

# Turning on the Sales Faucet for Plumbing/HVAC Businesses

By Geoffery Moore

I've worked for more than a decade with plumbing and HVAC businesses, and I can tell you the most important marketing lesson I've learned in four words:

*"Start with your trucks."*

Big whoop-ti-doo, right?

(Right now, you might be thinking: "If that's the whole point of this report, I'm sure glad it's free!")

But there are some strategic reasons why I say this. Let me explain.

As a plumbing or HVAC business, you face some special marketing challenges:

- **Selling the "Invisible."** You don't have a store people can see and visit and you don't have a tangible product people can handle.
- **What Customer Loyalty?** Your customers only need you once in a great while, so it's hard to count on customer loyalty and repeat business. Many people can't even remember which plumber they called the last time they had a problem.
- **Relationship Roulette.** Generally speaking, people don't want to hear from you at all—until they have a problem. And then, they want you IMMEDIATELY! This makes it difficult to build relationships with customers.
- **Media Waste-land.** If you advertise in the local newspaper you know that on any given day, only a tiny fraction of people reading the newspaper will need your services. This means that over 99% of the money you spend running an ad there is wasted! And it's the same for most other advertising media.
- **The Yellowed Pages.** You can reach them via the Yellow Pages of course, but this medium is getting more and more expensive—even as fewer and fewer people are using it. People are turning to online searches. But who?
- **Mystery Prospects.** This means that it's getting harder to identify your prospects in advance and know how to reach them.

With challenges like these, it's little wonder that so many plumbing/HVAC companies have such bad stories to tell about their marketing experiences. And I've heard them all.

- The plumbing & heating contractor who paid \$60,000 to a consultant, and got nothing but a white paper he didn't understand.
- The air conditioning firm that paid \$100,000 for a series of mailings that generated virtually NO business.
- The building contractor who paid a monthly retainer to an agency for two years and saw NO results.
- And on and on.

I'm not trying to be negative or discouraging. I just believe that if we don't clearly face and understand the marketing challenges in front of us, our chances of success are greatly reduced.

So what do you do?

### **The Challenge for Heritage**

I've said, "Start with your trucks." But to illustrate why that is so important, and how it works, let me tell you the story of Heritage Plumbing and Heating.

When I began talking with Heritage more than a decade ago, they were a \$3 million company doing a lot of Yellow Page advertising. But they were concerned about their reliance on Yellow Pages, since people who go there also see their competitors' ads.

And as I mentioned, the cost of Yellow Page advertising was going up and more customers were beginning to search on the internet for local contractors.

Heritage wanted to become so well known and so widely recognized that people would call them *first*, or go to their website, instead of going to the yellow pages. This would not only give Heritage an advantage over their competitors, it could also help reduce their dependence on costly Yellow Page advertising.

We needed to build brand awareness of Heritage. But we started by doing a customer survey. One of our questions was, "Why did you call Heritage?" Many made comments like this one: "I called Heritage because I kept seeing their trucks everywhere and I thought, they must be doing something right."

## **The Closest Thing to a Storefront**

So we started thinking more about the trucks. Heritage has 35 trucks, they are on the roads all the time, and thousands of people see them every day.

We realized that these trucks are the most tangible, visible expression of Heritage's brand. They are the closest thing Heritage has to a "storefront" or "product packaging." The trucks are how most people come to know Heritage. And they are the most common reminders of the Heritage brand.

But then we wondered, "How many people actually notice the trucks as they drive by? How many will remember them? And what, exactly, will they remember? Could we make the trucks more attention-getting and more memorable? And could we use the trucks to deliver a more high-impact message?"

At the time, the Heritage trucks were little more than giant business cards: they basically just had the Heritage logo on the side. There were no bright colors or images or anything to make them stand out. If some people were already noticing these trucks, we were confident that we could develop a truck design that would have even more impact.

So we decided to launch a new marketing campaign starting with—and centered around—the trucks. We would turn the trucks into big, rolling billboards that would greatly increase Heritage's visibility in the communities it serves.

### **Criteria for a Truck Design that Turns More Heads**

I wanted to put a line and an image on the truck that would accomplish the following:

- Make Heritage truly stand out.
- Be very brief, so that it could be read at a distance, even as the truck drove by.
- Be memorable and help etch the name "Heritage" in people's minds.
- Help trigger people to call Heritage rather than going to the Yellow Pages.
- Capture the "voice of the customer".
- Be the flagship of Heritage's brand, a message that we could build an entire marketing campaign around.

That's asking a lot from a simple truck design with an image and only four or five words. But if we were successful, it would help bring real focus to all of Heritage's marketing efforts and boost awareness in their target markets.

To come up with a line for the trucks, I thought about a husband and wife who had a plumbing problem. What might they say to each other? First, they would have to decide who to call. The husband might turn to the Yellow Pages or call a friend for advice. But if the wife had seen Heritage trucks around town and heard good things about them, she might say, *“Honey, just call Heritage.”*

This phrase met all the criteria above. Also, the alliteration between Honey and Heritage made it easy to remember the line and the name of the company. I liked the fact that it sounded real and natural, and that it was a call to action. Finally, I liked the idea that it implied a real-life story that people could relate to. The “implied story” makes it more interesting and memorable.

