

Get back to basics with our 3-step blueprint for building a new-business-development system. Keep it tuned up and this mechanism will have clients flocking to your door.

THE MARKETING MACHINE

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It's every business-owner's dream: a marketing machine that will get you the clients and projects you want; a system that practically automates your business-development activities. Once it's in place, all you have to do to keep the prospects coming is keep it running. • The best part? This is no complicated Rube Goldberg-like contraption. Plans for your personal marketing machine call for three elements: a singular focus on a market, a couple of effective marketing tools that work well together and the attention of one person to keep feeding the machine. Ready to get started? Here's your blueprint.

STEP 1 CHOOSE YOUR MARKET

QUALIFY YOUR MARKET

Before you begin your outreach, make sure the market you've chosen is fertile ground for your design services. To qualify the market, ask these questions:

What is the current state of this market? If it isn't in a growth mode, now may not be a good time to break into this particular field.

What size and types of projects are available from this market? Determine if you're able to handle them profitably and if you would enjoy the work.

Are other service providers like you already working in this market? If the answer is "no," there's usually a good reason. The market may be unwilling to pay for design services or may not perceive a need for them. If potential clients don't perceive the need, don't waste your time trying to convince them. Instead, choose a market that understands the value of design and is willing to pay for it.

A stylized illustration of a robot with a boxy head and a friendly expression, holding a large telescope. The robot is purple and white with a blue bow tie. The background is a yellow circle with small red and green stars. The text 'STEP 1 CHOOSE YOUR MARKET' is arched over the top of the illustration.

Your marketing machine needs to focus on just one market—which isn't to say you can *only* work in one market. But it's best to start with one, get it going and then add additional markets later. Consultants to the design profession almost universally recommend that firms select a specialty rather than being jacks of all trades. That strategy helps to sharpen your firm's expertise and hone your marketing efforts.

Putting different marketing tools to work within a single market means that your prospects will see your message in more than one place—at a trade show, in a publication they read, in their inboxes—and it will have a much stronger impact.

When it comes to choosing a market, start with what you know, especially if you're going out on your own after working in-house or for another creative firm. A marketing machine built on your past design experience will yield clients more quickly than one you build from scratch.

Look first at the industries you've served. For example, if you worked in the automotive field, you can make a strong case for your experience within that industry. Or, if that's a conflict, you can approach the automotive accessory industry or the aftermarket.

Because you're already familiar with the needs of these markets, you'll build your marketing machine on a foundation of confidence, credibility and samples to show prospective clients.

If you love housewares or travel and want to work in those industries but have no experience, keep in mind that it will take longer to build the machine—to make the connections, to create the work, to show that you can do it, to get the projects.

STEP 2 CHOOSE YOUR TOOLS

Your initial marketing efforts must include proactively reaching out to the prospects in your chosen market. The best tools to start with are networking and cold calling. From there you can add public relations, speaking engagements at events in your target market, exhibiting at trade shows, and more.

NETWORKING

Meeting your prospects in person is, hands down, one of the best ways to make a strong impression, find out what they need and get their contact information. And yet, many designers don't want to leave their studios, much less find the places where their prospects gather.

That was the case for Peter Levinson of Brooklyn, NY-based LevinsonBlock, a small firm specializing in nonprofit clients since 1981. Word of mouth had brought most projects to the firm. But 2005 had been a slow year, and Levinson knew he needed to find more nonprofits if he wanted to keep his doors open.

Although he dreaded the idea of networking, he did some online research, found the New York chapter for the Association of Fundraising Professionals and attended his first monthly meeting. (This is another good reason to focus in on a single niche: If you don't, it'll be very difficult to find good networking opportunities where you can meet several prospects at once.)

There were 40 people at the event and, to Levinson's surprise, everyone was friendly. He talked to 10 people and collected five business cards, although none had a burning need for his design services. His review of the first meeting: "It wasn't a nightmare."

