



SUP-X[®] INSIGHTS

Today's Guest: Nathan Smith
President, Silverstream Consulting



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Editor's Note: Rather than conduct our normal interview, I have asked my good friend and marketing guru Nathan Smith, President of Silverstream Consulting and Director of Marketing and Design for SUP-X, to give us his thoughts on startup marketing. This is an introductory piece and we'll ask Nathan to return occasionally to dive deeper on the topics that he surfaces today. Enjoy.

Startup Marketing: The Initial Roadmap

Some people argue that startup marketing is a completely different animal than traditional marketing and that they are two distinct strategies. I'm not sure how they can justify this theory and the truth lies somewhere in between. I also think that people all too often conflate tactics with strategy. They are not the same thing either. Sun Tzu wrote, "Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." With these thoughts in mind, this is the roadmap I use when counseling startups in their marketing efforts:

1. Who are you? What are you selling? Who are you selling it to? Why do they need it (now)?

Basic questions – but often not thought out because you're too excited about your product and/or believing your own hype. You need to commit to paper succinct answers to these four questions before you even start to think about go-to-market strategies and/or investor pitching.

Also, remember that it's not about you. It's never about you. It's about "them". Get in that headspace and tailor your positioning and messaging towards that audience. Do research on your target market. Don't just trust your gut. Three questions you should always be asking yourself – regardless of how mature your company is: "Why? Why now? Why us?"

2. Write two stories for your company: 1) the consumer story, and 2) the investor story.

Practice these and believe in them. Recite them with authority and confidence. Have research available to back up the claims you make. Create a list of keywords for each story. (bonus: these keywords can drive content creation, advertising tactics, and more)

3. Create some sort of a written plan.

Experts argue over whether or not you need a traditional 40-page marketing plan. I'm not going to pick a side in that debate. However, you must commit some sort of plan to paper that hits a few points: target audiences; product definition; features and benefits; value statement; marketing goals; revenue goals; strategic statement or outline to achieve these goals. Wrap some dates around these deliverables. This could be a 2-42 page document but you need to go through the exercise of laying it out as nothing quite distills the mind as writing.

4. Master the art of 'humble-bragging' and shift your attitude to one of quiet confidence.

I find entrepreneurs too often fall into one of two categories: 1) braggadocios who insist their product/service is the greatest thing since sliced bread. These are hype-men that make the most noise, often with wildly exaggerated claims that just can't be backed up. These people don't pay attention to their competitors and often go to market too quickly with a less-than-developed product; or, 2) lazy copycats who get sucked into the vortex of whatever their competitors are saying. These folks aren't diligent and confident enough with their product and research, and it shows in their marketing and presentation. They drown in their competitor's press releases and don't trust themselves, their idea, and their team enough to start marketing in earnest.

My suggestion for a middle path is that when you're starting out, think of your company as being behind a velvet rope. Access is limited to a hand-selected few that can offer you the best feedback. Then you can start to let more people in. Keep a level head about you and don't scream all of your goals, aspirations and secrets to the world in a fit of futurecasting, self-aggrandizement, which can backfire spectacularly.

5. Now that this is all done – you can start to think about the tactics you'll use.

ALWAYS ensure that your tactics rollup to supporting your broader strategy. ALWAYS. Otherwise you're wasting time and money, your two most precious resources. Here are some examples of marketing tactics you can/should be using:

a. PR: Create meaningful press releases and email them to reporters that would be interested in your offering. There are many resources online to writing a press release. Just make sure that your releases are substantive and not just a sales pitch. Also, begin to develop phone/email relationships with appropriate reporters. You may be asked to contribute a quote to a piece in the future.

b. Social Media: All startups should leverage LinkedIn. Join groups and connect with appropriate individuals. Create content and post relatively frequently. Also, depending on your company – Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter can be extremely useful tools for you, too. Post often and genuinely engage your audience. If someone comments, comment back. Create actual dialogue instead of copy/pasting a canned response to each commenter. Also, make sure you're using the right tool for the right job. Demographics mean something here. In step 6, I discuss a little more about matching your tactics to the job. Consult with a professional if you are not sure how to create engaging social content and which channels to use.

c. Advertising: Proceed with caution. On a limited budget, advertising can suck up your money for little return. This is better suited for more mature companies. The advertising I would recommend for a startup is social media advertising – and maybe AdWords. You can drill down to very specific demographics and control your ad spend. Retargeting and pixel tracking within digital advertising should not be overlooked as well. Print ads and the ilk are probably not appropriate for a startup with limited resources.

