Niche Markets

For renovators, finding a target or niche market has become essential to business growth.

By Brynna Leslie

Betty Lau is the owner of All Women Contractors in Toronto, a name that speaks for itself. After years running a renovations company, yet somewhat in the shadow of her older brother, Lau decided to branch out on her own in 2004. "In the first year of All Women Contractors, there was such an incredible response that I didn't know how to handle it at first," says Lau. "I was quite different from everyone. I picked a name starting with A so it would be at the top of phone book."

With her soft pink tool belt and Barbie pink logo, there's no doubt Lau's target market is women. She realized early on in her original business that, contrary to popular perception, women make the bulk of decisions to do with households, whether they are young or old, married or single. And years of surveying clients in her previous business told her that women have different standards from men when it comes to issues of trust, efficiency and cleanliness.

"I have been very good at building a rapport with my clients and having them feel so comfortable with me that they are able to leave their home in my hands," says Lau, who has often offered to walk clients' dogs or babysit their children for brief stints while on a job. "If it's a big renovation, I'll hire my cleaner to come in and clean their house as a bonus."

Connecting with your niche market

Building that kind of rapport with clients is essential to carving out a niche, says contractor Victor Fiume, owner of Fiume Brothers Custom Homes Ltd. in Oshawa, Ont. His company specializes in green renovations, with a particular focus on people with disabilities.

Fiume, former president of the national, provincial and regional Canadian Homebuilders Association, was first inspired by a speech given to the provincial chapter of the CBHA in the fall of 2007 by newly-installed Ontario Lieutenant General David Onley. "He gave a speech about the growing need to accommodate people with disabilities," recalls Fiume. "Around 15 per cent of the population has some sort of physical disability. And while we're not necessarily talking about just the aging population, we are all aging by the minute, so you also know that marketplace is growing quite substantially."

In order to tap into this niche market, Fiume became a quick study on the needs of people with disabilities, and where the gaps were in the home renovations market. He began working with the Canadian Paraplegic Association in 2008, contributing to their magazine and buying advertising space. He's also appeared as a guest speaker for accessibility committees in municipalities across Ontario to share his expertise as a renovator, establishing him as an expert in the field.

"When you pass by someone's house, they don't want a neon sign saying 'person with a disability lives here,'" explains Fiume, who says it's only by establishing rapport with clients that a renovator can come to understand these nuances. "We do landscaped ramps with interlock that really blend in with the neighbourhood. And we've come up with a great way of

doing barrier-free showers that, besides being able to wheel right in or if you're walking, having no step, are beautiful, really nice looking showers."

Online niche marketing

What Fiume and Lau are doing in the physical world—researching, understanding and relating authentically with their clients—can now be mimicked online. Advertising specialist Ron Tite argues that online marketing has become essential for business growth, and the niche marketing at the heart of online marketing is an area where small businesses have an advantage over large corporations. "We do global research on an ongoing basis," says Tite, the vice-president of innovation at international ad firm Euro RSCG Worldwide, and a guest speaker at the Ottawa Homebuilders Association in March. "We know that the current consumer, regardless of the category, want three things from a brand: truth, openness and transparency."

One of the ways that businesses can work to establish trust is by embracing the social media tools of their choice. "Digital is the way to go," says Tite. Tite says too many small businesses are avoiding digital communication because they mistakenly believe that it has to be a 24/7 investment. "You don't have to be on Facebook, Skype, Twitter, and writing a blog," says Tite. It's really about pinpointing and selecting opportunities that will help you to connect with a small group of people in your niche."

One of the ways that Ottawa-based renovator Moneca Kaiser has chosen to distinguish her business principles online, for example, is through her blog. The owner of Moneca Kaiser Design Build has an established reputation in the capital as a socially and environmentally conscientious artistic renovator. Her blog homecologist.com and her email tag line "Greenspeed" serve to reinforce that brand. "The idea from day one with my business was to make a contribution to the community and to the environment," says Kaiser. "My website is very professional and there's a lot of practical information on there. The blog is totally different. It's an opportunity to differentiate and I've purposefully taken a very laid-back, stream of consciousness approach."

Since she first launched the online diary of her work and life in October, she's received more than 4,000 hits. "I'm only publishing weekly," says Kaiser. "And everybody I know and work for seems to be putting their nice comments on there. I figure that's a pretty good readership."

Being authentic

Kaiser's blog came about after 15 years of doing meticulous work in a very particular way. Savvy from the start, Kaiser partnered with Habitat for Humanity at her first trade show, donating a cedar gazebo to auction off at the four-day event in Ottawa. Kaiser connected with a company to donate the lumber, and she donated the labour.

