

Leading the Way

By Alison Diana

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You're great at what you do. After all, you've invested thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours to ensure your engineers are top-notch; your support staff is courteous and knowledgeable; and your salespeople can spout off the latest business benefits, speeds and feeds, and return-on-investment statistics.

But none of this matters if the key decision maker—the business executive or IT leader who signs on the dotted line—doesn't know you exist. It's all meaningless unless your company actually gets invited to bid on projects. The trouble is that you're competing with entrenched solution providers or the service arms of multimillion- or even multibillion-dollar entities. It may seem that at a time when everyone is overworked, overwhelmed and overstimulated, getting a top-level executive's attention is impossible.

What you can't do is rely solely on even the most well-meaning, partner-friendly manufacturer's lead-generation program. While vendor leads can be helpful, successful solution providers need innovative ways to get a customer's attention, ranging from the silly—shipping a box of toys—to the altruistic—leading a community task force to help area companies survive a disaster.

Innovation is what will get your foot in the door these days. Sure, co-sponsoring events such as golf tournaments and receptions and mailing coffee mugs and desk ornaments still have some appeal, but creativity wins out.

As the following examples show, a little imagination can go a long way.

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1. Real-IT-y TV?

Taking a page from the seemingly endless stream of reality-TV shows, some solution providers have added their own twist to the popular genre.

Last year, Heartland Technology Solutions—in partnership with vendors Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft and Symantec and distributor Ingram Micro, which helped coordinate the contest—invited members of the local Chamber of Commerce to complete a profile designed to give the solution provider information about their current IT situations and how technology could improve their businesses, said Jane Cage, principal partner at Heartland, in Joplin, Mo.

"Our most successful publicity revolved around the Chamber Business Expo," she said. "We set up our booth with an 'Extreme Makeover' theme and solicited additional applications. The most exciting portion of the Extreme Technology Makeover is the number of great leads we received with information about prospects' technology situation."

Heartland winnowed out five finalists from 100 entrants. The solution provider then selected the winner on live television at the expo's conclusion. "We got a lot of great TV coverage from it. We got lots of continuing press," said Cage. "We got good leads because the people who applied exposed their [business] weaknesses."

Partnering with the Chamber of Commerce gave Heartland additional exposure, since the solution provider will contribute three articles to the organization's newsletter, updating members on the progress of the winner, Candy House Gourmet Chocolates, which received an \$18,000 technology makeover.

Candy House has five locations and seven computers, but before the makeover, the Joplin-based company had no server or link from one location to another. Inventory was kept on a spreadsheet that was forwarded among locations, said Cage. Invoices were printed from Excel, and there was no history of customer orders. The e-mail system was inefficient, and users couldn't produce any marketing materials in-house, nor could they distribute essential items—price lists and ingredient labels—among locations.



Dell is quietly making inroads with the channel. [Click here](#) to read more.

Heartland designed and installed HP, Microsoft and Symantec solutions for Candy House, allowing its computers to communicate easily and quickly and allowing users to create and share marketing materials and track invoices and customer histories, Cage said.

Likewise, Inacom Information Systems and partner Corporate Report Wisconsin launched an Extreme Wireless Makeover, said Patricia Montana, marketing manager at the Madison, Wis., solution provider. The promotion helped Inacom earn Cisco Systems' "Most Innovative Partner" award at the vendor's summit in March.

The makeover campaign was designed to motivate Wisconsin businesses to adopt wireless environments. With support from Cisco, Microsoft, IBM, HP, Lenovo Group, EMC and McAfee, Inacom is in the process of providing the latest wireless technology to winner Dane Manufacturing. Forty-seven companies vied for the winning spot.

"Of the 47 companies, 31 were companies we've never dealt with, which was awesome," said Montana. "This is a great way to get lead generation."

Inacom mailed nonwinning companies a letter of thanks and information on why Dane Manufacturing was selected. On May 11, the solution provider will host a reception to showcase the winner's transformation to all makeover contestants. If an entrant can't attend, Inacom will schedule a one-on-one meeting in the prospect's office.

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2. Top of the list

The appeal of a technology makeover is undeniable, but there are other ways to use technology to generate business leads. Purchasing keywords from Google or other search engines brings your company to the top of the list. But, be warned: The more popular the word, the more costly the investment.

