



Does your garden center have an ambassador marketing program? Enlisting advocates for your business can really help you grow your profits.

By Mason Day

Since the dawn of commerce many things have changed in the world of marketing. Technologies have advanced, and we're able to reach our audiences in ways that once seemed impossible.

However, if one standard has held true, it's that word-of-mouth marketing is ultimately what drives the best products ahead of their competition.

We are constantly being surrounded by advertisements, and because some businesses rely on shady techniques, we've reached a point where consumers don't really trust a whole lot of what businesses have to say about their own companies and products. What they want to know is, "What do people like me think about this company?"

Consumers want to see reviews. Amazon, Yelp!, Google — that's what it's all about. They want to know what their peers think.

Even Facebook has taken advantage of this. We've all seen the "recommendations" feature by now. People asking for advice on things from restaurants to internet service providers. How do we make sure that our businesses are the ones people are recommending?

That's where establishing an ambassador/advocate program can take things to the next level. Instituting a program to track and promote your company's most loyal fans finally gives you

a tangible process to manage a large chunk of how people are hearing about your business.

What is an Advocate Marketing Program?

An advocate marketing program is a system of using your existing customers and "fans" to actively talk about your business and promote your products. Usually this is done through cycles of activation, so advocates are not in a state of constant promotion.

Advocacy doesn't necessarily tie directly to dollars spent or trips to your store. The best advocates are the customers that align closest with your values, and consistently promote you to their network (friends, family, social following).

Though you can utilize rewards, the best advocate programs often create intrinsic rewards rather than monetary rewards. Programs that involve paying for promotion would be more aligned with influencer marketing programs.

Getting Started

Starting your advocate marketing program doesn't have to be complicated. Doing a few searches on the most popular social channels, and on various search engines and review sites, will help give you a feel for the ambassadors that you already have out there working in your favor.

Want to learn more about advocate marketing?

Catch Mason at Cultivate'18 July 14-17, in Columbus, Ohio. He'll be speaking on "How to Turn Customers into Brand Ambassadors," "The Power of Consumer Education Programs," and "Creating a Kickass Marketing Plan." Visit www.cultivate18.org for more information.



Once you figure out who's already spreading your message, you can start reaching out to those people through email and social media to make them an official part of your program. This will also help you to gauge what the situation looks like.

Hopefully, you're starting your advocate program to help drive even more interest in your business, not because you need to do damage control. In this case, it's a lot easier to prevent negative sentiment, than to be putting out fires.

Organization

When pulling together your program, don't feel like you have to download completely new software or hire an outside company to handle it for you. You can do a lot with the systems you are already likely using. It's just about investing in the sophistication that suits your business.

If you're already using a CRM system, you might be able to operate your program as a function inside of that program you already have in place. If you don't have one in place, however, you can kick it off by organizing your advocates in an Excel table.

It's important to pull information you likely already have from other sources and fill in your spreadsheet. Two examples include: 1) Grabbing their email address and/or phone

number from Constant Contact or Mailchimp, and 2) Pulling in their transactional data to know how many times they visit the store and what they spend.

It's also extremely important to gather as much qualitative information as you can as well. What makes your advocates want to promote your business? Why do they connect so strongly with your messages? What types of circles do they operate in (online and in-person)? This is also a great place to keep track of your advocates' social handles.

Most advocate marketers would classify this step as

Advocate Marketing Program Tips

- Use a Facebook or LinkedIn group to get your advocates talking to each other. This can help give you feedback on the benefits and weaknesses of your program. It's also a more private place where advocates can share grievances (if they have any).
- Don't over-activate. It's important to build relationships before asking people to spread your message.
- If you don't think you can go it alone, there are companies out there that specialize in advocate marketing. One of those is Influitive. They've become a key resource for those looking to build their own advocate marketing programs.

the "identification" phase, and once you have your organization process in place, identification should be ongoing. The more you can learn about your advocates the better. You'll be able to find out why they're so passionate, and what drives them to promote you.

Tip: Not all advocates are the same! Try "tier-ing" it up. Certain people might be willing to write a blog post for you, whereas others might only be interested in writing a business review on Google. How you decide to break out your tiers is up to you, but it will pay off in the next stages.

Fostering the Relationship

You probably wouldn't ask a new friend for a big loan, and you probably wouldn't ask your closest friends for big loans every day. If you did, you probably wouldn't have a lot of friends, and they probably wouldn't hang around for long.

After identifying and organizing your advocates, it's time to build on those established bonds.

Your advocates should feel as special as they are. This means going above and beyond with your customer service and support. Are you doing everything you can to make sure they are receiving the best customer experience from your company? Following up and asking for feedback are great ways to build on the existing relationships with your advocates.

You also can use different techniques to make advocates feel special. At GrowIt!, our head of community, Megan Uithoven, has instituted the process of "surprise and delight." In our travels, we'll occasionally pick up a book or some unique garden tools. We then send those items out randomly to GrowIt! members who we want to feel extra special. It's a great way to surprise our most loyal members and show them we haven't forgotten about them.

At this stage, it's all about building that personal relationship between your business and your advocates. The more you go out of your way to make them feel special, the more it could pay off for you in the end.

Activation

Once you've built up your army of advocates, and you've connected with them to the point that they truly feel like they are connected to your business, it's time to activate! This is when things really start to pay off for your business. It's time to come up with an "ask."

Like any marketing campaign, when creating an activation plan, you should have a goal in mind. What are you looking to gain? Do you want more business reviews? Do you want more social content? Get creative!

Many companies use "challenges" or "opportunities" to activate their advocates. It allows for the addition of gamification to the system; putting advocates up against other advocates or themselves.

Asks like this could include things like a contest to see who can add more in-store photos to Instagram or to see if they can beat their personal best in recruiting their friends to join your store's loyalty program.

Tip: Let the task match the advocate. Before you activate your advocates, it's important to understand just how much they love your business. Not all customers will be willing to do the same things for your business. A quick search can show you there's an entire hierarchy for the lifecycle of an advocate.

It Pays to Follow Up

After your activation phase wraps up, it's important to follow up with your advocates. Let them know how they did. Track their performance. You can use it to leverage the performance of your next activation. It's also time to reward your advocates.

Your relationship with them can't be all "take." However, one of the bonuses of an advocate marketing program is that it shouldn't cost you a fortune. A lot of times company swag can go a long way! We're constantly sending out GrowIt! T-shirts to members of our "Plant Masters" group for completing desired actions on the app. They LOVE it.

Some of your advocates may be looking for more as they continue to promote you. What can you offer up? A blog opportunity on your website? An honorary title? What about VIP early access to exclusive plants and merchandise? There are all sorts of things you can leverage.

Repeat

Boom! Just like that you've put together your own advocate marketing program! Now it's time to keep identifying new advocates while learning more about your current ones, and nurturing your ongoing relationships. 🌱

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