"I could have just gone in the home show myself and it wouldn't have been more expensive. In fact, it would have cost less," says Kaiser, who is also a founding member of the Sustainable Enterprise Alliance in Ottawa. "But the whole idea behind my business is to grow from a place of abundance rather than scarcity. I am a huge advocate of the triple bottom line –people, planet and profit—and this was good initial exposure, right from the beginning."

Moreover, says Kaiser, clients trust her because of her community service, while her environmental consciousness sends a message that she's not wasteful. "We knew this in the old days," Kaiser says, "that authenticity and reputation are important. Family businesses have always been the pillars of com-

HOW BRANDING HAS CHANGED

LIKE IT OR NOT, the way to successfully brand your company has changed. The revolution in digital technology has given rise to the need for niche branding, as consumers look for ways to connect with brands on an emotional level.

"People were used to interacting with brands that had clear profit motives, and they were used to interacting with brands who didn't care what the consumer thought because the brand had all the power," says Ron Tite, Vice-President of Innovation Practice at the ad agency Euro RSCG Worldwide. "But now, people trust opinions online more than they trust the brands. I'd rather ask my friend what he thought of the movie than read a review in the newspaper."

For businesses, this means having to embrace social media technology in a way that best meets your needs. And Tite argues there's a huge opportunity for small business-owners that never existed in the past. "It's possible to identify the eight-to-ten people in the world who make up your niche," explains Tite, which means it's also possible for you to establish yourself as the expert, as the opinion-maker in your specialty market.

"And the individual smaller companies also have an advantage over larger corporations because they can deliver on the brand messaging," says Tite, which makes them more credible in a world where the consumer is increasingly distrustful. "If I'm Ted's Carpeting and my tag line is "the fastest carpeter in town, there's only one person I have to worry about delivering on that tag line and that's me, Ted." —*BL*

Site Notes

By Robert Koci

VOC free

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) are bad for your health and manufacturers have been working to get them out of the products that you use every day to build homes. Paint has been the worst offender, so it's good news that Laurentide Paints has developed zero-VOC colourants for all its paint lines. "Our efforts will most certainly contribute handsomely to raising environmental standards within our industry," stated André

Buisson, President and Chief Operating Officer of Laurentide Inc. We agree, and are proud of the work being done here in Canada to lead the paint industry towards greater health and safety.

Support Nissan

If there was ever a country in need of your support, Japan is it. Nissan Canada Inc. (NCI) announced the Nissan Commercial Advantage Program, offering valuable packages to those who purchase or lease the all-new 2012 Nissan NV commercial van. The program targets small commercial customers who use commercial vans as an integral aspect of their business operations. You know Nissan makes quality and you know they won't be asking for any favours, so we will. Give a battered country reason for optimism and get yourself a top-rated truck in the bargain.

munity, the heads of the Lions Club. This is the same idea."

The family business

A lot of it has to do with accountability, something that has also become increasingly important in the digital age of communication. "Consumers do not just buy a product anymore," says Tite. "They go online, they look at reviews, they make comments. Consumers have access to information about all the company's dealings in the world; and the company has to be perfect, because if they're not, someone will call them on it."

It's one of the reasons roofing contractor Chris Hasenauer branched out on his own in 2002. Having worked for a number of years for companies in Newmarket, Ontario, including his father's business, Hasenauer felt he wanted to raise the bar on accountability. "He had a vision of a family-owned and operated organization that focused on and cared about other families, and protecting the largest investment they'll make in their home, which is their roof," says his wife and business partner, Jan Hasenauer. "The interaction that he had on a regular basis with homeowners told him that people think about their gardens, their kids, and they want a presentable home that looks nice and he also saw that what they care about has evolved."

The Hasenauers designed a website that seeks to educate consumers, who they feel have become increasingly savvy about the

choices available to them in roofing. They also nixed subcontractors, choosing instead to take on and nurture a team of employees so that the business would reflect the family culture at the heart of its brand. "By having employees, we have a lot more control over making sure the people we bring on board embrace the culture, understand the culture, understand why things are important to the customers," explains Jan Hasenauer. "If the estimator sells something to the customer, we understand what has been sold and why it has been sold in that way, because these things are not always cookie cutter."

And at the end of the day, she says, the customer knows that the buck stops with the company. "It's a unique relationship because we are not subcontracting the work out, so we are not holding anyone else responsible for the workmanship either." **CC**

The top five ways to establish your niche brand

1. Listen to customers and do your research. Make sure there is a target market for your brand.

2. Target your efforts. Whether you're purchasing ads, blogging or volunteering your time, aim all your marketing efforts at your niche market

3. Be consistent in your branding. Make sure your tag line, your affiliations, and what you Tweet about send the same message

4. Be authentic to your brand. Don't make promises you can't keep.

5. Give back. Build rapport with clients. Offer your time and expertise to organizations in your target market. Use your unique position to make connections in the community and help others move forward and grow their businesses. —*BL*