



# Opportunity's Knocking—Are You Ready?

*Market planning can show you where the opportunities are—and how to prepare for them.*

BY JAN COHEN

**W**hy should you even *think* about marketing, when you may have more people who want your services than you could possibly serve?

Marketing isn't "just advertising and PR." Marketing encompasses the "four Ps": planning, product, pricing, and promotion.

Let's begin with the first P, planning. Planning for the market is a way to assure that your services are wanted, needed, and appropriate to your customers.

Why should you expend time and energy on this segment of marketing? The answer is: It will keep you on target. It will help you see if you're losing focus, leading to lots of unrelated services, offered because you've "always offered them" or someone "thought they'd be a good idea."

Market planning will help you zero in on features to include in your "menu" of services. You can be confident that targeted groups will know that the services they want are available. You, and the public to which you report, will have evidence that your services fit together in a cohesive and effective way. Here's how to begin:

## **Step 1 List Groups that Use—Or Could Use—Your Services.**

If you don't know who your "customers" or "target groups" are, how can you assess whether you're meeting their needs or plan for their future needs? The fact that people are "waiting in line" for your services doesn't mean that if they had a choice, they would still be in that line. Other potential target groups *do* have

a choice. You must know who your customers are, what they want, where they live, where and how they want to access your services. You also should know what they can afford to pay (or "give" if they are volunteers, donors, or companies who can make in-kind donations).

Your target groups might include, for example: employers, school systems, judicial systems, individuals who use your services, potential volunteers, companies who might donate equipment, and so on.

## **Step 2 Divide Customers into Sub-Groups.**

After listing your customer groups, divide them into sub-groups. Brainstorm a list of as many sub-groups as possible. Members of each sub-group have wants and needs that may bring them to your organization. Most of these groups can pay some fees for services, with some able to pay full price. Others have "third-parties" or other organizations who can pay for services.

## **Step 3 Talk with People.**

You need to listen to your customers periodically, through phone conversations, focus groups, and surveys. To whom should you talk, and what should you ask? Here are some ideas:

**Internal customers.** These are the people who work in your organization. Ask them:

- What is unique about us? What special expertise do we have?
- What do those who use our services say about us? What do they complain about? What suggestions or comments have you overheard from them?
- What do you think we should change or add to our services to better match the current and future needs of our customers or potential customers?"

**External customers.** These are people who have used your services—both *successfully and unsuccessfully*. Ask them questions such as these:

- Why did you come to us? Did we provide everything you wanted and needed?
- What should we do more of?
- What should we add?
- What successful services do we offer? What is special about how we offer them? Why do you (or would you) use them?
- What do you want and need now, and what do you anticipate needing next year?
- If we could keep only one service, which one do you think we should keep?

Don't compete where you aren't competitive.



- What changes could we make that would help you most?
- If we changed or added only one service, what should that be? How should it work?
- How much can you pay for the service?
- What variables are most important to you—price, quality, location, customer service?

**Customers who are referral sources.** Ask them questions such as the following:

- What changes could we make to existing services (or what new services could we establish) which would help you meet your goals and those of the people you refer or assist?

**Volunteers and those who donate in-kind services.** Ask them:

- What do you want from the experience or relationship?
- How could we enhance your experience?

**Organizational customers.** These include government agencies, schools, or other entities who have needed or may need your services. Be sure to target those who were satisfied and those with which you were unsuccessful. Ask them:

- Why did you come to us? Did you get what you needed?
- What do you *anticipate* you will need? How can we meet those needs?
- How are others meeting your needs?
- How much are you currently paying for services? How much do you anticipate paying per unit of service? Is price a deciding factor?
- What services would you buy from us? What volume of services do you need? Would you pay per unit of service or by means of contract?

Ask enough follow-up questions so that your customers actually help *design* the services you will offer or redesign the services you currently offer. You can then market your services using the actual words and features described by the customers or potential customers.

