

Reaching Men and Teen Boys

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By Katie Roberts

If you're using 5-year-old methods to attract the 2007 teen or man, it's time for a change. Why? Think about the growth of the skincare industry for males. Or consider how reality shows have normalized men delving into home decorating or indulging in makeovers.

"Men are much more image-conscious than they used to be," says Ellen Davis, spokesperson for the National Retail Federation (www.nrf.com). "This is why we're seeing personal grooming products really taking off. They're taking a vested interest in their looks...they want to make sure that what they're buying really looks good on them."

Given these changes, there's now fresh opportunity for you to meet this demand. And the timing couldn't be better because retail, in general, is discovering the untapped value of targeting male audiences, Davis says.

"The only way to grow a business is to find new markets and new audiences, and a lot of that has to do with saturation of the marketplace," she says. "We can all go after the most lucrative markets, but some will have to get real creative and go after the overlooked markets."

You should also update your advertising plan to avoid looking outdated. The challenge, however, is that many - but not all - of the "newest" marketing tools are sophisticated, complicated and pricey. Making smart decisions about how to spend your advertising dollars is tough.

"Marketing channels have changed because of media fragmentation," says Peter Koeppel, president of Koeppel Direct (www.koeppeldirect.com), a leader in direct response television, online print and radio, media buying, marketing and campaign management. "It's harder to reach people because there are so many media choices nowadays. (With) the proliferation of TV channels and satellite, online (Internet) gaming, iPods, in addition to print and radio, it's a more challenging environment than ever to capture people."

Nevertheless, to thrive, you need modern marketing methods that communicate your comprehension of, and commitment to, this notable niche. Ushering you in the right direction, VOWS: offers a sampling of creative advertising-action steps.

Advertising-Action Steps to Build Your Formalwear Biz

Save money when marketing online. It pays to have a presence on the major search engines, but it's easy to lose money if you don't know what you're doing. Koeppel says to cut costs by buying a small number of keywords right before your busy prom and wedding seasons. And although contracting an online media buyer isn't cheap, one who comes with solid references can spend your online marketing dollars wisely.

Be where your customers are online. They're looking for you in search engines, but where else are your local customers hanging out on the Web? Wherever that is, that's where you want to be. If you're targeting teens, try sites like Youtube.com and Myspace.com, in addition to local high schools' homepages or teen club sites, where a simple text link to your Web site might suffice.

"There's no production costs, and you just put a word at the bottom of the page," Koeppel says. For younger male adults and men of marrying age, he says, consider education, sports and entertainment sites.

Try view-created advertising. Another big teen-marketing trend, which can generate huge word-of-mouth business, involves asking teens to make the ads you'll run. You could choose to involve them from start to finish, or simply for one stage of the process. Hold contests online for designing a Web site or building an ad, suggests Anastasia Goodstein, publisher of Ypulse.com, a Web site featuring daily news and commentary for media and marketing professionals. Create incentive by giving away an awesome prize.

Get edgy! Karen Hurley, executive director of the International Formalwear Association (www.formalwear.org), says the recent marketing push in the prom industry has focused on relating to teens and their lifestyle. This means determining whatever is hip and cool, and catering

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to their characteristically short attention spans, desire for instant gratification, and whatever is bold, outrageous and different.

"Marketing with shock value is the trend that advertisers are going with - and humor, too," Hurley says. Peruse popular sports magazines or MAXIM magazine for tips on shock value. And as for humor. . .

Humor those teen guys! Goodstein echoes Hurley's point, and says if you're trying to reach teen guys, your communication style needs to be of an "irreverent, in-your-face, humorous" kind.

"Unfortunately, what works for teen guys tends to be on the crude, brash and juvenile-humor side (think jokes about passing gas, belching or anything related to sex)," Goodstein says. "They like funny, in-your-face marketing as well. Check out sites like monkeyslum.com and riotweb.com for a taste."

Goodstein also notes the popularity of "funny viral videos, 'Jackass' type stunts and other time wasters," as well as anything providing something of value related to "specific interests, from video gaming to a specific sport. Anything too sentimental (girly), hokey or trying too hard to be funny would turn them off."

Maybe you don't want to feature a belching teen on your prom site, but exploring these resources to grasp the teen mindset can't hurt. A toned-down marketing approach - but one that still retains plenty of shock value - should capture teen audiences and differentiate your store.

As for grooms, they appreciate a laugh, but tone down the humor factor on your wedding site or "grooms" page. Brides - the ones who are most often researching which formalwear company to choose - don't appreciate the tone that teens so love. And grooms will simply want to gather the tuxedo essentials and seek ways (e.g., online appointments, measurements and driving directions) to make their actual visit to your store more efficient.

Show, don't tell. Whatever message you send to your teenage market, "don't shove it down their throats," Hurley says. For example, in communicating "cool," she suggests showing a teen guy with his hair a bit longer, some tattoos, piercings, and a tuxedo.

