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Marketing your market information service

This is one of a series of information sheets for people designing and implementing agricultural market information systems in Africa.

“Build it and they will come!” Sadly, that is only rarely the case. Even if you have developed the perfect market information service, customers will not come flocking. You have to tell them that your service exists, get them to try it out, train them on how to use it, and persuade them to subscribe. That is the domain of marketing.

Marketing is not something you do after you have finished developing the service you want to sell. It is an integral part of developing your service: it starts with the initial concept and will influence every stage in the process.

Developing a marketing strategy

Here are some steps for developing a marketing strategy. You may need to employ a marketing specialist or hire a consultant to help you do this.

1. Define your products or services

Work out precisely what you are trying to sell. Daily updates of a few prices in local markets for farmers? Advice on production and marketing tailored for specific areas? A service to help traders and processors source their inputs? An early warning service for the government and donors on food shortages and price rises? A comprehensive analysis of market data for a broad spectrum of commodities nationwide? A set of software that users can use to develop their own market information service?

You may decide to concentrate on one service or set of clients first, then expand into others later.

2. Define your marketing goals

Decide what you want to achieve with your marketing effort. Do you want to introduce a new service, or promote one that already exists? Do you want to gain visibility for your service? Expand an existing service into new geographical areas, commodities

or client groups? Get new users to start using your service, or persuade people to switch away from a competitor's service?

Set yourself measurable targets so you can tell how successful you have been. For example, you may decide you want to attract 20,000 new paying farmer subscribers. If you reach the target, you know you are on the right track (and can expand the campaign); if you fail to reach it, you can adjust your strategy accordingly.

3. Research your market

Gather information about your intended market. How many potential clients do you have? How much are they willing and able to pay for your service? What are their information needs? How is the market changing over time? See the separate sheet in this series on *Identifying clients and planning services* for more details.

4. Profile your competitors

Do any other organisations – private, government or nongovernment – offer similar market information services in your country? What kinds of services do they offer? Do they provide information for free, or do clients have to pay (and if so, how much)? What areas, markets, clients and commodities do they cover? What are their strengths and weaknesses? How do they promote their service?

Even if yours is the first market information service in your country, you will still have competition. Your clients still get information about markets from other sources – by word of mouth, by calling their friends, by bargaining with traders, by visiting the market in person. In your original research, you identified how your service could be better than existing sources of information. In the marketing stage you need to persuade the users of that fact.

Do not forget your potential competitors – other market information services that may move into your area. Many countries in Africa produce a sim-

ilar range of commodities under similar conditions, so it may be relatively easy to expand a market information service from one country to another. Who else might be about to muscle in on your patch?

In your initial research, you will have worked out how much you can charge your clients. Given this, ask yourself how you can best compete with them. By charging lower fees? By providing a more frequent or reliable service? By covering a larger range of commodities and more markets? By providing information in the local language? The answers will be your competitive advantage.

You may have decided you cannot compete directly with another service. For example, if another service already provides prices on coffee, tea and cocoa, you might avoid these commodities and instead focus on staple grains and vegetables. Rather than directly offering the same as the competition, look out for services that offer you a unique entry into the market.

Box 1. The five Ps of marketing

Here is a useful checklist to use when planning your marketing strategy.

Product

What product or service are you offering? What are its key features? How can it benefit your clients? Can you tailor the service to suit different groups of clients? Can you change aspects of it to make it more useful or attractive? For example, can you add features, make it simpler to use, emphasise quality or reliability, or improve your customer service? See the sections in the main text on Define your products or services and Define your unique selling propositions for more.

Price

What price are you going to charge for the service? Consider giving some services (such as weekly prices of a few commodities at major markets) away for free, but charging for more commodities, more frequent updates, more markets, or historical data.

Promotion

This is how you make clients aware of your service. It includes branding, advertising, promotion on your website and through social media and events.

Place

Even if you are offering a service that clients will get on their mobile phone, place is still important. Can your clients actually get a phone signal in their villages? Where will they see advertisements for your service? Where do they have to go to attend an introductory meeting, learn how to use it, sign up to the service, or ask a question? And do the locations the service reports prices from match the markets your clients are interested in?

People

This refers to your staff, salespeople and customer service advisors, including yourself. If you have good staff and excellent service, word will spread and you will win referrals from happy customers. If you do not, the opposite will happen.

5. Define your unique selling propositions

Think of a few things that differentiate your service from that of your competitors (if you have any). Some examples:

- You cover all the markets in a particular area
- You give information in six local languages
- You cover a bigger range of commodities than anyone else
- Your information is reliable and up-to-date
- You don't just offer price information: you also do weather, trade volumes and production tips
- You have a call-in service where farmers can get advice.

These "unique selling propositions" are what you should focus on in your marketing effort.

Do not try to be all things to all people. It may be better to excel in a particular niche than try to compete across all markets, commodities and clients.

6. Set your marketing budget

Your marketing efforts will depend on the budget you have available. Make sure that you have enough money to generate the sales you will need to cover your costs, attract new clients and generate a profit.

