

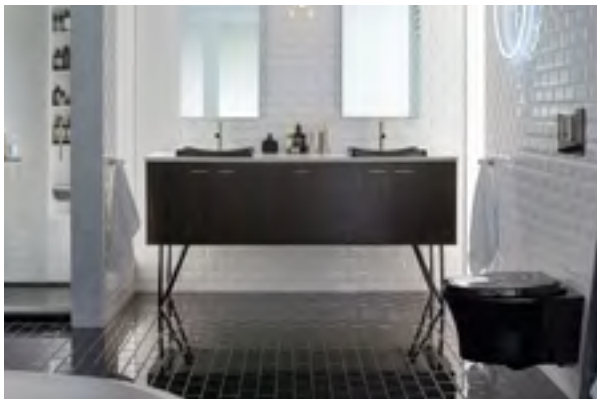


**Distributor Marketing
Management, Inc.**

Bringing Distributors and Marketing Together

WHITE PAPER

Effective Showroom Marketing for Plumbing & HVAC Distributors



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It's no secret that showrooms represent significant investments for plumbing and HVAC distributors. In addition to brick & mortar, facility build-out, product displays, vignettes, lighting and upgraded entrances; distributors face additional cost of staffing showrooms with accredited designers and support teams, fitted with design workstations. There are challenges to keep showrooms updated while investing in continuous development of designers; while dealing with constant threats from alternate channel sources, as well as price pressure from big box and web retailers. Faced with these realities, it's never been more important for senior managers to understand the importance of effectively marketing their showroom. If you're reading this, chances are you've done the heavy lifting of opening a showroom. Thus, this white paper will provide you with some keys to effective showroom marketing.

Avoid the "Field of Dreams" mistake.

In the popular film, *Field of Dreams*, an Iowa farmer played by Kevin Costner, builds a baseball diamond in his cornfield, because he hears a voice say: "If you build it – they will come." Well, when it comes to your showroom, the harsh truth is that they don't come. Just putting up a great showroom is simply not enough. Successful distributors understand that to sustain any real success, developing and executing a sound marketing plan for their showroom, must be a priority.

KEY #1 – Build YOUR brand

The first key to effective showroom marketing is acknowledging the critical requirement of building your company's brand. Yes, the products featured in your showroom are important and can attract buyers, but they are subordinate to creating **brand identity** and value, unique to you and your company. In this era of fluid brand channel alignment, step away from your business for a moment, and ask yourself some questions:

- Why should consumers or trade professionals trust us with their project?
- What is our company's USP (unique selling proposition)?
- Is our company's brand premise unique, understandable, and easy to articulate for our showroom sales team?

The answers shouldn't be elusive. Your showroom is about much more than merchandising and displaying great products. Yes, products matter, but effective showroom marketing is centered on people, trust, and service. Considerable research confirms that discriminating luxury consumers, above all else, want to buy from the competent professionals they trust. Your company's legacy, reputation, and expertise are important, yes. However, you need to market these as benefits, so they become **difference-makers** for your showroom customers.

Don't waste time and money trying to out-do Amazon. Showroom marketing is not a point & click business. Luxury product showroom customers are attracted to brands they know and trust. However, these same customers are just as eager to shop around to avoid getting burned by poor quality or service. So, your challenge is to create an atmosphere of competence, trust, and value; so, your showroom sales team can attract more customers and close more deals.

KEY #2 – Create a Home Field Advantage

The traditional recipe sounds simple enough; attractive working product displays, frequently updated, featuring the right kinds of products, well merchandised and supported by competent showroom consultants. All good; but essentially table-stakes in the showroom game. To consistently win you must exploit a home field advantage by differentiating yourself from competition. Consider featuring your people first, your services second, and then your products. Of course, this strategy may even put you in conflict with what some key vendors seek, but it works by providing you with the opportunity to convince your showroom customers - **why** you deserve their business. Let's concede the fact that selling intangibles such as trust and expertise are challenging. So, to help to simplify this process here are two proven ways to get you on the right path:

Market your showroom sales team, like rock-stars

Your showroom team must be difference-makers. Every interaction between the showroom customer and your team, must be treated as a unique opportunity to make a lasting impression. It's more than just creating an atmosphere of trust, it's about making a bold and compelling statement that validates your unique selling proposition and oozes value. There

are no shortcuts here. You cannot skimp on training and development. By shining the light on your showroom team's skills, credentials, experience, and reputation, you're **personifying the message**, a basic marketing principal. It's all about your people; your rock-stars, and their ability to provide superior custom solutions for your customer. No website or virtual reality gadget will ever stand a chance versus your showroom rock-stars who personify trust, expertise, and value.

- **Create trust by taking the fear out of design decision making**

Research shows that 3 out of 4 showroom customers, admit to being afraid of making a foolish or costly mistake. By the way, most are not seeking the lowest price. If that were so, they never would have left the local big box home center. Successful showroom marketers, mindful of this risk-averse predisposition, skillfully assuage the customer's fear by establishing an atmosphere of trust; by utilizing a disarming approach centered on overall value. This goes a long way toward establishing a consultative relationship with the customer, which is foundational to your most lucrative project sales.

