

Internet Marketing

It's a proven fact that professional product lines are better than department store cosmetics. Isn't it? Unfortunately, many people believe there is no difference in skin care products. Their purchasing decisions are made primarily on price, and they're unaware of the great strides that have been made in professional products.

Common misconceptions about your products and services

I recently conducted an Internet survey to answer that question. All the participants were knowledgeable about skin health and the benefits of moisturizing, sunscreens, etc. Based on the survey results, the principal reasons why women shy away from professional products and services are:

- Cost (they're too expensive)
- Inconvenience (they don't want to go out of their way)
- Unaware of product and treatment benefits

How do you change the public's belief system about your products and services? The professional product industry has made great strides in the last thirty years. Your skin care arsenal features anti-aging products with retinols, AHAs, and powerful anti-oxidants. Your service offerings include enzyme treatments, advanced peels, micro-dermabrasion, and oxygenating therapies that deliver phenomenal results.

When it comes to the science of skin care and its therapeutic applications, you embrace innovation and change. Your salon features the latest 21st century skin care technology coupled with the best products available.

With all of this forward progress made by the skin care industry, you'd think clients would be beating a path to your door. Sadly, for most small business owners, that is not the case. Why not, and what can you do about it?

Confronting consumer objections

How do you combat an objection to cost? That's relatively simple: offer products and services for every budget. Also, run sales and promotions to stimulate buying. How do you combat an objection related to convenience? Offer the convenience of shipping. If you're just a phone call away, that's one less item on the department store list. But how do you combat the issue related to product benefits? That's tougher because it stems from several factors, including: lack of knowledge, belief systems and a healthy dose of skepticism. Let's review the problem again.

Based on my survey, many people believe that there is no *real* difference between professional product lines and those purchased in drug and department stores.

How do you as individual beauty industry professionals combat this misconception? The answer lies in greater public awareness and education about your products and services. If your product line has a higher percentage of active ingredients, then let the public know it. If the molecular structure of the product is superior, then let your audience know it. Educating people about differentiating features and specific product benefits is the first step to broad consumer acceptance.

All products and services are not created equal!

Professional beauty practitioners and service providers are a specialized subset of the cosmetic industry, an industry that has done a great job of marketing its products. By putting huge sums of marketing dollars into magazine, television and radio advertisements, the cosmetic industry has created an empire that may seem impenetrable to you, the individual beauty practitioner.

Let's face it, as individual salon owners and even as a group, you will never have the marketing dollars to engage in massive campaigns to thwart the competition. Besides, any marketing, including major brands and competitors, creates public awareness and that benefits the industry as a whole.

Individual therapists and salon owners need to vigorously promote themselves as experts giving consumers real alternatives to department store sales clerks and over-the-counter product selection. You need to go on the offensive to reduce misconceptions about products and services. Without a clear understanding of the far-reaching and cumulative effects of professional salon treatments consumers will continue to buy low cost brands with do-it-yourself remedies that offer little or no results.

Internet Marketing

The easiest and most cost effective way to disperse your message is by using the Internet. With 69% of U.S. adults accessing the web, the Internet has revolutionized how business operates, markets, and communicates - yet it's a channel that is sadly underutilized in the beauty field. Shop.org and Boston Consulting Group (June 2002) found that the Health and Beauty Industry has achieved weak online retail product penetration (only 1.4%).

Internet usage has exploded over the last few years becoming the media of choice for many people seeking product and service information. The Internet allows shoppers to gain valuable information before making their purchase decision, even if the actual buy is made offline. The web levels the playing field between huge conglomerates and small businesses allowing them to compete effectively. Developing and running an ad on network television is likely out of the question for most salon owners, but designing a compelling website is within reach.

If you think local residents have no interest in using the Internet to find you, think again! Local search has skyrocketed among Internet users. In February 2004, The Kelsey Group and BizRate reported that 25.1% of commercial searches were local.

Based on statistics from Overture.com (January 2004), Internet users searched the keyword "cosmetics" 266,454 times, "skin care" 124,414 times, and "facial skin care" 99,929 times. From this small sampling of search terms, it should be apparent there's a thirsty public clamoring for information about your products and services.

What better place for these web surfers to end up than your website filled with valuable information about skin care, products and services? Salon owners can and should use the Internet to capture mindshare and market share from this eager group of targeted buyers.

Your website can economically provide information to customers and prospects while gaining their trust and loyalty. It will differentiate your business from the rest of the competition highlighting areas where you are distinctive and unique.

As a marketing tool, your website provides measurable results unlike any other media. For example, you can track the number of visitors and the time they spend on any specific page. You can monitor search terms visitors use to find your website. This information is important in your overall online marketing effort.

Product and service descriptions: Provide in depth descriptions about your products and services. Unlike print advertising media where you pay by the column inch, web pages offer virtually unlimited space. Use it to gain attention and create interest for your products and service offerings.