Still, it can be well worth the price. Fifty-two percent of marketers said paid search performance in 2005 outperformed other tactics, followed by e-mail marketing to house lists, which came in second at 47 percent, according to a survey by Ad:Tech in conjunction with MarketingSherpa. But rented lists can disappoint. More than half of those surveyed by MarketingSherpa reported that e-mail to rented lists produced poor results.

Lists are only as good as their content, and keeping abreast of executive changes, corporate reshuffling and juggled responsibilities can be time-consuming and frustrating. Too often, messages bounce back. If the address is correct, unsolicited e-mails increasingly

land in spam purgatory, never to be opened.

Being tops in organic searches can be more effective than paying for a search. Marketers spent \$5.5 billion on paid lists in 2005, versus \$660 million on optimization for organic listings. MarketingSherpa's research team expects optimization to top \$1 billion this year.



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3. And the winner is ...

Most people like to display some kind of plaque on their wall. Everybody likes a winner. Some solution providers have taken note. In late December 2005, Miles Technologies partnered with New Jersey media groups such as SJ Magazine, the Burlington County Times, CN8 and the Cherry Hill Regional Chamber of Commerce as event partners for the Second Annual Miles Young Entrepreneur of Southern New Jersey Award.

Chris Miles, the 35-year-old founder and president of the Moorestown, N.J., solution provider, said he launched the program to honor entrepreneurs under the age of 30 who lead growing young businesses in South Jersey.

He will meet candidates, learn about their businesses and have the event featured in a series of ads in SJ Magazine. Local television likely will cover the event, resulting in intangible good will and tangible business leads. Combining business with a cause, Miles Technologies is actively involved in high-profile charities, too, such as the Christopher Reeve Foundation.

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4. Blog it

It seems everybody has a blog these days, so why not use it for leads? Some solution providers are doing just that. Blogs are becoming a popular way for VARs to get their messages out. Online budgets are up this year. More than one-third of companies will shell out money for in-house blogs, and 30 percent expect to place ads on other people's blogs, according to MarketingSherpa.

Electronic Data Systems, for example, features a blog written by employees with the title of "EDS Fellows," whom the company considers its most innovative thought leaders. With topics ranging from multicore and SOA (service-oriented architecture) to Intel on Apple and IT recruiting, the blog gives EDS executives an opportunity to opine and be seen as experts. In addition, Scott Campbell, a partner in Momentum SI, writes a monthly blog on the SAP Developer page.

Chances are that blog visitors might take a cyber-stroll around your Web site to see what else is there. Using your blog as bait, you can capture their interest, but you need to keep the content on the site fresh and focused. Changing content on a steady basis gives people a reason to return—and keeps your company name at the forefront. Creativity is important. White papers, case studies and press releases have their place, but funny content stands out. Amused surfers might stay to be educated or pitched.

Extremely Productive, a Roswell, Ga., solution provider, for one, puts a new business cartoon on its site every day—then tracks traffic. "Sixty percent of the people come back 21 to 60 times," said Josh Ovetz, president of Extremely Productive.

5. Love thy neighbor

After last year's devastating hurricane season, even the most highly competitive company viewed its capitalist foes in a kinder light. No one is ever fully prepared for the worst, but one solution provider has positioned itself as a community leader, a business that goes

beyond the red or black lines of a financial report and looks at the people who really make up a company.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Ron Cook's Connecting Point began to investigate ways to help protect clients from the potential of man-made and natural disasters endangering its area.



Profits drive loyalty in the channel. [Click here to read more.](#)

"The government doesn't really do anything for small and midsize businesses if there is a disaster," said Lester Keizer, president of Las Vegas-based Connecting Point. "We wanted to create a loose alliance in order to be able to band together in anticipation [of an emergency]."

The company has signed up about 40 businesses for the emergency task force, Keizer said. And the number is growing. Task force members meet and discuss technical and non-technical ways to cope with disaster, be it half the staff getting the flu, a terrorist attack or anything in between. Some members have struck agreements for alternate sites should they be unable to operate due to a fire or similar problem, said Keizer. Connecting Point offers guidance on IT-related concerns such as backup and recovery, off-site storage, and remote offices.

