

Who Cares?

By Garry Upton

Are you consciously aware of the image you project? Is it geared toward success? Here's a review list of questions to consider.

Who cares about you and your success? You care, don't you? HVAC/R is a hectic market. Unless you're in charge of marketing and positioning your company with distributors, manufacturers, and customers, you may not get anyone to care. And without those groups supporting you, your chances for continued success are limited.

How much of a handle do you have on marketing and positioning your business? To help determine the answer, ask yourself the following 15 questions:

1. Do I have a list of customers who receive information about our company at least four times per year?
2. Do I have quality checks in place that:
 - Give customers the opportunities to praise our employees?
 - Show our weaknesses (in terms of work quality or in creating impressions) so that we may improve?
3. Do I sell a product that keeps us in our customers' homes often enough to be remembered? Something that isn't dictated specifically by the weather and/or season? (Without that product, your customer list is little more than paper and ink, or bits and bytes.)
4. Do I advertise our company and its capabilities on all trucks? If so:
 - Do our trucks look professional?
 - Do we make it easy for people to remember us by using uniform or unique colors?
 - Do we make sure our trucks are cleaned on a daily or weekly basis?
 - Do we stand behind our brands by advertising them on our vehicles?
5. Do we have leave-behinds that our customers may share with their friends? Examples include:
 - Company brochures.
 - Industry articles that explain how we can solve specific problems that customers may be experiencing.

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- A professional video of our company that shows customers why they should choose us. (Think about referral rates when answering this one. Are the leave-behinds where you think they should be? Remember: Referrals are the least expensive, most productive advertising you can do!)
6. Do I train my staff in customer relations, including:
 - The importance of attire and personal grooming? Verbal skills, both on the telephone and in person?
 - How the crews should leave the rooms of homes and businesses in which they work?
 - How to positively represent our company in daily conversations?
 7. Do I send letters of recommendation commending my supplier's employees who go the extra mile for our company? (Your supplier contacts will be more willing to partner with you when you appreciate and acknowledge their efforts on your behalf.)
 8. Do I send protest letters when I feel a supplier is hurting a business relationship? If so, are the letters instructive? Do they define the problems and suggest improvements?
 9. Do I work closely enough with a few suppliers to be of monetary importance to them? If I'm unimportant to my current supplier because of my company size, is there another supplier who would value my account? (Little frog in a big pond vs. good-sized frog in a little pond.) This is a very important issue for you to consider; it can mean the difference between getting that last furnace, special considerations, etc.
 10. Do I make it a point to know what business directions my suppliers are taking? Do I consider how their goals can help me or hinder me?
 11. Am I active in local HVAC/R industry organizations? If not, why? If I don't participate, is it hurting my ability to help shape the industry? Some contractors think their local associations aren't addressing relevant issues, and that it's a waste of time to participate. However, with all the issues our industry is facing, your best chance to make a difference is to meet with your credible competitors and work together to make your voices heard.
 12. Have I taken the time to analyze my competitors? If so, have I determined who our most aggressive competitor is, and why customers should choose our company instead of theirs?
 - If you know the things you do better than the competition, then what information are you placing in your employees' hands to market your company? Remember: The consumer is best influenced by positive statements and can be very turned off by potshots against your competitors.
 - Have you chosen friendly competitors with whom to partner? Perhaps they specialize in another part of the industry and are willing to share leads. Perhaps they are in a remote part of the city and sharing leads geographically makes sense.
 - Have you joined a group of contractors from other parts of the country to exchange ideas? Associations have groups like this, and conventions and industry educational forums are another good way to meet contractors from other regions.

13. Have I taken time to learn how my employees feel about themselves and the company, and whether their attitudes reflect success or failure? (This can get increasingly difficult as your company grows. Make sure you have the right communication tools in place, either within the company or by using outside resources such as a public relations representative.)

14. Do I take the time to be a part of groups, such as:

- Clubs?
- Church?
- Charities?
- Chambers of Commerce?

15. And finally, am I proud enough of what I do to market myself and our company to my network of friends, associates, and competitors in a way that attracts success? Do they believe we're better, not cheaper, than the competition?

Take this list, keep thinking about the direction of your company, and add to it. You will find that as you organize your thoughts on paper and follow through, you will add the right group of partnering friends who will help ensure your continued success. So when you ask the question "Who cares?" you can tell your auditor the right people care!

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About the Author

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Decision Analyst is a leading international marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new product ideation, new product research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



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