

ESCAPING

Parking has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry, but its marketing hasn't kept pace.

By Bill Smith

When the parking industry was still in its infancy in the 1950s and '60s, just a handful of companies worked to manage demand for spaces, and business in general tended to be done through relationships with a handshake. Little thought was given to marketing beyond taking prospects out to dinner and putting together proposals.

Over the years, as the automobile came to represent part of the American dream, the parking industry grew to unimaginable heights; today, the parking industry is estimated to bring in more than \$35 billion per year in revenue alone. Factor in the revenue that's generated from the design and development of new parking facilities, the creation of parking equipment, and the introduction of new parking technologies (just to name a few significant influences), and it's clear that parking is no longer the insular community of the past.

However, while parking has evolved into a vital, lucrative industry, the marketing strategies of most parking organizations haven't evolved in an equal fashion. Many parking organizations—from municipalities to private parking owners to consultants to parking equipment suppliers—still approach marketing as if they are living in the 1960s.

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According to Brent Robertson, a partner with Fathom, a marketing consulting and web design firm in West Hartford, Conn., in today's economy, marketing is essential to the success of any business.

"With the rate of change, the parking industry is getting more competitive and will continue to get more competitive," says Robertson. "There are a lot more players in the space, and parking organizations need to know how to stay ahead of the competition."

According to Robertson, the key to staying ahead is having a strategic marketing program. He says leaders need to understand the challenges their organizations face and build their marketing programs to overcome those unique challenges.

"You need to be able to reach your most important audiences, whether they are customers or parkers or strategic partners," says Robertson, "and you need to be able to communicate effectively to those audiences to differentiate yourself from your competition."

The Digital Age

Robertson says the digital revolution that has seen substantial advances in web design and exponential growth of social media platforms is good news for parking organizations looking to get the word out about their products or services.

"Having a web presence is really important," says Robertson. "Ultimately, before customers or clients will hire a company, they want to see what that company is all about—what its values and experiences are. A good website will demonstrate a company's expertise, accomplishments, and approaches, but more importantly, it will also convey the values of the organization and its people."

Robertson points to the website of Fuss & O'Neill (fando.com), a civil engineering firm in Manchester, Conn. In addition to offering examples of the firm's projects and introductions to its people, the Fuss & O'Neill site focuses heavily on answering the questions, "Who are we, and what do we stand for?"

"If you looked at a number of civil engineering websites and stripped the logos off them, you'd find that they are pretty much all alike," says Robertson. "They only talk about what the firm does—what services they offer and what projects they have done. They don't talk about who they are, what they stand for, and how they strive to make a difference in the world."

"Fuss & O'Neill's website works because it takes a completely different approach. Its theme is, 'Our dedication to our work is connected to our desire for a better life. We are committed to helping create a better world, and this is how we do it.' It's a message

One Great Marketing TIP

Starting a marketing program can feel like an overwhelming prospect, especially if it's been awhile (or forever) since one was considered. Every great journey starts with one step. We asked marketing experts from a variety of industries for their one best marketing tip for parking professionals. Here's what they had to say:

How can you turn your customers into advocates? Word of mouth is 10 times more effective than advertising.
—Jonah Berger, author, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, associate professor of marketing, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Learn everything you can about your customers—their wants, needs, fears, and points of pain. As you gain knowledge on how they make their decisions and what drives their business, your marketing plan will naturally reveal itself. You'll intuitively know what your customers, and potential customers like them, will respond to—often even better than they do.
Kristin Swartzlander, owner, DirtyMouth Communications

Advertise, advertise, advertise.
—Mark Stevens, author, *Your Marketing Sucks*, and CEO, MSCO

If working in an upscale neighborhood or restaurant, have postcards or business cards printed up with a 10 percent off valet parking service offer for their next house party or event.
—Gale Rosenberg, president, Rock 'n Retail

One thing few companies understand and use to their advantage is their employees. Everyone in a company is in marketing. If they are enthusiastic about their job/employer, they help create a positive image. If they don't, the image they create is negative. Customers are attracted to positive environments. Who wants a disgruntled employee parking their car?

—Rebecca Lacy, president, Pinnacle Management Group, Inc.

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that resonates with municipalities, developers, and other potential clients.”

According to Robertson, there are parking organizations that know how to use the Web effectively. He says that the SP Plus site (spplus.com) stands out.

“SP Plus’s website is effective because it’s abundantly clear who they are and what they are up to,” says Robertson. “Aesthetically, it’s well put together, and their passion and attention to detail really comes through.”

Every business is different, but one thing remains the same: your bread and butter lies in your existing customer base. It is therefore equally, if not more, important to develop a communication system to stay in touch with your existing customer base than it is to generate a communication system developed to reach new customers. Your system should be documented and followed and should be standard course of business. Here is an example: Every new customer that walks in the door gets added to our mailing and email list. They all walk in with a postcard to ‘refer a friend’ and get a discount or free service. A week later they receive a note thanking them for the business and encouraging them to come back in. If we do not see our customer for three months, they receive another letter/postcard/email that gives them a special discount offer. If they don’t take advantage of it and we don’t see them in the shop for three more months, we double the offer. At the ninth month of not seeing them, we recognize they aren’t taking advantage of our offers and we call them and personally invite them back to visit us.

