

# Use This Outside-the-box Marketing Idea To Get Outside-the-park Results

By Geoffery Moore

## The Power of Marketing Ice-breakers

Suppose you are having a social gathering in your home, but people are not talking much. There's an awkward silence. What do you do?

You might use an ice-breaker. For example, you could tell an interesting, engaging, or humorous story, then ask questions about the story to get people talking. Once people open up and the conversation gets going, you could move on to other topics.

Did you know that you can also use ice-breakers in your marketing? With a marketing ice-breaker, you find something interesting, surprising, or delightful to talk about that makes people *want* to pay attention to your advertising. It gets the conversation started.

If you have the sneaking suspicion that prospects are not paying much attention to your advertising efforts, you may need a marketing ice-breaker. You can use an ice-breaker to break through communication barriers such as routine skepticism and low attention span. And it can help you generate amazing results!

Let me give you an example. I should explain that this example involves using direct mail, but it can work in other media as well. And even though it's an idea I used for a bank, it can also work for other products and services. (After I tell the story, I'll talk about how to adapt this idea to other businesses.)

## Capturing the Attention of Busy, Skeptical, Hard-headed CEOs

Years ago, I was doing some work for Manufacturers Hanover Trust, a New York bank. At the time, MHT was well known as a consumer bank, but their business banking division was less well known. They wanted to build up their business banking accounts.

MHT had a mailing list of CEOs, and they wanted to send something that would “warm up” these CEOs so they would be more likely to take a phone call from an MHT business banking representative.

Their idea was to mail their business banking brochure to CEOs with a cover letter. They wanted me to write the cover letter, and they asked me what I thought of this idea.

I told them, “It’s a beautiful brochure, but I don’t think it will work.” Then I explained: “Put yourself in the CEO’s shoes. We all know that CEOs get hundreds of pieces of mail each week, and all of this mail is screened by a secretary or assistant. So the chances are slim that the CEO will even get to see the brochure. But we also know that CEOs are a tough crowd; they are busy and they’ve heard all the pitches. Even if they do see the brochure, it may not make much of an impression.”

They saw my point. There were too many communication barriers. A typical marketing approach didn’t stand a chance of breaking through. *We needed an ice-breaker!*

### **What Do CEOs Want?**

When you’re trying to come up with an ice-breaker, you need to put yourself in the shoes of your prospects and ask: *What could we send prospects that they would be absolutely interested and delighted to receive?*

So I started thinking about CEOs I had known and what might appeal to them. I remembered meeting with a CEO who had dozens of quotations on 3X5 cards, plastered all over one wall of his office. I asked him about these cards and he said, “I’m frequently asked to give speeches around the country, and it’s hard for me to find time to do the preparation I need to do for these presentations. So whenever I come across a thought or quotation I like, I write it down and put it on the wall. Then, when I’m asked to speak on a certain topic, I look up on the wall and grab the cards that seem to fit the situation. As I’m flying to my destination, these quotes stimulate my thinking and help me put together my talk.”

It occurred to me that many CEOs probably have this problem. They don’t have time to keep up with their reading, but they are frequently called on to speak. And they want to at least sound smart and well-read when they do.

I told MHT this story and said, “Why don’t we send the CEOs a series of quotes and excerpts from best-selling business books. The CEOs will appreciate getting these quotes. They can use them in their presentations and sound intelligent. And the mailings will provide a concrete demonstration that MHT is knowledgeable about business and interested in being of service to businesses. This will be the ice-breaker that gets the conversation started.”

### **A Mail Package CEOs Couldn’t Ignore**

So that’s what we did. We created a series of five mailings, and I named the series “Pivotal Perspectives.”

The initial challenge was just to get the secretary or assistant to open the mail package and give it to the CEO, instead of throwing it away. So we put each mailing inside a large, 9X12, glossy black envelope with beautiful silver lettering—so that it would stand out and look important. On the front of each envelope, we described the book excerpt that was inside, to make sure that the secretary would know that this was more than just another sales brochure.

Then, once the package was opened, the challenge was to get the CEO not only to look at the contents but to appreciate them and hold onto them for a while. So we put in a beautiful, keepable executive-style folder that contained the quotes from the book. And there was a cover letter in which MHT talked about their business banking services and why they were making these excerpts available for free. Finally, there was a reply card that said, “If you agree to meet with an MHT business banking rep, he’ll bring you a free copy of the book we’ve excerpted this month.” A nice touch.

We sent out five of these mailings over five months, taking advantage of the power of repetition to continually remind the audience of MHT’s business banking division.

### **And the Results?**

From the beginning of the mailing program, MHT began to get notes back from CEOs saying how much they appreciated receiving this series. So we knew our ice-breaker was working. Let’s face it, you’re not likely to get thank you notes when you send out a typical sales brochure.