KEY #3 – Work the Neighborhood

Although the name suggests a geographic focus, to work the neighborhood means deploying targeted relationship and service-centric strategies, toward a more targeted group of customers. This refined approach allows you to better leverage your team's unique strengths with greater frequency and effectiveness. Know that it also requires a dedicated effort to acutely understand the needs of your showroom customer, and to put this knowledge to work; out-servicing your competition, resulting in more value for your showroom customer.

Beyond traditional advertising, consider alternative brand and awareness building uses for your showroom, like hosting local professional trade association or civic group meetings. A growing number of successful showroom marketers host cooking classes or community tech school events. Additionally, savvy showroom marketers understand the value of collaboration with other non-competing companies who share the same marketing demographic, like luxury car dealers, decorators, jewelers, and others. Collaboration which helps build your brand like event co-marketing, prospect database sharing, and other activities, are more affordable than you think and can pay surprising dividends.

If you're not already doing so, consider providing secure 24/7 access for your preferred contractor customers. This goes a long way toward facilitating sales for your most valued contractors. Coach your showroom sales team on the importance of respecting pre-existing relationships. This simply means you should do everything in your power to create a safe place for your contractor to send his customers to make product selections. It's no coincidence that many contractors distrust big box sellers and national chains out of fear of seeing their customers poached. By facilitating these win-win activities, your brand is enhanced by creating this safe zone for your preferred contractors.

KEY #4 – Create a Marketing Plan for Your Showroom

Having a showroom means you're in the fashion business. Sure, you're selling kitchen and bath products, but luxury showroom customers seek a hassle-free selection process where their fashion and design ideas are effectively blended with consultative expert know-how. All the more reason why you need an effective showroom marketing plan which recognizes and includes product and brand design – yet differentiates you and your showroom team. Don't assume that because you carry a well-known national luxury plumbing brand, showroom visitors will know what you offer, and why you're superior to your competition. With so many options available, you cannot afford to miss the chance to stand out and build your brand. So, start with a clear understanding of who you're marketing to. Identify your key trade customers and influencers, such as plumbers, builders, remodeling contractors, designers, architects, commercial specifiers, property managers, and others. On the consumer side, you should include new and existing homeowners; those considering remodeling and home upgrades, aging in place, and others.

What works best? Well, this depends on **who** you target. Don't fill the sky with arrows, rather, narrow your focus for maximum effect. For your trade customers, an instructive and useful website is essential. To make your website an on-ramp to creating showroom traffic, customized direct mail is proven to work as it delivers an affordable way to target specific markets and is 10 x more effective than e-mail marketing. Successful messaging emphasizes trust and expertise and includes call-to-action prompts like free consultations, a welcoming gift for visiting, special bundling offers, or seasonal discounts. However, before jumping in, it's a good idea to talk to a direct marketing expert. They'll likely recommend starting modestly with a targeted prospect mailing database. It's more affordable than you think and provides a precise approach; i.e.: pro-trade versus consumer prospects. This enables you to begin with a more surgical, rifle shot approach versus cannon balls. Many showroom marketers have learned the hard way that skipping this step out of enthusiasm, can be costly.

What about Social Media?

Any well-coordinated social media effort should help bring attention to your showroom, but it's not without risks. All elements of your social media platform will require routine monitoring and updates. Whether or not you take aggressively to social media, it's prudent to pay attention to reviews and respond with updates. Showroom marketers report mixed results with paid search advertising, so it pays to seek advice of trade peers and other qualified experts. Avoid "me-too" tactics, instead focus on activities which are measurable and help you stand out from competition while building your local brand.

KEY #5 - Control the “2nd Screen Experience”

What’s the “2nd screen experience”? Research confirms that prior to walking through your showroom door, more than 70% of your visitors have already spent time on the web researching products, designs, styles, and most probably, other retailers. This can fairly be characterized as your visitors’ “1st screen experience”. Major manufacturers pour huge resources in to elaborate websites which cater to this first screen experience. Also, it’s no coincidence that these websites make it easy to find alternate showroom and supply sources. Meanwhile, on-line and big box retailers make it simple to comparison price shop. That’s why it’s even more important to control what we call the “**2nd screen experience**”; that is, what your visitor will see while visiting your showroom.

Digital Signage Can Help

By deploying digital signage, you can go a long way toward owning this “**2nd screen experience**”, and wrestle attention away from your showroom visitor’s smart phone or tablet. With digital signage (55” HD TV & cloud-based content) you’ll direct attention to your company’s brand, sales team, and services. Of course, you can still feature major brand ads and videos on your digital signage network, but you control the information to build your brand, promote your expertise, and differentiate yourself from the competition. Fresh and relevant content welcomes your visitors with a professional message, every time. Does it work? You bet it does. Research shows that digital signage is **3 x more likely to get noticed** versus traditional in store signage.



In summary, effective showroom marketing requires an acknowledgement of its importance – as well as a simple plan to build and differentiate your unique brand.

So, if you’re eager to maximize your showroom investment, consider these simple keys.

For more information, contact us at www.distributormarketing.net



About the author:

John Anderson serves as Director of Sales at Distributor Marketing Management, a full-service direct marketing firm specializing in plumbing and HVAC distribution. For over 25 years, he’s worked successfully with both manufacturers and distributors, in the custom-building products industry. He can be reached at john@distributormarketing.net