

PLAYING BIG

How small companies can have a big presence in their market

By Graham Garrison



When apparel-maker Vooray, a small company out of Utah, decided to flex its brand muscle, it didn't opt for a Super Bowl commercial, massive giveaways, or a multi-million dollar advertising campaign like the retail giants in its space. It couldn't. Instead, it built the Human Slingshot Slip and Slide.

The Human Sling Shot Slip and Side consisted of a huge slip and slide, a truck, rope and the physics created from its contraption to propel people – who just happened to be wearing its apparel – 150 feet in the air. What made it work in promoting its brand was a partnership with Devin Graham and his YouTube Channel, says Andrew Davis, who describes the unlikely partnership in his book “Brandscaping.”

More than 11 million YouTube hits later, Vooray reached its audience and potential customer base in a unique way. “Vooray ended up with a huge success on its hands from a distribution standpoint,” Davis says. “Retail stores, especially internationally, saw this content, saw the people wearing Vooray hats and swimsuits, and contacted Vooray to ask for international distribution of its product.”

The bigger brand does not always get the business. The following are strategies small businesses can use in branding efforts to “play big” in their market.

The partnership approach

Davis says small companies should consider partnering with bigger brands that don't compete in their space, similar to the “You Also Bought” feature on Amazon. “Somebody buys your product or hires your service; what other products or services do they generally buy?” he asks. “Partner with those bigger brands and create content for those bigger brands to help educate their market in an authentic partnership.”

For example, Graham has a subscriber base of more than 1 million viewers on YouTube and releases a new video every Tuesday. He needs events to turn into music videos, which is what he does every week, but the content comes from various sources. “Vooray put this event together, asked

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Devin if he wanted to create a music video for it, and put it on YouTube,” Davis says. “That's an authentic partnership; Devin needs some great content that doesn't cost any money to produce because he doesn't get paid to do these things, and Vooray needs access to his audience – 18-25 year old men who love crazy stuff.”

The PR factor

Mitch Leff, founder of Leff & Associates, a public and media relations services firm, says PR campaigns are more cost effective than advertising dollars for smaller companies, which may not have the budget. Leff recommends looking at an outside PR firm that knows the community you are trying to reach. “If you're going to out-source your PR, and you're in a specific area like apparel, technology or home interiors, if you can find somebody with PR expertise and knows your industry publications already, then your ramp-up speed and ability to get the word out faster is better. If you try to do it yourself, you may have to learn

your publications and outlets, make the contacts yourself, and it will be more time-consuming. Whereas, if you bring somebody from the outside, they'll often have those relationships already. They can hit the ground running.”

Social media

This is a no-brainer. The cost of entry to social media is minimal. “Very often the cost of entry is the time for the person managing the work,” Leff says. “There are little to no out-of-pocket costs. And the opportunities to reach customers practically are unlimited at portals such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and Yelp.”

Use employees as brand ambassadors

“How do your employees feel about your company?” asks Wendy Alpine, president of Alpine Communications Inc., a boutique PR agency that helps small and mid-size businesses build brand awareness. “Would they say they like working there? Does your HR department do anything innovative to enhance the employee experience – with or without products (e.g., community service projects)? Your employees can be your best brand ambassadors if they feel good about the company they work for.”

Really know your customer

Marketing expert Seth Godin writes in his popular blog that companies often pick the product or service first before picking the audience, when it should be the other way

around. He uses examples such as a real estate broker picking which sort of buyer she wants to work with, or a bowling alley instructor picking between league players or girls-night-out parties, etc. “The yoga instructor, the corporate coach, the app developer – in every case, first figure out who you’d like to do business with, then go make something just for them,” Godin writes. “The more specific the better.”

Promote what makes you tick

Do customers trust your product? Alpine says that’s a point to promote. She uses Latham Inc., a family-owned business based in Atlanta, as an example. Latham is a leading designer and manufacturer of time and attendance products for small businesses. They’ve also been at it since 1919.

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“From mechanical time clocks to face recognition and cloud-based systems, Latham is a trusted brand in the industry. Part of that trust comes from customer service support that includes live telephone assistance, money-back guarantees and no hassle exchange programs. All of these are advantages smaller businesses may have over larger competition. Use it in branding.”

Think ahead

Brands need access to potential customers. Companies should look ahead to who those could be, and where they are now, Davis says. “The simple question I ask my audience is, ‘Who has your next customer as their current customer?’”

Practice thought leadership

You can position your executives as experts in your field so that media outlets, blogs, seminars and trade shows seek them out for insights. “You don’t have to be the biggest company in the field to talk about best practices or things that are making your industry go, you just have to be well-researched on your industry,” Leff says. “Someone quoted on your industry in a *USA Today* story might be from a big company, but he might just as easily be someone from a small company. As long as he has something valuable to say, he can be a thought leader in his field.”

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Worry less on the look and more on the impact

Too many companies spend too much time worrying about the brand’s look and feel rather than understanding the value their brand brings to the consumer. “It’s much more important to even take a small set of consumers and understand what they think of your brand – not its looks, but what it means to them,” Davis says. “It’s very simple value propositions that make the product or service worthwhile to the consumer, but too often companies assume what they know the customer loves about their product, but actually don’t.”

