

The 21st Century Booster Club: Caution: You Have Entered the Danger Zone

David W. Vandewalker

The months of December and January represent the largest danger zone for every band program! Black Friday is the blackest, darkest day in the life of a booster club and signals the official beginning of what I call the “Booster Club Danger Zone Days”. For marching band parents, these months represent a Sabbath-like time of rest that is richly deserved after a grueling three or four months of aggressive service. Family time becomes the number one priority for people once they start basting the turkey and start unpacking the holiday decorations. Cyber shopping, mall mania and office parties become the object of a volunteer’s time. Suddenly, all of the chaperone parents, prop crew, construction workers, and roadies are rarely seen. Booster club meeting attendance drops drastically and before we know it, suddenly it is time for the next two fundraisers and special events to kick off and no one knows when, where, or how they happen!

Why is this situation so dangerous? The danger is the false sense of effective communication and organization during the fall semester, especially those involved in a marching band program. Parents are excited, engaged, at school and around other parents

frequently to pick-up their student, observe rehearsals, attend football games and competitions, etc. Combine the need for a break from the rigorous schedule and the lack of frequent contact and interaction with the pulse and heartbeat of the program, the 21st century small business, the booster organization, can crumble in a matter of days. To successfully navigate through the challenges of the Danger Zone, one must focus on two key elements of running a successful 21st century business: communication and marketing.

One of the most influential (non-music educational resources) self-help resources to provide help to my booster organization and band program is Jay and Jeannie Levinson’s *Startup Guide to Guerrilla Marketing*. This book explains that starting a small business is not for the faint of heart. Fifty percent of all new businesses fail in the first year. Ninety-five percent of new businesses fail in the first five

years. Intelligent people fail. Great services or products fail. Hard work fails. Two major points of significance stick out in my mind when I first read the book. First, research determines that a message or advertisement must penetrate a person’s mind nine times before action is taken. That means that the message may need to be “sent” twenty to thirty times in order for one person to have it penetrate their mind or attention for the ninth time. When I reflected on this statistic, I was reminded of Macy’s department stores. Everyone knows what Macy’s sells and where the nearest store is

located. Yet, I read massive ads in the weekend paper, drop the pull out advertisement on the floor, get a direct marketing postcard in the mail just before the direct marketing circular flier arrives, at midnight I receive an email for special “preferred customer” advance sale invitation with a coupon, and by the end of the weekend I turn

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down the volume on the television when the Macy's department sale commercial comes on during the football game time-out on the major network channel. Millions of market dollars have been spent in an attempt to get their message across to my family and me for the critical ninth time of mind penetration. One must ask, do our booster clubs go to half of the effort that the department stores do to be successful?

The second significant take away from the guerrilla marketing book is the acknowledgement of "Five Priceless Gems." They are:

- 1) advertising doesn't work,
- 2) having a website doesn't work,
- 3) doing PR doesn't work,
- 4) if you advertise, have a web site, and a PR strategy, all three will work because they'll help each other work,
- 5) the only thing that works these days are marketing combinations.

Many of the failed businesses never understood these Gems. One of the difficulties in running a small business with volunteers is that time and perspectives are often limited.

Volunteers tend to communicate and market based on what effects them personally. For example, a "people person" might make phone calls to remind people while a computer specialist might send out the information via email. The volunteer thinks that they have effectively communicated or marketed the event "because they communicated it in the phone call/email" but according to the "Five Priceless Gems" this is not true.

If one desires to have a 21st Century Small Business Booster Club, then one must make wise business decisions like a guerrilla marketer would when trying to stay in business past year five! A successful businessman doesn't hesitate to spend money on

marketing. In 2005, the average business plan showed companies spending 4% of their gross revenues in marketing. Most band directors desire to be better than average. Generally, we are not happy with anything less than a "superior!" So how superior will our business plans be if we are only willing to spend the average of 4% (or worse yet, less than 4%) on marketing our program or event? If you, the band director, want to

win a marching contest and you know your competitor is spending 4% of their budget on something, wouldn't you choose to budget 6% or 8% of something to give you a competitive edge on the contest field? Sorry, that was intended to be a rhetorical question!