At the second monthly AFP meeting, four of the people he met did actually qualify as prospects—they needed design services—and Levinson fed those contacts directly into his marketing machine.

COLD CALLING

"Hi, this is Merideth Harte from 3+Co. We're a boutique design studio in New York run by three sisters. We specialize in design and art direction for book and music packaging. I'm guessing that you're probably swamped with what you have going on at this particular moment, but I'm wondering if you might be looking at portfolios?"

That's the opening line Merideth Harte often uses when she makes cold calls, which, at times, has been one of the main components of 3+Co.'s marketing machine.

But why would Harte do something as distasteful as cold calling? "We were ready to expand our client base," she says. "We considered hiring a PR firm, but we know our business better than anyone and we know who we want to work with."

The three sisters already had a strong client list in publishing and music packaging. So they made a list of 50 clients that they felt confident were a good fit for 3+Co. Harte did some simple online research to identify the key contacts within each company—then

she picked up the phone. "To get through, it sometimes took lots of repeat calling, once or twice a week," Harte says. "I didn't always leave a message. I didn't want it to seem like I was stalking them. I would just randomly throw a stone to see if I could hit them. When I reached someone, I'd explain who we are and what we do. More times than not, they were familiar with work we had done for other publishers and packagers, and I got good feedback."

Indeed, if good feedback is what you call actual projects for companies like Barnes & Noble, Random House and Universal Music Group.

Here's how Harte did it: "I'd take time every day and set the goal of making contact with three or four people," she says. "I'd keep a list of each prospect, where I was with each one, who is responsive, etc. A few weren't interested because they don't farm out work or already work with another design company. Sometimes they said, 'Call me in six months.' But often our timing was perfect; I'd reach someone who said, 'I really need someone now. Come right in,' or 'Where have you been, and why don't I already know you?'"

"As soon as we got one positive response, it started to snowball," Harte continues. "You really can get what you wish for. You make a good connection with one client and that leads to other jobs."

So what's the secret for taking the pain out of cold calling? According to Harte, "Once you get the initial interest from someone, you think, 'Hey, it's not so bad. I can do this.' It's a matter of bolstering your confidence and not being overwhelmed."

Timing is everything when it comes to marketing. The more often your marketing machine gets the word out there, the greater your chances of being in the right place at the right time.

PHONE OR MAIL?

Should you call your prospects before sending them a marketing piece, or send them something and then call? A debate rages on this question—and there's no right answer.

Pick up the phone first if you don't have the name of the person who buys creative services. Always make a research call first to get that information. You'll never be able to follow up on a letter sent via snail mail to a title like "Corporate Marketing Director." **OR** if you have a contact name but no connection to the person, you should also call first to make sure that person is a qualified prospect for your services. If they're not and you send them an expensive package (or even a simple letter), you've wasted much more time than you would have spent making the initial research call.

Mail a marketing piece first if you have the name of someone you are sure buys design services. If you have a marketing piece that really stands out from the clutter, go ahead and send it. For example, Erin L. Ferree of elf design in Belmont, CA, sends out recipe cards with a cake recipe and the tagline, "elf design makes marketing a piece of cake." "While it doesn't always land new jobs," Ferree says, "it gets people interested in my method of keeping in touch. I'm always top of mind when a project does come up. And people actually ask when my next mailing is coming out!"

STEP 3 STOKE THE ENGINE

Statistics vary on how many marketing efforts—or "touches"—it takes to turn a new prospect into a client, but the average is more than five, sometimes as many as nine. That's right: nine times that you need to reach out, educating your market about how you can help them, reminding them that you exist, helping them get to know you and building trust, before they sign on the dotted line. That's why follow-up must be the engine of your marketing machine.

There are two main efforts: following up when you've initially made a new contact, and maintaining continual follow-ups to your entire network of prospects and clients (via e-mail newsletters and other regular communication). Both are important.