—Scott Selenow, president, Immerse Agency

As important as web presence is, it’s far from the only way the digital age is revolutionizing marketing. Social media can be particularly useful for both public and private parking organizations. It provides the means for communicating in real time with key audiences, which can benefit municipalities wishing to keep parkers, business owners, and residents up to date on parking policies and developments. It can also be a great way for parking businesses to share the latest developments with customers and prospective customers.

“In the past, marketing was about speaking to the public,” says Robertson. “Now, because of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, organizations can carry on a dialogue with the public.”

Social media use is nearly universal. Facebook alone has well more than 1 billion users. The trick is knowing which tools to use and how to use them. Social media strategy begins by asking a number of questions:

- What are my challenges?
- Who do I have to reach, and where will I find them?
- Who are their influencers?
- Where do they spend their time?

The answers to these questions can help organizational leaders decide whether to use Facebook, Twitter,

Have the courage to be real. In the 21st century, reality works. But it takes courage to really open up and show people your company’s triumphs as well as your failures. Be real, be human, and have a real conversation with your audiences no matter what tactics you use. It will set your marketing free.

—Scott Robertson, APR, CEO, Robertson Communications Corp.

No matter your industry, make sure your printed materials are grammatically correct and have no spelling or punctuation errors. You may have to contact a professional for this. Errors negatively impact your credibility.

—Flo Selfman, independent public relations consultant

Start a feedback program. It’s cheap, it’s easy, it shows customers you care. It’s like marketing without marketing. A good feedback program consists of clear and obvious signage that provides an easy way to get in touch with management if the customer has a comment.

Clear: signs in elevators, hallways, ramps etc. Easy: any platform that is convenient for customers. Phone: Typically not, especially in a parking structure. IM/

text messaging, yes. Email, moderately successful. Definitely not: contact forms or physical comment cards; no one has time for that. The messages you get will help you better maintain and operate your business, but even if you never get a message, it shows customers how much you care about keeping the place clean and well-maintained. Bonus points: Use your name on the signs. “Hi, I’m Bill, and I own this parking structure. I want it to be clean and safe for you but I can’t be everywhere 24/7. Please be my eyes and ears, and if you see something, text me at 555.xxx.xxxx. Thanks so much! Bill.”

—Adi Bittan, CEO, OwnerListens.com

What works is relationship marketing. It always has, and it always will. Unfortunately, most marketers today are just looking for the next gimmick. It all boils down to the fact that people want to do business with people they like. If your marketing is not relationship-driven, you’re not going to last long in today’s marketplace, especially with the popularity of social media, which is all about building and maintaining relationships.

—Robert Richardson, owner, Richardson Graphics

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YouTube, or one of the many other social media tools. They'll also help determine what messages will be most effective.

A final digital approach that has gained traction in the parking industry is the e-newsletter or e-blast. For many organizations, e-newsletters have replaced traditional paper mailings, providing a more convenient and less costly alternative for reaching clients, prospects, and industry leaders.

Walker Parking Consultants' experience with e-blasts demonstrates the potential this technology offers. Walker distributes monthly blasts offering overviews of recently completed projects and news about company milestones.

“The e-newsletters are a great marketing tool for us,” says Laura Stinnett, a marketing manager with Walker Parking. “They give us an opportunity to showcase our projects through attractive photographs and show how the garages benefit the communities where they are located.

“They also provide a platform for keeping in touch with thousands of contacts throughout the world, and they let us measure how many of our contacts are reading the newsletters,” continues Stinnett.

Traditional Marketing

For many parking organizations, traditional marketing approaches can also provide valuable results. Public relations, particularly publicity, can be especially useful for reaching key audiences that include clients, prospective clients, strategic partners, and industry leaders. Stories arranged in print and broadcast media can reach large numbers of people, and there may be no better way to raise an organization's profile.



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Walker Parking has used PR for more than 20 years to staff and showcase its projects, and it continues to publicize the firm, its projects, and its people in parking industry press, media serving other industries in which it is active, and in local media throughout the United States where the firm has a presence or does work.

“We value public relations very highly,” says Steve Cebra, senior vice president. “Our PR program is geared toward supporting new business development, while at the same time, helping us maintain a high profile among current clients and the industry as a whole.”

While Walker Parking relies on PR to maintain its profile in the industry, other companies use it to refresh their images. Sentry Control Systems is one such company. Sentry has long been known as a leading provider of SKIDATA technology, but it is less well-known for the other solutions it offers, which include parking guidance, license plate recognition, cloud-based validation, enforcement technology, CCTV, 24/7 technical services, and professional services.

“SKIDATA has always been an important part of the Sentry story, but it's just one of many solutions we offer,” says Whitney Taylor, executive director of marketing for the company. “We needed to find a way to tell our whole story.”

According to Taylor, the company's marketing team chose to pursue a comprehensive strategy that combines web marketing, social media, and public relations. Through this program, the company completely revamped its website and will launch the new site in the coming weeks. It also recently began public relations and social media campaigns. The campaigns are designed to complement each other, using the three different approaches to raise the company's profile and communicate key messages to its most important audiences.

According to Fathom's Robertson, Sentry's approach is a recipe for success. It is important for the individual elements of a marketing program to be designed to complement each other. Individually, marketing tactics can play an important role in helping parking organizations achieve their business goals. However, when marketing approaches are combined, their effectiveness increases considerably.

Parking has evolved significantly during the past 50 years, from an insular community to an international multi-billion dollar industry. When it comes to marketing, however, many parking organizations are still stuck in the 1960s. Many could benefit from strategic marketing programs that utilize a combination of traditional marketing approaches and digital marketing techniques.