



Cultivating customers

CHARTER OPERATORS CAN TAKE THEIR CUE FROM AIRLINES WHEN IT COMES TO GROWING LEADS THROUGH INBOUND MARKETING TECHNIQUES.

BY RENÉ ARMAS MAES



Potential executive charter customers need to understand the extraordinary lifestyle experience made possible by business aviation. **Mike Reyno Photo**

Today's global economic slowdown translates into longer sales cycles. Qualifying leads, acquiring new customers and even increasing revenues per customer have become more complex. From airlines to charter providers and corporate aircraft for-hire operators, everyone is chasing a similar customer pool.

On top of that, we continue working in an ultra-competitive environment where in order to grow a business, it is even more crucial to identify creative ways to get in front of customers and break through the noise.

This article is directed at corporate charter providers, and focuses on lead generation strategies and ideas to engage and attract new customers, with the ultimate goal of guaranteeing steady revenue and margin growth.

Leading network carriers and point-to-point low cost airlines around the globe employ a number of key marketing tactics to attract, connect, find new leads and build brand preference. Their marketing strategy centres on content marketing, search engine optimization (SEO) and conversation marketing, which are referred to as inbound marketing strategies. Corporate for-hire operators and charter providers can certainly learn and capitalize on the same marketing techniques employed by the airline industry.

The airline business and corporate aviation are highly competitive industries that face many challenges attracting customers and generating new leads. Both target lucrative segments of the aviation industry.

Lead generation has shifted from a multi outbound

marketing channel (cold calling, direct emailing, customer referrals, buying and segmenting databases, etc.) to an inbound highly branded marketing process. Inbound marketing is the one strategy that has assisted many organizations to connect with current and potential customers at a higher level, while being able to lower the cost per lead compared to traditional marketing channels. Therefore, inbound marketing will be the focus of our discussion.

Today, potential customers manage multiple sets of online information and are bombarded (even before they become potential leads) by a number of product and service offerings. The goal is to position a brand with a highly crafted message in a prospective buyer's mind, even before they recognize the need for a product or service. You need to find a way to build connections and a sound top of mind branding strategy that positions your brand, engages customers, and ultimately facilitates a purchase.

But how can one position a brand ahead of the competition in order to attract customers? One approach is to employ an integrated inbound marketing strategy that includes high quality content marketing, SEO and conversation marketing.

Content marketing focuses on creating highly branded material to attract and engage with new customers. Virgin Atlantic is a leading carrier that has mastered the way it talks and connects with business passengers, attracting new customers with detailed messages aimed at this target audience. In general, network and point-to-point carriers focus on data analytics to identify what their current and potential customers are looking for,

position themselves in front of their target audiences, and develop high quality travel experience "episode" videos about delighted customers enjoying a flying experience with them.

Can corporate for-hire operators learn from this strategy? Certainly. They, too, need to find a way to stand apart from their competition and must showcase their customized door-to-door travel experience offering. Potential customers need to understand the extraordinary lifestyle experience made possible by business aviation.

Nowadays, any product or service research starts with a search engine. Therefore, global airlines care about what is being said about them and their competitors. They use different tactics such as profiling key customer experiences, new partnerships, product upgrades, etc., to position their brands and optimize search engine rankings.

Ideas to expand your brand include speaker opportunities at key aviation and non-aviation conferences, especially those driving GDP growth; freelance writing; solutions-based approach strategies; and empty leg utilization. If an empty leg cannot generate revenue, it must serve a public relations purpose, by helping you position your brand, attract customers and generate new leads.

Airlines also employ another strategy called conversation marketing, which focuses on keeping a dialogue alive with customers about any operational disruption, day-to-day customer issues, company updates and even fare promotion information.

To conclude, both inbound and outbound marketing channels should be used to generate new leads and attract new business. If you are successful mixing a number of the ideas captured in this article, your company should be attracting new customers, generating an important number of leads and building its brand.

Finally, work hard to turn each customer interaction into a remarkable travel experience that will lead to brand preference and ultimately what your business needs: a lifetime stream of revenue from new and current customers. ✈

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