

They pack a punch!

Business-Card Marketing Power

Ah . . . the beloved business card: typically the first thing that is ordered upon the birth of new company, the acquisition of a new job, or the promotion to a new position. It's been around forever it seems. Actually, the business card is a hybrid of the calling card—first appearing in China in the 15th century and later in Europe in the 1600s—and trade cards, which were first used in 17th century London as a form of advertising, including a map directing the public to merchants' stores, as no formal street address numbering system existed at the time.



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Calling cards were exchanged between the footmen of aristocrats and royalty, and the servants of their prospective hosts to elegantly announce the regal person's arrival. Sophisticated rules governing the use of visiting cards—as they were also called—became an essential tool of etiquette. The upper class of North America adopted the practice of trading calling cards—often adorned with refined engravings and family coats of arms—from English and French aristocrats.

You may be thinking "So what?" A business card is just a two-inch by three and one-half inch—the standard for North America—piece of card stock that shares the name of a business or organization, the name of a representative and some contact information. Maybe so, but it could also be the most powerful tool in your marketing arsenal. Don't overlook the power of the business card. It says a lot more than you think.

Much like the strict rules of etiquette of old, there are do's and don'ts when it comes to designing, carrying and exchanging business cards. And every smart business owner should know and practice them. Have I piqued your interest? Let's explore the possibilities.

What is the purpose of the business card?

When you hand a prospective client a business card, you should look for the "wow" factor response. What does the other person do immediately upon its receipt? You want them to look at it, read it, flip it over and say, "Wow, nice card. Thanks!" If you observe no reaction, no interest or a casual deposit into a wallet, pocket or purse, the business card hasn't done its job.

Recipients of business cards should be invited to a snapshot of what your company is best known for—its eye-catching, unforgettable logo and the unique value proposition that you offer customers. It should create an impression of credibility, trust and depend-

ability. Remember that your business card becomes, for every recipient, a passive reminder of what you can do for them and how they can get in touch with you. It should make a positive impact, and it can, if you pay attention to the details of its design and composition.

For one thing, your business card should be consistent with the company letterhead, advertising style, email design and invoice format. Often, when a business has been around for a

while, the layout of promotional and communication materials changes along the way. Take a moment to assemble side-by-side your current business card, letterhead and printed forms, website home page, your most recent advertisements, capabilities brochure and newsletters. Are they, at first glance, consistent? Do they support your company's brand promise and image?

With so many low-cost, do-it-yourself business-card printing companies online, small business owners may question whether the expense of hiring a designer is necessary. Avoiding the temptation of using a cheap, boring business card template and giving a graphic artist—like the one you may already employ—a crack at designing or redesigning a logo, business card and everything else a company needs to put forth the impression that you are a viable enterprise could prove to be the best investment you've ever made. It may even convert a wimpy marketing effort into a force-to-be-reckoned-with marketing engine.

In design, more is less

A discussion about the type of business card comes up early in the branding process for most business owners. One must start by asking some basic questions:

- Who are your most likely and/or ideal customers? What do your best customers today look like, sound like, act like and where do they live? Create a general geo/demographic description of your target client.
- What do you want others to perceive about you from the look of your business card? Are you serious about the work you produce? Fun-loving and creative? Professional yet personable?
- Do you have so much you want to share on your card that it will require it to look like a matchbook?

- What color scheme should one use to convey the message that the business is friendly, trustworthy and a convenient one with which to do business? If you do business internationally, remember that colors often mean different things in different cultures.

A business card should serve the same function as an elevator pitch—to evoke questions and stimulate interest in doing business with you. For that reason, your company tagline should be included. Don't have one? Get one. Make it something that causes people to say, "How do you do that?" One of the best ones I've come across lately is from Amazing Ink in Ferguson, Mo.: "You can't be everywhere, but your name can!"

Consider the business card as a corporate artifact—when you hand one to a prospect, client or business contact, you are leaving behind a little piece of your company and yourself. The secret is to make it something that people don't want to throw away or lose because of its perceived value.

The card should make a good impression but it shouldn't be a struggle to read. Some businesses have so much to say that the typeface is too small to read easily. Too much information just clutters the design and decreases the impact. Consider the information on your business card like perfume or cologne—it only takes one or two drops to work its effect. (More than that? Well, you know what they say about the scent announcing the woman. . . .)

Keep the design as simple as possible. The front of the card should have only your company name, logo and tagline, your name (title optional), and contact information such as address, email, phone number(s) and website. When it comes to selecting the information to include on your business card, the rule of thumb is "more is less and less is more."

Business card do's and don'ts

Here are some other things to think about when designing, producing and distributing your business card:

- Do use both sides of the card. The cost of printing the back of the card is nominal. Use the back for a list of your services, testimonial quotes from pleased customers, something useful (like a calendar), or an invitation to pass the card along to a friend as a referral.
- Do pay attention to the composition of the card itself and the message it conveys. Stick

Broad Strokes

This month's broad strokes include:

- Don't underestimate the impact business cards can make in marketing and promoting your business.
- Keep your business card traditional in size and shape, but be innovative as to the value it delivers to the person to whom you hand it.
- When it comes to selecting the information to include on your business card, the rule of thumb is "more is less and less is more."
- Learn when to carry, how to carry and when to offer your business card and avoid the business card "don'ts."

to the standard size and thickness to accommodate those that scan the card to capture its information electronically. Plastic cards are more prevalent today because they are eye-catching, more durable, and technology has changed to make smaller runs affordable. But they are still more expensive than card stock, especially if recycled materials are used.

- Do consider employing additional printing processes—such as foil stamping, raised lettering, rounded corners, color photography or holograms—if your budget will allow for them. But don't commit to an elaborate, expensive card if your clientele will see no value in it. In fact, if the card appears to be self-serving, it could even be a deal breaker.
- Do carry a number of business cards with you at all times—not just when you are going to work, on the job or attending business functions. Some of the best opportunities for business networking are at the least likely events or times. Do carry them in a business card case, either made of leather or metal. Don't carry them loosely in your pocket or purse.
- Don't whip out your business card the second you meet someone. However, it is appropriate to present your business card to a receptionist or administrative assistant that will announce your arrival to the person with whom you wish to meet.
- Do offer your business card when someone asks you for it, when you ask someone for their card, at the *end* of a meeting with clients or prospects before they leave your shop/store, if someone asks you for your contact information (business or otherwise), at the end of a flight if you have talked with the person

sitting beside you and wish to have them contact you, or if you dine with someone outside of your company at a professional or networking function and you wish to tell them your conversation was enjoyable. Offer your business card as you shake hands and leave.

- Don't drop your business cards in bowls for raffles as you will only be contacted by someone trying to sell *you* something.

- Don't leave a stack of your cards on tables randomly, thumbtack them to bulletin boards or give them to someone else to hand out for you. This practice cheapens the value of your card and of you as a professional business person.
- Don't hand out your business card at school functions, church or funeral services, sporting events, or to your work colleagues just to let people know who you are. Social functions are acceptable as long as the conversation was business-related.

Business cards can be both a blessing and a burden, but until technology allows us to collect, retain, access and manage contact information on everyone we meet paperlessly; we still have the business card on which to rely. Knowing when and how to use them as an effective marketing, business-development and communications tool remains a staple of successful business people. Good luck!

PW



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