Resource material: Devote a section of your website to such topics as dehydrated, oily, or sensitive skin conditions and treatments. This is where you can really shine and differentiate yourself from the competition. In doing so, you'll reinforce your expertise and build credibility. Post information such as after-treatment care. This may seem redundant, but it re-enforces the advice you give during treatments.

Customer support: Provide multiple ways for customers to contact you. Incorporate customer contact forms and surveys to gather insight into what's important to your clients. Customers welcome the opportunity to provide feedback. Use this feedback to fine-tune your business and focus your marketing efforts on the top concerns of your customers.

Most dissatisfied customers won't complain, but they also won't come back. Solicit their feedback via an online form or email. If you do get negative feedback be sure to make it "right" for them. When customers believe that you really care about them, they're less inclined to shop around.

Testimonials: Show off client success stories that you're especially proud of. Real testimonials will boost your credibility. Ask some of your clients for a short endorsement that you can use on your website and in other marketing collateral. Thank them with an appropriate gift or a discount on their next treatment.

FAQs: Consider using a question and answer forum to handle buyer objections up front. An FAQ section on your website allows visitors to learn about your products, services and policies. Anticipate their questions and provide clear, simple answers.

Email marketing: The most effective tool on the Internet is email. Create an "opt-in" list and use it to broadcast special offers and promotions. Disseminate product information during email campaigns. Write informational articles in monthly or quarterly email newsletters. Also, post them on your website and over time you'll have built a valuable, content-rich site filled with quality information. Remember, your aim is to establish yourself up as a credible, trusted authority in the skin care field. Build that trust, and customers will follow.

Company philosophy: Post your mission statement on the website, but be sure it's articulated succinctly. You should also post short bios of key personnel. Don't put a lot of time in this section because the "About Us" page will be your least visited page.

Company policies and guidelines: If you have a policy that states there are no children allowed in the salon, here's the place to put it. If you have cancellations and return policies, put them here as well. Provide as much information to clients before their visit so they won't be surprised when they come in.

Getting The Word Out: Beyond Your Website

Product Manufacturers and Distributors: Partner with product manufacturers and distributors to create widespread brand awareness using the efficiencies of the Internet. Manufacturers can provide a lot of support by disseminating product specific information. Find out if they have a webpage devoted to professional retail service providers. Make sure your contact information is listed on that page. Ask if they will install a link to your website. With help from manufacturers and distributors, your marketing message will reach a larger number of interested buyers.

Professional Associations and Magazines: National and local associations are also in a position to help educate the public via the Internet. Enlist their help and that of professional publications. Web surfers are always searching for substantive information about skin care. As authoritative sources, they can be advocates for skin care professionals.

Publish articles related to women and beauty: The professional beauty care industry is under-represented on women's websites. Website publishers are hungry for well-written articles to distribute on their sites. Contribute content and help create a greater understanding about your profession. Find out if you can provide resource material for their newsletters. A professional "tips" column might be well received.

Become an advocate for your industry by making the case for professional products and services. Two women's websites that draw a lot of traffic are *MSN Women* and *iVillage.com*. In addition to helping your profession, you'll be able to cite them in your own marketing material.

Join Forums: Offer professional advice on a women's forum. Although you can't shamelessly self-promote, you can offer advice for specific skin care problems and educate the public about alternatives to low cost, do-it-yourself remedies.

Should you abandon other forms of marketing?

Absolutely not. The Internet should not replace your yellow page or newspaper advertisement, but it does offer a cost effective means to expand your business to a wider audience. According to Thomas Register, after direct sales and referrals, the Internet is the 3rd most powerful way to generate a return on marketing investment. It beats trade shows, print advertising and direct mail.

Use the Internet to carve out a bigger segment of the retail cosmetics market. With careful planning, your website will become your most cost effective marketing component. By using compelling, persuasive copy you'll significantly increase awareness, acquire new customers and drive revenue.

Don't have the time or resources available to develop your website? Seek professional help. There are several website design and marketing companies that specialize in the skin care industry group.

Your website may be the first thing a potential customer sees. Make that impression a favorable one by presenting your company in the best possible light. Have it developed by someone who knows and understands your business.

Blue Print for Action

The task of creating consumer awareness may seem daunting, but it is not insurmountable. With time and concerted effort from professionals in the industry, many skin care misconceptions can be dispelled. You can help affect an attitudinal change toward professional skin care products and services.

The first step is to develop an effective website that is easily found by web surfers. It should reflect the same professional image you strive to achieve in your salon. In time, there could be hundreds (if not thousands) visiting your website daily.

Broadly distribute your marketing message using a variety of methods: product descriptions, treatment options, scientific test results and email newsletters. Contact manufacturers, associations, or other organizations, and interest them in campaigns to promote consumer awareness. Publish articles and advice in a variety of websites and forums. Educating the public and differentiating your services should be every practitioner's goal. I'm looking forward to seeing more of you in cyberspace.