Do you desire to have more parents attend your booster meetings? Would you benefit from an increase in profits for the fundraisers you already do? What you benefit by creating an annual event for the community and they actually come? My answers are yes, yes, and yes. My conclusions are three-fold:

- 1) I need to be willing to spend 6-8% on marketing or communicating those things that are non-negotiable to me for my program,
- 2) I can only be assured that I am effectively communicating if I get my message to the intended audience a minimum of nine times, and
- 3) I have to market my message in many methodologies simultaneously to realize the synergistic benefits of guerrilla marketing. Whatever "it" is (booster meeting, fruit sale, road race, leadership tryouts, etc), if I, the director, want to be a "superior" businessman, then I have to make sure than my army of volunteers are being diligent in achieving all three of the above mentioned elements of marketing success.

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Tips of Effective Marketing Communication

Develop a great marketing plan. (*Ten Step Guerrilla Marketing Attack*)

- a) research everything
- b) write benefits list (i.e.: how will the parent or client benefit by attending the event or buying your product)
- c) select media tools and prioritize
- d) create a marketing plan targeting the appropriate audience
- e) design a marketing calendar for strategic implementation
- f) find marketing partners and collaborators
- g) launch an attack in slow motion
- h) maintain the attack with consistency
- i) keep track of records and measurements
- j) assess the plan and improve in every area

Mini-marketing media tools: Postcards to serve as a mini-billboard, business cards announcing event, postcard decks, personal (mail merge) letters, classified ads, phone trees, text messaging, free news announcements, press release to local media outlets, fliers, community bulletin boards, yard signs, inside signs, posters, street banners, civic organization announcements and marketing, email blasts, newsletters, forums and chat rooms, mailing list rental or building, Constant Contact e-postcards and newsletters, Charms Office Assistant, Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, blogs, podcasts, video podcasts, and websites.

Major marketing media tools: Advertising display ads, direct marketing, newspaper ads or articles, radio spots, ticker tape announcements, magazine articles or ads, coupon pack marketing, press release for feature coverage in local media.

Consider offering benefits for participation or attendance: Gift certificates, coupons, free trial offers, guarantees, contests, raffles, door prizes, sweepstakes. Whenever possible, acquire email and contact information for follow-up contacts and tracking plans to generate future participation or sales.

Always look good in print/online.

a) Strive for consistency by using the same typeface and color choices throughout all communications of an event.

b) Add white space. Just like in music, “silence is golden.” Rests in music create organization to the sound and provide time for the listener to perceive, that which is coming next.

c) Chunk content. Use subheadings and create mini-articles for billboard effects.

d) Create balance and alignment of elements (graphics, photos, charts, etc.) to help organize the data for the reader.

e) Take caution with graphics; less is more. Just like ornamentation in music, a little ornamentation creates interest; too much ornamentation and the melodies can be distorted or lost.

f) Avoid use of writing in all CAPS. Never underline, instead use italics or bold for emphasis.

g) Think about the details. Remember that your marketing will be judged by what it looks like first, and then they will decide if they will read it. You only get about seven seconds for their first glance decision. Bill Stoller from *BusinessKnowHow.com* warns against being sloppy. He suggests proofing the grammar, spelling, typographic errors, extra spaces, hideous press kit covers, poorly shot photos, improper formatting, etc. Proof it, give it to someone else to proof, and proof it again.

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Build an effective website that people will want to use again. This site could be for your band program or a small website for your road race or fundraising program, etc.

- a) Pages need to load quickly.
- b) Communicate your area of expertise and benefit for the reader.
- c) Describe the product or services being offered.
- d) Offer information that will benefit visitors to the site.
- e) Invite visitors to participate or register in order to obtain email and contact information.
- f) Create sense of professionalism that communicates the image and brand you are marketing.
- g) Include contact information and a link to the home page on every page.

h) Define all benefits or guarantees, terms and length of contracts clearly as possible.

There is good news! You can safely navigate through the danger zone by:

- striving for multiple contact methodologies with your booster events (email, digital postcards, Facebook, Charms, etc.),
- using synergistic combinations of marketing methods, and
- implementing as many marketing communication tools as possible.

These suggestions can lead your booster club to stay on track for 2010 to help everyone have a Happy New Year!

Article Sources

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