In addition to all the good will this was generating, by the end of the series MHT had set up almost 200 face-to-face visits, and these eventually led to millions of dollars worth of new accounts.

So MHT was able to collect some of the low-hanging fruit with companies who were looking for a new business banking relationship. And they also made a big impact on thousands of other CEOs, laying a solid foundation for future sales efforts by business banking reps.

### **Can this Approach Work for Very Small Business?**

Yes, it certainly can. I was talking with the owner of a company that sells pet memorials, pet urns and pet caskets. I asked him what he was doing to promote his business. He explained that he had sent some mailings to veterinarians in the area, telling them he had a brochure that he would like to place in their offices. And he had tried to follow up with phone calls.

But when I asked him how that was going, he said, “Well, I haven’t actually talked with a veterinarian yet.” I wasn’t surprised. After all, why would a veterinarian want to put something in her office that would remind all of her clients *that their pets are going to die?*

This was an even tougher problem than typical sales resistance. We were dealing with people who would probably be reluctant to even read or think about the topic. This conversation was going nowhere. So we clearly needed an ice-breaker to get the conversation started.

Putting myself in the customer’s shoes, I thought about my next door neighbor who had recently lost her beloved family dog. She went through a difficult time with her dog as it grew older and developed arthritis and blindness and other health problems. There had been a lot of questions about the best way to care for this aging dog. It was tough.

So I told the business owner, “I’m sure all of these veterinarians have some clients who have aging, ailing pets. And there must be a lot of questions and issues in people’s minds about the best way to care for them.” He said, “Yes, but what does that have to do with me?”

I said, “Suppose you started doing a little research on the questions people have when they are caring for an aging pet. You could start collecting information on that subject. Then you could write to the veterinarians and say something like this:

*I've found that people who have aging pets have some very important questions. I'm preparing a Q and A pamphlet that speaks to those questions, and I would like to interview you by phone for just a few minutes, to get your advice, and then quote you in my pamphlet. To thank you for your help, I'll be happy to make this pamphlet available free to your clients once it's printed."*

I told him that on the back of the pamphlet he could tastefully mention his business as the one who has created this Q and A and made it available.

This pamphlet was an ice-breaker that could help him break through and get the conversation started—both with veterinarians and pet owners. And it appeals to veterinarians on a few levels.

First, professionals are usually flattered to be asked to share their expertise. Second, being quoted in the pamphlet will make the veterinarian look good to her own clients. And third, as these pamphlets get circulated, this may help to spread the veterinarian's reputation in the local community.

Even those who choose not to be interviewed will likely pay more attention to a mailing like this than they would to a mailing that simply promotes pet urns and pet caskets.

The business owner got very excited about this idea, and he took it even further. He said, "You know, I could even team up with veterinarians in different towns and put on local free seminars on how to care for aging pets; we could invite the public to attend."

Armed with his ice-breaking program, he began to build relationships with veterinarians and pet owners, and in time this helped build up his business.

### **A Highly Adaptable Idea**

The ice-breaker approach won't be right for everyone, of course, but it can work in a lot of situations. For example:

- A private school could find the best articles on issues of importance to parents, and could send these to a list of prospects for their school. They could also send the same articles to parents of their students to strengthen relationships.

- An accountant could find the best articles on various financial issues, tax tips, etc., and send a series of these to a list of prospects. He might also send them to existing customers, to build loyalty.
- An art museum might send out some good articles on how to evaluate art, how to buy art, how to appreciate art, and so forth.
- A plumbing and heating company might send out information on how to maintain one's heating system, things homeowners can do to conserve energy and keep the home more comfortable. They could also send information on what to do in emergencies, how to keep the home safe from carbon monoxide, and so forth.
- A restaurant could send to prospects, and to their best customers, some great articles on food and wine.
- A hardware store could send out some interesting home maintenance tips.

### **Keys to an Effective Marketing Ice-breaker**

As you look for your marketing ice-breaker keep two thoughts in mind.

First, make sure you're sending quality information that is perceived as valuable by your target audience. You want to send something that people will really appreciate getting, something that they will find truly interesting, helpful, and worth reading. You want them to be impressed and even grateful that you sent it to them. You don't want to send them boiler-plate, boring information.

Second, make sure you're ice-breaker is about something that is relevant to your business and that sends the right message about your product, or your service.

Your ice-breaker can take the form of a mailer, Q&A pamphlet, an email newsletter, a seminar, a blog, even a book—whatever information pieces best fit your situation.

The goal is simply to find a way to start a conversation that people will genuinely *want* to be part of. And once you do that, you're on your way!

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**If you think a marketing ice-breaker might be right for your business—or if you have some other marketing need or question—call Geoffery Moore at 1-603-353-4700. Or send an email to [bullseye@YourBestMarketingMove.com](mailto:bullseye@YourBestMarketingMove.com). Geoffery will give you a free consultation to help determine your best marketing move.**

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