's necessary to make it work. Here are the five key steps.

Step 1. Narrow your focus. Go after a specific niche in the market. A niche is a small segment of the market, such as roofing for a specific type of technological facility, or, even narrower, diagnosing causes of indoor-air-quality complaints. Adjust the narrowness of the focus

so that there are enough prospects to make the pursuit worthwhile.

You find your niche by looking carefully at your current and past clients, and then prospects, one at a time. Look for a service, or a segment of a service, that you provided to a client, say Henry, which might appeal to others, too. Maybe the reports you do are most valuable to him. Are there others, besides Henry, who might have similar needs?

Step 2. Customize your services for the specific niche you've chosen.

Proceed as though serving Henry and this niche were your only business. Fine-tune it like Kinko's Copy Shops or any of the successful franchises. How? By focusing on Henry. Probe him to discover how this service helps him with a root problem or desire. Since Henry chooses among his alternatives, find out whom you have to beat. Make your service bigger or smaller, faster or slower, more traditional or more unusual, higher or lower in price. Keep improving and customizing your offering until a "light" goes on for both you and Henry, and you know that your service delights him.

Step 3. Formulate a clear, cutting message.

One that identifies your position in the market and clicks in Henry's mind. One that gets through to Henry despite all the noise in the market. You find the message by asking questions of Henry to better understand him. Then take a shot at it by saying something like "We never reduce the quality of our service to make it cheaper." Whatever the message, if it's not

right, change it until it works for you and Henry. Once you have formulated this message, strengthen it by making cosmetic changes, for instance, to names, pricing, and packaging of the services you offer to Henry.

If Henry thinks about the indoor-air-quality problem that he has and your message about this problem comes to his mind, then you become a valuable resource. And do you think he will start looking elsewhere because your price is a little higher than he anticipated?

Step 4. Develop a number of related niches and customize your offering for each.

After Henry's niche, add others. Develop a niche only if it relates to other niches. Your first niche of roofing reports might lead you to a second niche of providing expert testimony. A new niche needs to give you a strategic advantage, such as lowering your costs or having leads from one niche be fed to another. You can add other niches by sub-dividing your existing markets, and looking for someone who demands those services. By planning the development of related niches, and dropping niches that don't fit, an overall strategy can be formed.

Step 5. Manage the delivery of your service.

Don't take it for granted. You need people and systems that are friendly to Henry and other people who call. Later on, find out for each niche whether the clients you and the services they receive are what you and they expected. If there are surprises, customize again so that your services match

client needs.

Conclusion:

If you're the Ford Mustang of your niche, convey that message frequently, year after year, internally as well as externally. The effect is cumulative. Alter and improve your services, but despite all the changes everywhere, do not change your identity as Mustang.

Henry will get older and maybe richer. As he becomes too old for your Mustang, you'll need to focus your message on Henry's younger sister, and later, maybe his son. In each case, you will need to go through the five steps described above and get to know Henry and his friends.

And now I have a question for you. Is there room for improvement in your firm's services? Are there any actions you can take now? By commenting, please let all of us know your reactions, or if you have any stories, news, or marketing tips that you want to share.

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