There’s another big benefit to the line—it communicates a key benefit. It implies, “For any plumbing and heating problem, all you have to do is call Heritage and they’ll take care of everything.” Heritage prides itself on its superior expertise and customer service, so this idea really captured the essence of their brand.

So we re-wrapped all the trucks. We put a large photo of a housewife on the side of the truck saying, “Honey, just call Heritage.”

Even though this is a relatively simple idea, the owner of Heritage told me, with real pride, “No other plumbing and heating company has trucks like ours!”

### **Using the Energy of Synergy**

We wanted to get as much synergy and reinforcement of this line as possible, to get it “branded” onto people’s minds. So we put the same woman, saying the same line, in all of their Yellow Page ads, on other marketing materials, and on the website.

Finally, we began to incorporate the line into radio and TV commercials. Recently, the owner of Heritage mentioned that several customers have told him how, when they hear the line, “Honey, just call Heritage” on TV—even if they happen to be passing through the room—they instantly know it’s Heritage.

Now, when people see the advertising, it reminds them of the Heritage trucks they see around town. And when they see the trucks, they are reminded of the advertising. Synergistically, everything is working together to etch the name Heritage into the minds of consumers.

No wonder Heritage has doubled in size and has plans to double again!

## A Strategic Marketing Move

I want to remind you that there was a lot more to this approach than simply wanting to make the trucks look better.

*It was a strategic marketing decision based on an in-depth understanding of the challenges Heritage was facing, and the best marketing move they could make to meet those challenges.*

Let's look at the marketing challenges I listed at the beginning of this report:

- **Selling the "Invisible."** By making their highly visible trucks the focus of an entire branding campaign, Heritage has become "more visible" to more people, more often. The trucks became the "packaging" of their brand.
- **What Customer Loyalty?** By keeping their name and image in front of more people more often—through trucks, web marketing, radio, TV, and direct mail—Heritage was able to build broader brand awareness which will help support greater customer loyalty.
- **Relationship Roulette.** It's still a challenge to build customer relationships. But by "showing up" more often, in more ways and places, Heritage is able to reinforce those relationships.
- **Media Waste-land.** Instead of wasting money on spot advertising here and there, Heritage's strategy is to show up everywhere, all the time. Since they have no way of knowing who their next prospects will be, it makes sense to cast the broadest possible net and maintain broad, deep brand awareness.
- **The Yellowed Pages.** This approach is reducing Heritage's dependence on Yellow Pages and freeing up money for brand awareness media such as radio, TV and the internet.
- **Mystery Prospects.** Now, instead of wondering where their prospects are, Heritage is casting this broad awareness net so that more prospects will find them first instead of fishing in the yellow pages.

## The Snowball Effects of Branding

Sure, it's an investment in time and money to build widespread brand recognition. But once you get there, you begin reaping all kinds of benefits that have a momentum-building, snowball effect: *the more you're known, the more your business grows, which makes you more well known, which makes the business grow more, and on and on it goes.*

Consider the "snowball" effects of brand recognition.

**Comfort Zone Factor.** Building a well-known brand puts more consumers in the comfort zone with you. They begin to feel they know you. And the more they see your brand everywhere, the more they will tend to *assume* that you're a quality company.

**Decision Shortcut.** Branding shortcuts the decision-making process for busy consumers with short attention spans. The more people know and trust your brand, the more they will call you *first* instead of shopping around or going to the Yellow Pages.

**Reduce the Cost of Marketing.** As brand awareness builds, more and more people will become customers simply on the strength of what they know about your brand. Eventually, you won't have to work so hard or spend so much to get new customers.

**Encourage Customer Loyalty.** Building a brand that people *remember and trust* encourages your one-time customers to become life-time customers who buy from you again and again. People like to stay with brands they know and trust.

**Trigger More Referrals.** Building a brand that people remember also triggers more word-of-mouth referrals. The more your brand is on people's minds, the more it will also be on their lips. People are more comfortable referring a company when they know it is a recognized brand.

**Defend Against Competitors.** The best defense is a good offense. The more customers know your brand, the less they will be vulnerable to other appeals. New competitors who see how well-known your brand is will be less eager to move in on your territory.

**Recruit the Best.** Having a popular brand helps to attract better employees, which, in turn, can help maintain morale and quality of work. People like to work for a company that is well known and respected.

**Increase the Value of Your Company.** Building a strong brand makes your company much more valuable (in case you ever decide to sell or need to attract investors). The *New York Times* reported that many large corporations today calculate that more than 50% of the value of their corporation can be attributed to their brand.

When you fail to build a widely recognized brand, you miss out on this Snowball Effect. And if you don't build a dominant brand in your market, *sooner or later someone else will*. They will own the prime spot in consumers' minds—and all the leads and sales that come from that—and *you won't*.

Bottom line: build your brand. And start with your trucks!

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**If you have any 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.**

This free report has been adapted from Geoffery Moore's e-book, *Think Like a Customer to Market Like a Genius*, © 2010, Geoffery Moore Marketing. The book is available for sale at [www.YourBestMarketingMove.com](http://www.YourBestMarketingMove.com).