What works? What doesn't?

Growing a computer consulting business

About the business

My husband and I run a computer consulting/repair business called Computer Care Kelowna (http://comptuercarekelowna.com/) in Kelowna, BC in Canada. This is a small business. Our customers are chiefly home computer users, and we also have several small business/home-based business customers.

We've been at this for several years now. I am the person who goes to the field and fixes things, maintains things, advises people. My husband takes care of the books, some of the scheduling, lots of the parts ordering, and of calming me down. We also do some website work, and that splits out about 50-50, but it's not a large part of the business.

What hasn't worked:

Ads in the local paper. We advertised in the classifieds/market place section of the local paper for about a year and a half, and got almost no uptake. I don't know why. Maybe they were just terrible ads; maybe it's just a terrible paper.

Doing things for free. I keep hearing other computer people, especially in Canada, say that doing things for free has resulted in more business. This has not been our experience. Doing things for free has resulted in more people expecting that we will do things for free. To be clear, we do some things for free because we believe in a cause or person or organization. We don't expect that to result in more business.

Distributing brochures or flyers in office buildings. No pickup at all. Maybe we're just terrible at it.

What has worked:

Ads on Craig's List, ads on Kijiji, ads on the local internet news site, castanet.net. Most of the inquiries from Craig's List turn into business. Most of the inquiries on Kijiji are from people looking for someone to install illegal software. Most of the inquiries from castanet.net result in business which results in repeat business.

Writing a weekly column on castanet.net AND hosting it on my own website. This has been a good business generator. It gives me credibility and gets my name out there. Sometimes it's a grind, but staying with it, delivering it on time, and promoting it via newsletter/rss/email subscription really helps.

I get a lot of uptake. (I sent queries to castanet, and to the local newspapers. Thank god castanet was interested.)

Answering emails, and answering them promptly. I do give some free advice, answering questions from people who read the column. I always find a way to suggest that if they need onsite help they consider me, and I give them my contact information in a .sig file at the end of every message.

Word of mouth. I am a woman visiting places I have never been before and it helps when the recommendation comes from someone I know.

Magnets. Recently I've started leaving a couple of business cards and a refrigerator magnet with my customers. They love the magnets. I've had several calls from people who have seen the magnets at their neighbor's and gotten my name that way. I know it sounds stupid, but apparently it works, and it's cheap and easy.

Follow up. A follow up phone call or email after a visit, especially if I have something of value to add, makes customers feel good. ("It was great to meet you; let me know how you're doing with that scanner!")

Staying organized. I keep notes, and I try to keep them up to date. When someone calls me after a year and I can say, "Are you still on Main St, by the Husky station?" they think that's really special. And it saves a whole lot of time.

Some useful tools

I'm not going into the "What's in your bag?" thing, but here are some things that I can't live without:

GPS. Get one, use it, buy the updates. There are a million reasons, but here is just one: http://catester.posterous.com/why-i-use-gps-even-in-kelowna

Someone or something to answer the telephone when you are not there. And for crying out loud, return the calls promptly.

Someone who knows where you're supposed to be and when you're supposed to be back. Maybe men don't worry so much about this, but someone always knows the address and phone where I'm supposed to be and how long I'm supposed to be there. I have a check in code with my husband (or with someone else if he is gone) for situations that I'm particularly worried about. (Maybe the location is not great or the customer seems creepy or the whole thing just seems odd.)

Car entertainment. Music, podcasts, whatever it takes, especially if your only radio choices are the CBC or local talk shows. I have a Sansa Clip + and a cable that plugs into my car stereo. 8GB of something interesting can be a lifesaver.