INDIVIDUAL FOLLOW-UP

E-mail is the ideal follow-up tool for keeping in touch with individual prospects. After that first conversation or meeting, make it a point to follow up right away. Build on the momentum of your freshness in your contact's mind by sending an e-mail message in which you thank her for her time and express your eagerness to work together. Briefly reiterate your understanding of her business challenge and refer to an experience in your background that shows you're the right resource to help her.

If too much time passes before you follow up, sometimes even a day or two, the conversation may slip into the recesses of your prospect's mind or blur with that of others like you, and therefore won't make as strong an impact.

Here's an example of a follow-up message sent by cartoonist Lloyd Dangle, the Oakland, CA-based creator of TroubleTown, after he met a prospect at the Licensing Show in New York City:

Subject line: CORPORATE SLIME = CANDY?

Dear Steven,

No, I'm NOT calling YOU corporate slime! I'm writing to remind you of the design of a greedy, power-mad suit that you saw—and expressed interest in—at the Licensing Show.

My notes say that your reaction was, "YOWEEEE! I could make candy out of that." (I added the YOWEEEE myself; you didn't actually say that.)

I'm reaching out to you to see if we might make this or another project happen in 2006. I want to pitch you ideas but only in a productive way that suits you. Please let me know which you prefer:

- E-mail me samples
- Mail me samples
- Call me at around _____ am/pm
- The time of year we look at designs is:
a) anytime, b) _____
- Other: _____
- No thanks, you're not the kind of SLIME we work with here.

Thank you for your time, and keep an eye on your snail mail for something from me soon.

Sincerely,
Lloyd Dangle

In this follow-up e-mail message, Dangle reminds his prospect of his interest, expresses his eagerness to work together and then asks how he should stay in touch. Asking a question is a good strategy because it gives your prospect something specific to respond to, rather than the usual, "Hope to hear from you ..."

HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU FOLLOW UP?

The main reason most people fail in the follow-up arena is because they give up too soon—way too soon. They don't want to be perceived as a pest and therefore stop reaching out.

How hard should you push? How many times should you reach out? How often?

There are no rules, of course. Everyone has their own preference, and you should ask each of your

ONGOING FOLLOW-UP

The only way to stay in touch with everyone in your network is with a regular marketing vehicle—something you do like clockwork, monthly or at least quarterly, and for which you don't have to reinvent the wheel every time.

