

Marketing in a Family-Run Business

Business Development Best Practices Series

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After I had been in the advertising agency business for 14+ years and knew that the hours, bureaucracy and corporate culture had become lackluster, I was offered the opportunity to be a Marketing Director for a family-run business two years ago. This family business, Kieffer's Appliances, is a local, 4th generation appliance dealership that focuses on serving the trade, from residential to multi-family construction. The owners, John and his son, Jace Kieffer, explained that they were growing quickly, but knew it was an important investment to take their marketing efforts to the next level. They were very direct, explaining that there would never be a chance of company ownership of the 100-year old company, but would value my marketing expertise.

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, there are nearly 30 million small businesses in the United States employing 47.8 percent of U.S. workers, so chances are, you may be in a family-run business or work for one.

I offer the following pointers for marketing in a family-run company:

For the family-run owners:

1. Invest in a good marketing manager or director. Marketing Management is NOT the ability to send out an e-mail blast or create a flyer; it is someone who helps identify growth channels, researches and understands different media to reach the company's goals, and sees the concept through to execution.
2. It is natural in a family-run business to sometimes make business decisions outside of the office; when you do, be sure to keep key management, including the Marketing person, in the loop as much as possible—not only will they remain engaged, but a trusted outside perspective can be invaluable.
3. Marketing can come up with brilliant messaging and concept creative ideas around a promotion, but if your operations and sales teams are not aligned, the marketing will fall flat. Additionally, if there is ever a challenge with the business, involve marketing right away to come up with inventive ways to address and overcome whatever challenges you are facing. The best marketing occurs when not done in a silo.

For the marketer working in a family-run business:

1. Family businesses tend to be less focused on quarterly results, but instead, have a long-range outlook for their businesses—which is a wonderful position for brand marketing. Always work in a longer-term strategy and stay involved in business decisions, as it relates to marketing strategy.
2. A family-run company may have a more relaxed environment, and this can be pleasant for non-family members too. Some companies may treat their staff like family, which, can create a supportive and sometimes intense work environment. However, it's important to remember you are not part of the family and to stay out of family matters in every circumstance.
3. In this type of business, playing office politics successfully means having the humility — and the political shrewdness — to put the family first. If you have the career ambition for ownership, a family-run business may not be the right working environment for you. Also, in Marketing Management, it's imperative to keep confidences and continue to explain your perspective, while knowing the ultimate decision likely lies with the owners.
4. In a family-run business, decisions are often made quickly, whether it is to start a YouTube channel or invest in Billboards for awareness, you must use whatever resources are available and sometimes that means aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends.

Marketing is understanding the owner's business goals and working to support and amplify those business goals through marketing. Fortunately for me, the family members involved with the business here are true professionals—and I am glad, for one, to have the opportunity to do marketing for a family-owned business.

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