How much is enough? That depends. For a small start-up, you may want to spend up to 20 to 30% of your total revenue on marketing: you want to attract a lot of clients quickly. Later on, when more people are aware of your services, you may be able to reduce the percentage.

Different promotion channels cost different amounts. A nationwide television advertising blitz can raise a lot of awareness quickly (though not necessarily among the people you want to reach), but will cost a fortune. Social media and word of mouth cost little, or perhaps nothing at all. But if you rely on such "free" channels, you will find you spend a lot of time attending events, writing tweets and talking to individuals. And because in business, time = money, the marketing effort will cost you anyway.

Try to estimate the cost of gaining each new subscriber. For example, imagine a farmers' organisation agrees to recommend your service to its members. You can estimate how much training and information materials for the organisation will cost you, and divide that by the number of farmers who you expect to sign up.



Figure 1. Logos of some market information services in Africa

7. Develop your strategies

Work out how best to reach your intended clientele. Select those channels that will reach them best, within the constraints of your budget. See Box 1 for ideas.

Here are some possible strategies to consider:

- Give away some services for free, but charge for others (see Box 1).
- Offer a free trial for 3 months, then start charging.
- Target a small number of valuable customers.
- Target a large number of lower-value customers.
- Get development organisations to promote your service among their clientele.
- Include your service as part of mobile network operator's offerings.

The **80/20 rule** states that 80% of your revenue will come from 20% of your clients. Focus your marketing effort on getting the 20% to sign up to your service, and to stay signed up.

You want to convince certain people of the value of your service who are not actually among your target clientele. For example, if you are targeting your service at farmers, you might want to persuade development agents, extension workers and the managers of farmers' organisations about your

service. They can then recommend it to the farmers they work with.

The media (both mainstream and web-based) are another important intermediary. Create a favourable buzz among journalists and bloggers and in Facebook and Twitter, and at least some of your publicity work is done.

8. Start small, monitor and modify

When you first launch your service, you don't know whether your marketing approach will work. So start small. Try it out first with focus groups: what do they think? Test it in a limited area, and monitor the results carefully. Adjust the approach if necessary before going to scale.

Continue monitoring your marketing effort regularly. Clients' needs and expectations, technologies and the economic situation all change, and your competitors will not be idle. Evaluate your approach and modify it if necessary.

Branding and content

Brand

Your brand distinguishes your service from your competitors. It helps your clients remember your service and associate it with positive feelings. Various things contribute to a brand:

- **The name of your service.** Think of something short and memorable, that gives a positive image and that can be portable across languages and cultures.
- **Logo:** A clear, simple logo will help your visual materials stand out.
- **A tagline, slogan or catchphrase** that reinforces or explains your message. mFarms has “Agribusiness solutions”; Infotrade has “Market information services”, while RATIN spells out its full name, “Regional Agricultural Trade Intelligence Network” (Figure 1). The tagline may or may not be part of the logo.
- **Colours.** Select a colour (or colours) and use it consistently in all your publicity material.
- **Design.** Develop standard design guidelines for all your visual materials. This includes the placement and size of your name and logo, the colours and fonts you use, the style of graphics (photographs, drawings, illustrations), etc.

Unless you are a talented graphic designer, get a professional designer or marketing specialist to design a logo and visual style for you.

Aim for as much visibility for your brand as possible. Put your logo on everything: business cards, letterheads, email templates, brochures, posters, advertisements, noticeboards, T-shirts, your vehicles...

Content

You will need text and graphics to carry your message in your visual publicity materials (and voice and music for your audio publicity). Get someone who is good with words to write the text, and use professional-quality photographs. Pre-test your publicity materials with a sample of your intended clients. Do they understand them? What do they think of them? Double-check the drafts before they

go out for errors: mistakes are expensive and can give you a reputation for shoddy work.

Promotion and training

Promotion

You can choose among many channels to promote your service: display, print, mobile, internet, face-to-face, and audio-visual. See the separate sheet on *Disseminating information to your clients* for details.

Do not rely exclusively on one channel. Rather, use several channels simultaneously to support each other. At an event, put up a display, give a demonstration and distribute brochures to attendees. Have posters and handouts printed with the same design to reinforce your message. Have the same slogans on your visual and audio publicity materials.

Training

You may have to train farmers to use your service. This can take a lot of time, effort and money. You have to arrange training sessions and bring the farmers together in one place (ask the local farmers’ organisation for time during one of its regular meetings). Before you can demonstrate your service, you may first have to show some of them how to do use simple features on their mobile phone, such as sending an SMS or downloading an app.

Make sure you have staff who have teaching skills, and provide simple printed materials to remind the trainees of what to do.

Training is an excellent opportunity to get to know your clients better, and to understand their needs and any difficulties they have in using your service. So make sure you feed insights from the training staff back to your design team so you can further improve the service you are offering.

Agricultural market information systems in Africa

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