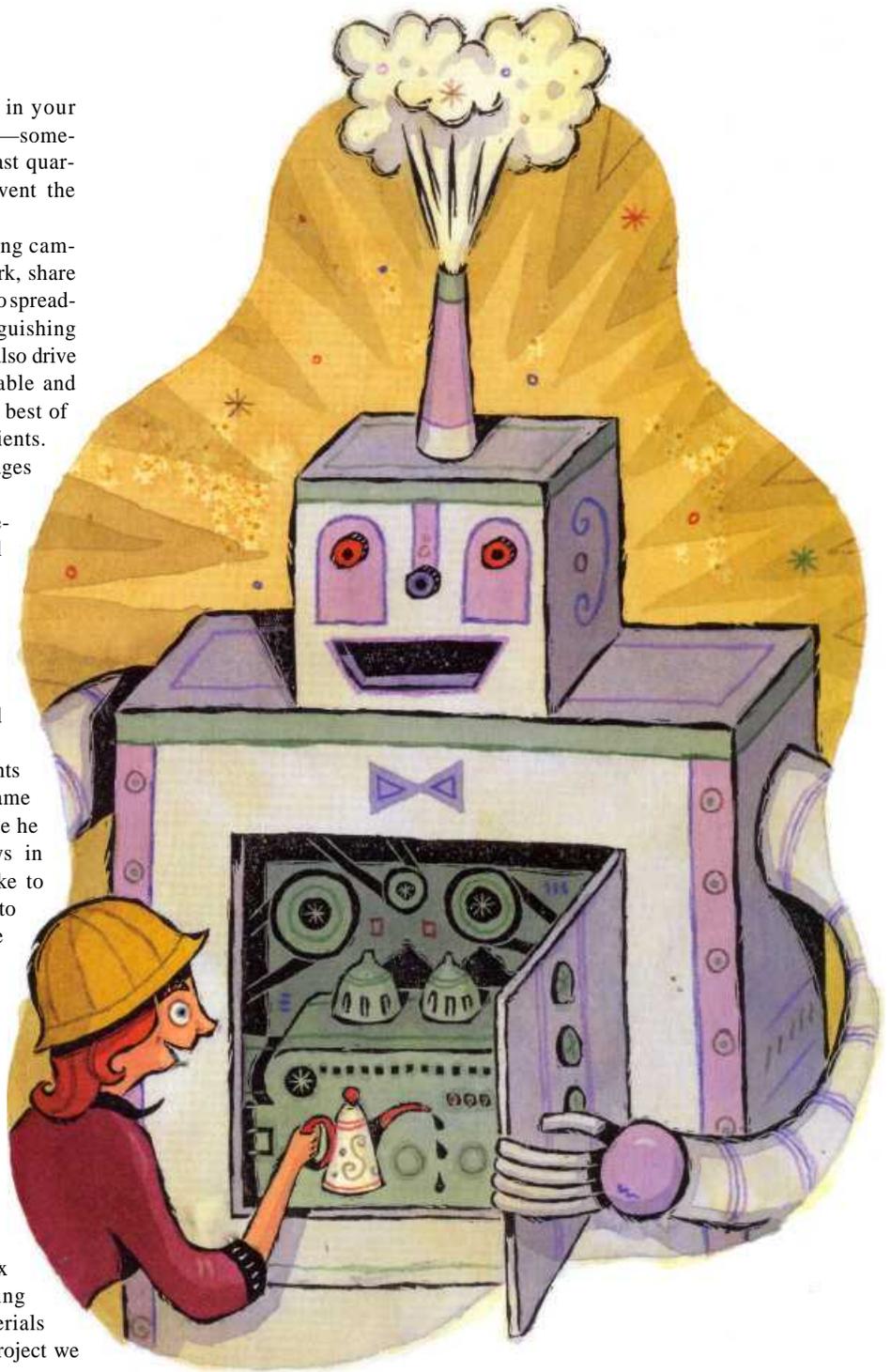
E-mail is ideal for your long-term marketing campaign, too. It allows you to showcase your work, share your knowledge and build credibility, while also spreading the word about your services and distinguishing you from other designers. E-mail newsletters also drive traffic to your website in a much more reliable and controllable way than search engines do. And best of all, e-mail serves as a prompt for your recipients. When they get a message from you, it encourages them to respond.

Scott Souchock, principal of Seattle-based G.ScottlDesign, creates environmental graphic design for educational institutions. His monthly e-mail newsletter, "Wayfinding 101," offers what Souchock calls "pithy, practical, informative and often fun tips, stories, case studies and examples about wayfinding, signage and the world of environmental graphic design."

Souchock's list started small—just his clients and a few prospects whose projects never came through—but has been growing steadily since he launched his e-mail newsletter. He's always in list-building mode, asking people if they'd like to receive "Wayfinding 101" and remembering to include a link to a sample in the signature file in his regular e-mail correspondence.

Besides e-mail, there are other tools you can use to stay in touch regularly with your contacts, such as a printed newsletter, a postcard series or a monthly calendar. But whatever tool you choose, make sure you use it consistently, so everyone in your network can relax in the knowledge—that you'll stay in touch with them.

If you implement all of the marketing efforts recommended here, your marketing machine will be in full gear within six months—and soon you'll have people reaching out to you saying, "I've been getting your materials for a while now, and I'd like to talk about a project we have in mind."



prospects what they prefer. But when in doubt, err on the side of too much contact rather than too little, because what may feel like a lot to you probably isn't at all to them.

If you've properly targeted your list and the people you're calling do buy design services, they'll expect you to regularly keep in touch. Some of them may even want you to.

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