"You want them to associate with the overall image and then let them find (the message) on their own," she says. "Young men will be going to prom, but if you tell them they have to wear a tux, they may choose not to. If you're showing them something that's edgy and cool, they want to be that person looking cool or be that hot date in that tux."

Launch a viral-marketing campaign. Simply put, viral marketing is advertising that propagates itself - product placement at its best. One example might be outfitting the prom king or groom for free in return for his telling friends and relatives about your store. Or you could sponsor an entire sports team for group pictures if you like. Viral marketing, as its name implies, is a fabulous form of word-of-mouth marketing that's been proven to work. And there are many variations, such as building in a referral program to help you track its success.

Offer meaningful incentives. And avoid gimmicks at all costs! Since engaged couples quickly get cynical about being oversold or fooled, it's best to avoid cute tricks altogether. However, a meaningful incentive can not only draw in grateful customers but also boost your store's reputation. For example, returning to the topic of the modern, image-conscious male customer, "it's not a bad idea to pair a formalwear purchase with a free skin-care evaluation, percentage-off a haircut at a high-end salon or a manicure," Davis says. Creating valuable incentives is about "finding what appeals to (the customer) and getting rid of what doesn't."

Another incentive idea: Save the guy time by helping him take care of multiple shopping needs in one trip. Hurley has seen some retailers offering package deals to grooms who both rent a tux and buy their rehearsal dinner suit.

Extending that concept to prom, she says, you could offer a discount for both renting prom formalwear and purchasing a graduation or college suit.

Of course, teens love free stuff, but again, give them things they want. Instead of free baseball hats sporting your logo (boring!), how about handing out raffle tickets for a CD burner (cool!) or a complimentary corsage (useful!) for their date? Depending on your budget, there are

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tons of giveaway ideas that capture the attention of teen guys. Goodstein suggests: video games, Xbox, Playstation 3, Sony Mylo, iPods, digital cameras (still or video), Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Zune, or USB sticks with a cool design. Other, cheaper, suggestions might be music CDs, restaurant gift certificates, free "prom day" car wash coupons, sporting goods equipment, or a magazine subscription of their choice.

Use video to your advantage. Today, you can shoot a short, hip clip on a cell phone or a longer, spiffier one with a fairly inexpensive video camera. Run the footage on your Web site, on movie trailers before a movie starts, in a direct e-mail marketing campaign, in commercials, or in-store on a TV. The more marketing tools you use to promote your video, the bigger impression you're likely to make.

Also, get creative when you shoot your video, Koepfel says. For example, spotlighting a skateboarding teen sporting a tuxedo will set your store apart from the competition.

"It's a medium a lot of people don't do in this industry," he says. "If someone were forward-thinking in using some of those things, it would be a great way to cut through the clutter."

The golden rule: Use only teens in teen ads; use only adult men and women in ads targeting that audience.

Make the shopping experience part of your marketing program. Promoting your store should start with advertising efforts and finish in the customer's shopping experience. For grooms, show that you respect their time by setting up appointments whenever possible, communicating throughout the sales process in a direct manner, and making the shopping process smooth.

"Men buy differently than women," Davis says. "They tend to make decisions more quickly and don't second guess themselves, which is why they were the early adopters of online shopping. Formalwear is a bit different in that there is evidence of your shopping decision - the photographs last for years - but they still want the process to be easy."

If a groom must wait, make sure there's something for him to do. A comfortable sitting area, complete with popular men's magazines and formalwear catalogs, a TV turned to a sports network, and a steamy cup of fresh coffee will help. Remember, this is the generation that has grown up with the comforts of the Starbucks' retail ambiance, Hurley says.

Tune into teens' insecurities when it comes to prom-tux shopping. They don't like people touching or fidgeting with them, nor do they appreciate you glossing over product details, even though they won't say so. The key, Goodstein says, is to make the guy feel like "king of the world" and "super smooth."

Speaking of egos, many teen guys come with their mothers, but aren't thrilled to be shopping in public with them. So they appreciate your stepping in and tactfully taking charge of the situation. Even politely asking the mother to take a seat while you coach her son on a few different styles can't hurt.

And, just like adult males, teen guys want a comfortable shopping environment. Having a few hip magazines sitting around, a cushy bean-bag chair to plop down on, and a sports video playing in the vicinity of the prom-tux displays add to that edgy, yet "at-ease" experience. Plus, Goodstein says, this gives the customer's accompanying friends something to do if they're bored.

Talk to many formalwear retailers about marketing to the groom, and they'll tell you to advertise to the bride. Or, if you ask them about promoting the prom tux, they'll say to speak to the girl, his date. It's true. Your marketing programs do need to reach the ladies, but today's grooms and teen guys expect your efforts to be directed primarily at them. So what are you offering these men in your marketing experience? If your answer is "not much," use VOWS: advertising-action steps to reach out to this significant retail niche.

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