Be sure to ask yourself: Does it make sense for your customers *and* for

## QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR STAFF AND BOARD

- Are you trying to be “all things to all people”? Plan to target your efforts and your services. Don’t compete where you aren’t competitive. Focus on a niche where you’re the *only* or *best* one offering the service, where you have a track record, or where your service has some unique trait. Feature these programs and services rather than more of what everyone else is offering.
- What groups are your competitors ignoring? You may discover that in your geographic location there are several organizations helping one customer group but none targeting others. If so, you might want to focus your efforts on that segment.
- Have you plans for new target groups for your organization? If you discover many potential customer groups, it may be better to concentrate on one new customer at a time. Developing new markets takes a great commitment of time, money, and energy. However, if you target marketing efforts to only one customer and the demand decreases or is not there, you will be quite vulnerable. Discuss and consider in your plan how to add new customer groups into your mix.
- How can you use the concept of Return on Investment (ROI) when marketing your services? Learn how to calculate and present your numbers and results in this way. Your controller, financial officer, board treasurer, or a financial consultant can do an annual ROI sheet on your organization. Stress the Return On Investment to the community in your presentations and materials to potential funders. Of course, some audiences (especially the general public, your volunteers, and cash or in-kind contributors) also want to know the real benefits which users have received from your services. A combination of ROI, people served, and other data and quotes from past customers should satisfy most who read your information.

your organization to provide the suggested service? The fact that potential or existing customers want a service doesn’t mean you *must* provide or create it. Valid reasons *not* to do it include:

- It violates your mission.
- It doesn’t fit with your direction or vision for the future.
- It demands more resources than you can obtain or have available at this time.
- It cannot cover its costs.

### Step 4 Use the Data You’ve Gathered.

Now, how can you use all the information you’ve gathered from your target groups?

- Develop or update an annual marketing plan for *each* of your targeted customer groups.
- Plan to add or change services to reflect needs identified by each group. You will

also be aware of *key services to keep* with only minimal changes. As part of this process, you may want to evaluate which services have the potential to generate sufficient revenue to cover their costs or subsidize other critical services. These may be new or expanded services or slight changes in focus.

- Evaluate *each* of your services to see whether it can be:
  - the best in your market (either geographical or best of that type of service)
  - most convenient (where it is offered, how it is accessed)
  - responsive to newly expressed needs (offering the service in other languages, for example)
  - customized to each user (one template does not meet everyone’s needs).



## Step 5 Revise Your Marketing Materials.

Now you're ready to evaluate or redesign your marketing materials, such as brochures and fliers, and take a look at your indirect marketing materials, such as annual reports, newspaper and magazine articles, and newsletters. For each of these materials, ask yourself:

- Is it bringing people or organizations to you?
- Is it informing people about what you do and what you've accomplished?
- Does it attract volunteers and other resources?
- Does it meet a need in the market?
- Do customers value it? Do they identify it as critical—something they need and rely on? Do they ask for it when they come to you?

If your answer to these questions from past, current, or potential customers is "no," change or discontinue these materials as communication tools. Choose and evaluate marketing materials through feedback. Don't continue them just because you've "always" offered them.

Glossy materials and fancy pictures don't make up for quality services—and quality services don't need expensive marketing materials, because referrals are your best marketing device. Professional quality brochures and reports can be produced in house. Focus on the "message."

## Step 6 Market Your Services.

It's time to market your services, using the information you've gathered from talking to people and evaluating your offerings. Market services to each of your target groups, using *their words* or the *features they like* about your services.

Your final check before going out "to market" is to ask yourself *and your customers* if everything you've planned—from availability of the services, to specific features, to price, to marketing materials—matches what they want and need.

Be sure your services match what your customers value most.

## Step 7 Review Your Marketing Plan.

Review your marketing plan several times a year. Don't just keep providing the same services in the same way, even if that has been successful up to now. Create a continuous feedback loop: asking customers what they want, finding niches and filling them, getting feedback on your services, and updating your plan. This continuous improvement process will keep you focused on improving services as customer wants and needs develop or change. It also will keep you aware of logical expansion of services and additional customer groups who might want your services.

## Step 8 Continue to Plan.

You want to plan not just for survival but for "thrival" of your organization. Peter Senge wrote that the "market edge" will go to those who seek to understand the "latent need" of the customer—"what the customer might truly value but has never experienced or would never think to ask for."

By following the steps described here, you can be sure your services match what your customers value most. This process takes less time than outdated programs and guesswork. It takes fewer dollars than hiring PR consultants to write your materials. The bonus emerges when you see the *opportunities* for new markets, new customers, new contacts, new volunteers, new in-kind donations of materials and services. You'll be able to evaluate these opportunities using the information and direction included in your plan. You'll know which "fit" and which don't.

Remember: "Opportunities can fall in your lap only if you have your lap where opportunities drop." Market-driven

organizations have "laps full of opportunities" and know which ones to keep. They are, and *you can be*, thriving service providers for local communities. ■

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