



By Ralph Gaudio

ACHIEVING CHRISTMAS SUCCESS

From planning through promotions, this case study will show you how to be successful this holiday season.

In a year of unstable economic times with no immediate relief in sight and retail indicators continuing on a downward spiral we gathered at our store for our annual Christmas management meeting. We were not very optimistic, to say the least, but at G Boys Garden, Christmas & Patio Center, Marlton, N.J., Christmas is our most important season. After several heated discussions, we decided to gear up for our most profitable Christmas in the last five years.

We needed to implement a plan of highly scrutinized product purchases. Achieving good margins was a necessity, but we also had to maintain competitive pricing. We decided, most importantly, to find and create new ways to attract customers to our location. Our main goal was to market our business at every turn. If there were customer dollars to be had, we were going to obtain those dollars. Our 2005 Christmas motto was "Promotion, Promotion, Promotion."

Each manager was responsible for coming up with one marketing idea to increase store traffic. In addition, I dedicated spending of about 60 percent of our \$80,000 advertising budget on television, with the rest divided up accordingly. What follows are the best of the best from our 2005 holiday promotions.

Popular Promotions

We start each year with our invitation-only Christmas preview. This event takes place the first week of November. We offer customers pre-season discounts and give them a sneak peek of what's to come. This type of event also puts you in the forefront of consumers' minds for buying hot items for the coming season.

We found one of the most effective forms of advertising is cross marketing with other local businesses. This is a cost-effective way to attract customers that are already within your grasp. We are fortunate enough to have one of the busiest diners in Southern Jersey next door. We take out an advertisement on their placemats reminding the customer to stop by next door and offering a coupon. We also decorate the diner's lobby for free in return for allowing us the opportunity to provide signboards and pictures of our store and animation room. Another popular local business is the McDonalds directly across the street. We decorate its lobby as well with a McDonalds' tree, once again putting signage out reminding customers to stop across the road. This method of advertising is extremely effective and requires little or no advertising dollars.

After the opening, our most expensive marketing venture is the Black Friday Parade. Each year on the day after Thanksgiving, traditionally known as Black Friday, we have a parade that travels three miles down Route 70. This signifies the official arrival of Santa to our Christmas kingdom. The parade features characters, fire trucks, live bands, local television personalities, antique cars, clowns and, of course, Santa and Mrs. Claus. Customers line the parade route three deep. They are treated to free candy and inexpensive merchandise handouts. All three news stations and major news publications cover the event. Just the television

exposure is worth the expense. More importantly, it gets thousands of people to my store instead of the malls on the first official shopping day of the holiday season.

Focus On Children

Children are the springboards to holiday success: They can hold the key to unlocking unlimited sales dollars. Our biggest attraction for children is the animation room. Children travel down a path in a fantasy wooded setting with animated characters and music at every turn. Upon finishing the tour the children come across the man himself, Santa. Here they can visit and have their photos taken with Santa. When they leave, each child is given a candy cane and songbook with a picture on the back cover to color. If they return their colored pictures on another visit, they receive a free gift.

We also schedule appearances of cartoon characters throughout the Christmas season. This past year we ran promotions with Batman, Kim Possible and Sponge Bob. Of course, Santa is on the premises daily through Christmas Eve. Upcoming events are listed on a special-events calendar and given out by cashiers to keep parents informed. We think these character appearances are important because they differentiate us from the box stores and make children ask their parents to come back to our store. Once you hook the children, the parents are sure to follow.

Christmas Niche

A successful promotion we have run for years is Pet Night. Since there are so many pet lovers in our area, we decided to dedicate a night for customers to bring their pets for photos with Santa. We do ▶



While certainly an expensive and long-term project, hosting a Christmas parade can draw lots of attention to your store. (Photos courtesy of Ralph Gaudio)

MANAGEMENT

this two nights a season and have increased both picture business as well as register sales on these nights. The only cost of this promotion is the newspaper advertisements promoting the event.

Another niche market that many retailers miss are local churches. We send out 150 coupon flyers to local churches offering discounts and a free nativity upon presentation of the flyer. This has not only helped increase general Christmas sales but also played a significant role in increasing live poinsettia sales.

Five years ago, one of my managers came up with idea of having "Corporate Nights" for the employees of large, local businesses. We targeted 20 large, local businesses and provided the human relations or payroll manager an E-mail offering discounts, give-a-ways and refreshments on certain evenings for their employees. The company sends out a mass E-mail, and upon presentation of their corporate ID and letter, employees are afforded the aforementioned goodies. The 20 corporate nights have increased sales on those particular nights from 6 to 8 percent.

Being in business more than 45 years I thought I had seen it all. Once again, I was wrong. Throughout the years, ideas I thought would be highly successful were not as grand as anticipated. Other ideas I did not allocate as many dollars or time to turned out to be very successful.



Pet night can be a good niche Christmas promotion.

What I do know and have known since day one is that you need to get the word out. You need to advertise, promote and provide. Let your target market know that you are the destination of choice for all their entertainment and shopping needs. ❀

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