



*Marketing is  
about timing*

**Chris West & Mike Southon**  
September 2006

## *Marketing is about timing*

**To many people, marketing is a bit of a mystery: corporates do it well, usually, but it costs millions. Smaller businesses often dip a toe into marketing and get precious little in return: pretty brochures, clever ads but not much extra business. Yet the thought lingers on – marketing is important; out there someone else is getting it right...**

There are many ways of looking at marketing: back in the sixties, Neil Borden came up with the term 'marketing mix', which meant all the different marketing tools. There are an almost infinite number of these tools – guerrilla marketing guru Jay Conrad Levinson lists a hundred in one of his books. We like to keep things simple. First there's marketing strategy, then there's marketing communication. A third aspect, marketing information, feeds into both the first two.

The strategy has to be right before the communication is considered. This may sound obvious – cue a truism like 'you can't find your way somewhere without a map' – but it's a common mistake to get things the wrong way round. Strategy usually emerges out engagement with the market. You think you have an idea; you put it into practice; what eventuates is something rather different from what you intended. This is learning, progress, how things really work. Which is great, but if you've spent a fortune on marketing communications before setting out, these communications are now obsolete. You need another set, and they don't come cheap.

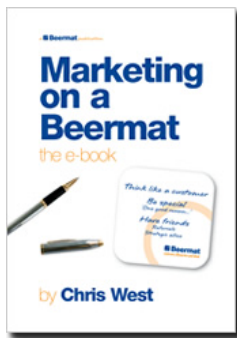
This is where the small business has an advantage over the corporate. In corporate brand launches, the strategy is planned and the communications set up, usually in line with the strategy, before the big fanfare of the launch. If the initial planning was right, the marketing works. If it was wrong, then the corporate has an irredeemable turkey on its hands. A very expensive irredeemable turkey. The small business can act differently, gently easing into the market, refining its offer in the light of what it discovers until it has a clear idea of what it is really providing, for whom. Or, of course, it can back off, having realized that there wasn't the market for the offer that was originally thought. It can do this without having lost shedloads of money, lick its wounds, have a good think about what went wrong and try again – still quietly, still in the spirit of adventure.

Naturally, the time comes when the business knows it has found a market where there is enough demand and where they can operate profitably (and, usually, start thinking about expanding further). Now is the time to set out strategy, and marketing communication can begin in earnest as you now know what you want to say and to whom.

The small business will have started off using personal contacts, email and / or some very cheap marketing tools like fliers. It should not abandon these and leap at once into expensive campaigns. Build the marketing armoury slowly, watching carefully what works and what doesn't.

Sales people may well feel that some of the power is being wrested out of their hands at this point, which is why some sales cornerstones like to stay in early start-ups, moving on once the marketing people move in. While we understand this, it's important to keep a 'people person', which is what the sales cornerstone should be, at the heart of things. The moment it all becomes about process, you are ceding advantage to the corporates, for whom this is the case; remember they are bigger than you. The sales cornerstone should not be shifted into sales management, which they are usually hopeless at, as they get bored with the detail and want to be out there selling again. Instead, get them out there talking to people of more general strategic interest, such as potential partners. Don't, by the way, give them free rein in choosing strategic partners – that's the entrepreneur's job.

Lao Tzu said 'in action, it is timeliness that counts'. He probably wasn't talking about marketing, which wasn't massive in China in 600 BC. But it's as if he was. Think strategy from Day One; only start the communication once the strategy is clear; then build it slowly.



***Marketing on a Beermat, the new e-book by Chris West, is now available from [www.beermat.biz](http://www.beermat.biz)***

*Article courtesy of "Director" - The IOD Magazine – [www.iod.com](http://www.iod.com)*