d. Content Creation: Whether it's a brochure, web page, YouTube video, or a tweet - - all startups should be content creation machines. Write well, write optimized, and write often. Focus on how your company/product makes your target's life better. Distribute content on a regular basis. DO NOT rely on adding info to the blog page on your website and call it a day. No one will read it. Go to where the readers are. Then you can work to bring them to your stable, if that's even a worthwhile effort for your particular company. Create a content calendar and commit to original writing at least once a month. Frequency is key here and getting noticed can take some time. Work hard to grow your followers and disciples via networking methods described herein. Keep pushing that content out to them and engage, engage, engage.

e. Website: Ok, of course you have a website, duh. But make it good and it MUST be mobile responsive. A great website can level the playing field across small and giant companies. There are services out there that will help even inexperienced people develop sharp sites – Squarespace is just one of many. Ensure that your web content is optimized for not only search engines, but your target audience as well. Learn the art of letting go of words, too. Attention spans are short these days, so the fewer words the better. If you don't trust your abilities in this area, hire someone. You may need to hire a separate designer and copywriter. It's hard to find someone who excels at both of these disciplines, but I can't over-emphasize enough the importance of having access to a good writer on your team. Also, ensure that the aesthetic of your site matches your product and its audience.

f. Branding: Don't blow your budget here, but make sure you've got the right product name and a smart logo. Consult a professional for this. Don't rely on MS Word and clip art to build your brand elements. Your brand is the visual representation of your entire company, its products and its ethos. Again – always keep your audience in mind here and position your brand accordingly. And there are online brand development tools/services like Logoworks, Fiverr and others that can keep the budget down, but make sure that you are absolutely 100% crystal clear in your vision and articulate your needs exceedingly well when using a gig-economy based service like Fiverr.

6. Tactics depend on your product and your audience.

There are simply too many marketing channels available today to use them all. Furthermore, the most popular channels may not even be relevant to your company. Think back to the Sun Tzu quote at the beginning of this article: relying on the hippest techniques – without thinking about how they complement your end game – is a recipe for failure. I promise you this. Furthermore, go back to Step 1 above: remember your audience and ensure that your campaigns and efforts in marketing support not only your broader strategy, but are distributed via the correct methods. For example: if you have created an enterprise software solution for financial institutions, Instagram isn't going to help you out and you'll be wasting your time trying to get followers. Conversely, if you've created a breakthrough toy for 3-6 year olds, sending press releases to the Financial Times is a non-starter. Again - don't lose sight of your strategy.

7. Build relationships.

I can't stress this enough. Connect with your communities relentlessly and authentically. LinkedIn, FB, Twitter, email campaigns, trade shows, networking luncheons, happy hours...there are literally more opportunities that you can handle to cultivate meaningful relationships with your end-users and potential investors. Make this exercise a priority. Ensure that you are networking strategically as well. Don't waste your time at a Chamber of Commerce meeting or on FB if the participants don't fit your target market(s).

8. Market in a spiral.

There is so much customer data available to you, your marketing and business development efforts should follow the path of a spiral. Some people think of this as a funnel. I prefer thinking of it as a spiral because it keeps your particular goal focused at the center of your efforts. Testing the effectiveness of marketing is much easier and more granular these days. There is no reason that you should not have systems in place to test the effectiveness of everything from a tweet to a landing page to a value proposition. Constantly test, refine, and work your way to the center by way of this spiral of improvement.

9. Create a system of accountability.

If you are a one-man shop or a small, agile team, this can be overwhelming. But the truth is, if you lay out grandiose goals, but do not implement them in some manner by which you or your team can be tied to the efforts – you'll lose track of your progress and, ultimately, fall off your strategic path. This is almost guaranteed. Accountability is the glue that binds commitment to results. The buck has to stop somewhere. Identify who that is and remain loyal to it.

10. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

There is no silver bullet to marketing success in the startup environment (or any business environment, for that matter). Your success will be determined by how much thought and action you put into a strategic plan that speaks to your market and offers a truly innovative solution to them. Don't get sidetracked by the noise that is all around us. Stay focused. Also – don't become paralyzed by over-analysis. General George S. Patton stated that, "A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week." Even in a marathon, you have to leave the start line at some point.

Follow these steps and readjust some of your thinking and I'm confident you will experience more success in your endeavors.

Nathan Smith is the President of Houston, Texas, based [Silverstream Consulting](#) - a marketing and PR agency which counsels professional services firms, non-profits, and startups - with offices in South Florida and Texas. Nathan owned and published a music magazine in 2001 and is the former marketing director of Gunster, one of the largest corporate law firms in Florida. He is also a nationally published author and Addy award winner. Nathan can be reached at nsmith@silverstreamconsulting.net and at (561) 779-9153.