



# Marketing:

## THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF RELEVANCE

BY DOUGLAS WILSON

**T**he Catch 22 of marketing hasn't changed since the first marketing major graduated college, failed to find a job in their chosen field of study, and instead became a barista to pay for the school loans. It goes something like this: Does your business employ a full-time marketing manager? If not, has it retained a firm to assist with its

marketing efforts? For most small businesses—not just FBOs—the answer is, “We can’t afford one.” And so, the chorus of the unemployed marketing managers across the country remains, “How can you afford not to market your business?” While the barista joke is just that—the need for a company to market itself versus its financial ability to do so—is very real.

To address this topic, we first need to understand the *need* itself. Though some businesses proudly proclaim they don't advertise (a subset of marketing), most would universally accept that marketing itself is a fundamental business imperative. Yet, we're still not to the need. Why do businesses market themselves? What is the point of marketing?

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When reading these questions aloud to a room full of department heads, the outside sales manager will likely answer that marketing “*primes the pump of the sales engine*” or some other such ridiculous metaphor. The reality is much simpler, and fundamental to us as humans. Just like people, businesses have a need and desire to remain relevant. And just like a child who has drawn a picture and seeks a parent’s recognition and approval, businesses likewise need to present the picture they have drawn, their unique narrative, and receive recognition in the form of patronage by their customers. Marketing, ergo, is that relentless feedback loop; the relentless pursuit of relevance. To lose relevance, is to no longer be needed, which is a very dangerous thing for a business.

Establishing the need for marketing for FBOs, marketing is an altogether-more-complex affair than just the affordability equation. First, in the FBO space, there are far fewer customers to whom FBOs market than a normal retail business, and those customers, are far more savvy consumers than most. While all of us need water to survive, we don’t have to visit an FBO to survive, even if many do offer free bottled water. Hence, if one is marketing bottled water to the general populous, that product appeals in some way to every human being alive today. For an FBO, marketing is limited to those who understand what an FBO is, or does, and who have a business or personal need to operate, own, or fly on a business or general aviation aircraft.

### Who is your FBO’s customer?

Furthering the complexity, potential customers onboard an aircraft tend to fall into distinct groups—either flight crew member or passenger—each with differing needs, interests, and responses to different marketing messages. It is these groups that lead to one of the longest running debates at the FBO level: Who exactly is the FBO’s customer? Is it the pilot or the passenger? While data quantifying the number of business or GA passengers is unavailable, the statistics for “active” pilots is a published figure. At the end of 2015, that number stood at 590,039 according to the FAA, a remarkably small group in marketing terms. An FBO mustn’t forget of course, there are other customer groups not on the plane, such as charter, management or fractional companies; and they are influenced by the marketing function differently than the pilot or passenger.

Finally, and largely recognized by the industry, the generational shift that began ten years ago is in now full swing. There are pilots today in their twenties and thirties flying passengers in their sixties and seventies. Captains of industry are flown by captains of the computer era. Plus, there are pilots in their sixties or seventies flying passengers in their twenties or thirties, the latter of whom may have made their fortunes online. In either case, the various mediums used for marketing, and the messaging itself will need to vary for a few years still to come. Loosely translated, and using advertising as the marketing example, FBOs today should consider both print and online outlets.

### Brand Awareness

Notwithstanding the complexities of a small customer base, an ongoing customer identification debate, and a shifting demographic in the cockpit and cabin, marketing, in all its forms, can be categorized much more simply: Brand Awareness or Call to Action. And often, one must establish Brand Awareness prior to embarking on a Call to Action message or campaign.

The first form of marketing is what it means—Brand Awareness. Be it an ad campaign, giveaways with an FBO’s name, or even an FBO’s website, Brand Awareness is simply to create recognition of who the FBO is, their marketplace position, location, and offering. Keep in mind the “who” is a loaded term, and an FBO’s narrative should stem from its guiding principles, mission, and competitive edge. In other words, what makes the FBO relevant to the customer? Why should a customer choose your FBO over your competition? What is your FBO’s unique narrative?

For a moment, let’s reflect on the phrase “unique narrative.” Many FBOs are justifiably proud of their safety record, high service levels and great people. To be sure, *our people make the difference* is an oft-uttered marketing differentiator. But, at the FBO level, such lofty claims fall on deaf ears. Nor for that matter, is an impeccable safety record or exceptional service unique. It is an expectation that a high quality FBO has all three—safety, service and great people. This not-so-unique narrative is most manifest in FBO advertising. These ads feature the exact same imagery: A cabin class

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business aircraft—call it a Global or a Gulfstream—visibly chocked and coned, an expensive car planeside, and a phalanx of attractive women who just happen to be greeting deplaning passengers. It is formulaic. More importantly, it's not unique. Brand awareness marketing should position your FBO in a manner that is distinguishable from other FBOs. What is it that makes your FBO safer, your service distinguished, or your people unlike any other?

### A Call to Action

The second form of marketing is the Call to Action, and is straightforward. A consumer is asked to respond to a marketing appeal by a business, for example, to receive a special price, discount, gift, or otherwise. The easiest example of Call to Action marketing is one of its first forms—coupons. Though declining in print these days, most familiar is the grocery store coupon that implores, “Bring this coupon in and save X on your next purchase.” A once well-known FBO whose doors shut in 2014 after 45 years of service used the Call to Action form of marketing in the extreme, offering free Omaha Steaks, among other gimmicks, to lure potential customers. Further, while their narrative wasn't all that unique, the manner in which they told it in their advertising was, featuring cartoons along with coupons. Although many cringe today when thinking of the once-overt nature of Flower Aviation and their Call to Action marketing, it was indisputably unique, memorable, and worked for years. Over time however, the Call to Action lost

relevance, and failed to evolve quickly enough to a changing demographic.

Today, the Call to Action for FBO marketing is much more subtle than in the past. It is executed through email marketing programs, such as MailChimp, Constant Contact, banner ads, and the like. It is measured in open and click-through rates. While an excellent and inexpensive tool, email marketing can have a major drawback to the uninitiated. Notwithstanding the known drawbacks of spamming potential customers, consider the loss of credibility when a potential customer opens the email and clicks through to the FBO's webpage, only to find a webpage that hasn't been updated for years, or has no information regarding the offer. The law of unintended consequence applies, and FBOs are wise when considering electronic direct mail media to first vet their web presence, including the FBO website and social media pages.

Other forms of Call to Action marketing remain: pilot incentive programs, such as Avfuel's AvTrip Program, World Fuels' FlyBuys Rewards, or Atlantic's Awards for example, are immensely popular. The latter of these is colloquially known as Captain's Bucks to flight crews as the loyalty program literally results in preloaded American Express gift cards. The point being, these programs, along with advertisements that encourage a click through, or a registration in a rewards program, are examples of the Call to Action concept of FBO marketing. Finally, consumers generally need to have an established understanding of “who” is sending the

message, so simply advertising an extremely low fuel price doesn't always work as a Call to Action—especially if the FBO is relatively unknown.

These concepts are merely the tip of the iceberg, and don't consider many forms of marketing such as industry event participation, sponsorship opportunities, community involvement initiatives, and charitable giving, among others. Moreover, this is merely a conceptual framework meant to spark an internal dialogue at the FBO level. What is your FBO's unique narrative? What do you hope to achieve through your marketing efforts? And, what types of marketing mediums and messaging are appropriate? These questions are critical thinking exercises, best considered behind closed doors with multi-generational FBO personnel in the room, led by a marketing specialist, preferably one that speaks aviation.

How do I know all this? A well-educated barista told me. **A**

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