



PRODUCT LAUNCH FOR THE ENTREPRENEUR

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You've reached a milestone. You have researched your idea, developed a business plan, perhaps built a team, and have funding in place. It's time to go to market. Now what? This is a time when a lot of entrepreneurs panic. There is a lot at stake. What if no one buys the product or service? What if it's the wrong market? What if we spend money on the wrong promotions and run out of marketing budget? What if the trade press ignores us? What if we get no web traffic at our site?

These are all common concerns for the entrepreneur. However, I'll let you in on a secret. Big, established companies have the same worries, all the time, every time they launch a product. There's ALWAYS a risk when you go to market. The only things you can do are: recognize the risks, evaluate and prioritize the risks, and then learn from the mistakes. To accomplish this, you need a plan. To write the plan, you need to do some information gathering, some analysis, some thinking and some writing.

Chances are, you are going to market with your first product or service. You want to make a splash. You need to create awareness of your product among your customers and in your target market. To do that, you need to position your company carefully, and choose the right messages, so that those customers buy your product or service, generating long-awaited revenue. Whether you have \$10.00 in your marketing budget or \$10 Million, you need to decide which marketing programs will reach the greatest number of potential customers, and will yield the greatest return on investment. Here's how to put together a simple and realistic plan for going to market.

GATHERING:

Hopefully, you have a business plan with some information in it that you have already gathered together. You will need to have the following information:

- Detailed customer description
- Description of target market segment (s)
- Market trends
- Competitive matrix, or list of competitors with noted strengths and weaknesses
- List of channel (distribution) partners, if any
- Your marketing budget

If you don't have this information in your business plan, then you will need to do a bit more research before you go on to the analysis phase. When you have all of this information gathered together, you are ready for the next phase.

ANALYSIS:

Step 1. With the customer description in front of you, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where does the customer hang out? Where are they located geographically?
- How do these customers learn about new products and services? In trade publications? In the newspaper? Word of mouth? From sales people? At events such as trade shows? From websites? Radio ads?
- What is the customers' value proposition with regard to my product or service offering?

Step 2. Using the description of target market segment (s), ask yourself the following questions:

- How will I reach the customers in the segment?
- Are all customers within the segment similar in terms of their buying behavior and sales cycle?

If you have more than one segment, you will have more than one set of answers.

Step 3. From your characterization of market trends, identify some of the predictions that relate to future demand for your product or service. In what time frame will this demand materialize; in the next 6 months, in the next year, 5 years from now?

Step 4. Using your competitive matrix, or list of competitors with strengths and weaknesses, answer the following for EACH competitor:

- How is my product or service different from this competitor? (this is called a differentiator)
- For each competitor "weakness", is there a feature of my product or service that will be an advantage for me?
- Based on competitor strengths, are there any features of my product or service that is my weakness, that I should de-emphasize?
- How do my competitors promote their product or service?

Step 5. If you have channel partners who will be selling your product or service, then ask yourself the following:

- Are there any marketing programs in place sponsored by my channel partner that I can participate in to sell my product or service?

Step 6. With your marketing budget in hand, determine the amount you can afford to spend for the next 6 months, and also the next 12 months.

THINKING:

Now you need to take the results of the analysis and do your strategic thinking and decision-making. This can be the challenging part, but it also can be creative and fun.

The objective is to develop a plan for going to market. You will need to decide upon which **MARKETING PROGRAMS** you will use to get there, and how you will **POSITION** your product in the market.

For the marketing programs, take a look at the results of your Analysis-Step 1. Where will you get the attention of the most number of customers? For the sake of example, let's say it's your website, and one particular trade magazine.

Now look at the results of your Analysis-Step 2. You have determined that the majority of customers in your segment are very similar in their behavior (for this example), so you will assume that they all use websites and read the same trade magazine.

In Analysis-Step 3, you listed the market trends, and for the sake of this example, learned that demand would be greatest in 6 months. You don't have much time; which means that you will have to put together your promotional program quickly. The website is easy; you can quickly add content. However, an ad in a trade magazine might require a long lead time, so you make a note to find out the publication's lead time.

From Analysis-Step 4, you concluded that your competitors use trade shows and their own websites to promote their products. However, the next trade show is 9 months from now, so it may be too late to do that. You decide that it would be good to focus on your website in order to keep up with your competitors, but an ad in the trade magazine might create some attention for your company that your competitors don't have.

Now look at Analysis-Step 5. Are there any channel programs that you can participate in? For this example, let's assume that you have a reseller who advertises in a key trade magazine, and through them you might be able to get a discount on your ad.

The last thing to check is your budget (Analysis-Step 6). In this example, there are two programs that you wanted to pursue (website and trade magazine ad) and you've determined you can afford to do these easily, with some money left over. You may want to reserve some budget for longer term activities. There are also some low-cost or no-cost programs you can do, such as press releases, email newsletters and announcements, web links with your partners, and interviews with local newspapers. All of these activities can supplement your marketing campaign.

Make note of the programs and your estimated budget for each until the next step (**WRITING**).

To develop your POSITIONING for your product, take a look at the results of Analysis-Step 1, and Analysis-Step 4. What's the primary value of your product or service from the customer's point of view? List those.

What are your competitive differentiators and strengths? List those as well.

Your positioning should take into account the perceived value of your product or service, as well as your differentiators. You need to use the combined list to develop MESSAGES. You will take the words and phrases from the list and use them to create content for your website and for your ad in the trade magazine, for this example.

WRITING:

Throughout this exercise, you have made notes and lists; now it's time to put a plan together that will form your "Go to Market" campaign.

Using a table or spreadsheet, list each of your marketing programs. Next to each one, list the calendar date for completion and the allocated budget, along with the names of the people responsible for helping develop that program. If you are a lone entrepreneur, you may have to do it all yourself or outsource the work to a vendor. Bear in mind that marketing programs can sometimes require several people with different skills to complete them. For instance, a website project might require a content writer, a graphics designer and a programmer or webmaster to complete it. List all of these individuals in your spreadsheet or table, along with the amount of cycle time required for each individual's task; that way you can make sure you have enough lead time to meet your completion date. The completed spreadsheet can now be used as a project management tool.

Next, write a summary of your positioning strategy, along with a key list of messages that you will use in developing your promotional materials and programs. Also make sure to list any features that need to be de-emphasized, as you may have identified in Analysis-Step 4. The resulting section can then be used as a checklist for all of the individuals who may be helping to develop your marketing programs.

CONGRATULATIONS! You now have a simple marketing plan and launch plan in place to help you go to market. And, once you've been through this process for your first product or service, it will be much easier to develop plans for your second one.

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