"We'll probably have a good core of about 50 to 75 key small and midsize business leaders serving on this task force. It creates a lot of business leads," said Keizer. "You've got all these businesses together, and they all need technology. What better way than if you're the promoter of the group?"

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6. Publish or perish

Writing can be a great tool to help position your company as a leader and innovator. Penning a column or how-to section in a local newspaper or business publication creates visibility.



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Often, local newspapers actively seek contributors, especially those willing to write for little or no money. Being a source for articles in leading business magazines, especially those targeted at C-level executives, further underscores your expertise and creates name recognition for you and your company—resulting, hopefully, in a warmer response to a cold call or, ideally, a prospect actually initiating contact with you.

7. Hit the streets

Another option is putting your message on wheels—if the customer won't come to you, you can get your message to the customer. All City Computers' CompuBus is becoming known as an attention-getter in Southern California. The Winnebago features a state-of-the-art mobile conference room and computer lab for as many as eight students. After the bus pulls into the client's parking lot, CompuBus rolls into action.

Instructors can learn a customer's software in order to teach employees, or clients have the option of using their own IT department or trainer. Businesses also can charter the bus, according to officials at the Camarillo, Calif., solution provider.

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8. On the menu

Webinars are nothing new, but using them as a business-generation tool is. The trick is how to get people to attend the online sessions. Food may be the answer. Solution provider Ideal Consulting sends \$5 Starbucks gift cards to executives planning to attend its Webinars, said Eve Cline, Ideal's vice president of marketing, in Tampa, Fla.

After inviting local businesspeople to participate in a Webinar—which costs about \$1,000—generally two to three companies become clients, said Cline. In addition to being less expensive than in-person seminars, which cost \$5,000 to \$10,000, the Webinars make potential customers more willing to learn about Ideal's services and solutions while sitting at their desks.

The solution provider has picked a specific weekday, Thursday, and frequency, once a month, to encourage current and potential customers to make it a habit to attend, Cline said. "You have to do some catchy things to get people's attention. The coffee gift card is a nice reminder," she said.

9. Play well with others

Sometimes, it's not what you know but who you know. Relationships with other solution providers, consulting companies or developers are great lead generators. En Technologies, of Coral Gables, Fla., for example, has an exclusive contract with Mainline Information Systems in which Mainline passes along every IBM software-related lead it gets. Mainline sells software and hardware specifically for IBM environments, and En Technologies is an IBM solution provider partner, so the arrangement is perfect.

For its part, Ideal teams up with some local accounting firms to earn new business, said Cline. The company also taps its software developers' co-op funds to pay for some lead-generation programs.

10. Arouse curiosity

A C-level executive's pinstripe suit and corner office often camouflage a curious mind. After all, it's hard to rise to the top without a desire to know the who, what, where, when, why and how. In a position that requires attention to detail and hours of meetings and conference calls, appealing to the playful side of a CEO or president can separate you from the herd.

That's what Extremely Productive's Ovetz has found. The solution provider transforms everyday items such as Lego blocks, bricks, darts and sandbags into cost-effective tools shipped overnight to reach the upper echelons of businesses around the United States. "I want to speak to the CEO or president. My client is the guy who writes above the line, so to speak, and most people, like myself, hide behind an assistant, especially when they're in large to midsize companies," said Ovetz.

One reason? While administrative assistants routinely slash open legal-size envelopes, overnight packages—especially unusually shaped items—go right on top of the executive's desk. "There is a little bit of shock value and a little bit of humor to it," Ovetz said. "You can give me an object, and I can make a sales pitch using it. We send out remote-controlled cars without the remote and then deliver the remote when they call. I usually do that during the holidays."

About 80 to 90 percent of the time, the executive picks up the telephone, intrigued enough to bypass the assistant, to find out more about the Lego blocks or the darts that appeared, unasked for, on his or her desk. Given this callback rate, the payoff is obvious, immediate and ongoing. After all, it costs Extremely Productive between \$20 and \$30 per piece to send the packages. Using this approach, the company has won contracts worth about \$500,000, according to Ovetz.

The bottom line

With imagination, you can separate yourself from your competitors, meet the decision makers and make an indelible impression in an ever-changing, ever-challenging market.

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