

FIVE TACTICS: LAND THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MARKET

When it comes to professional services, the key word is professional. The lawyers, engineers and management consultants who fall under this catchall term tend to be more conservative, going for tried-and-true embroidered polos rather than, say, a trendy glitter tee. But they also are attracted to luxury and brand names, something that decorators who target this market can use to their advantage. Here are some tactics to get you started.

TACTIC 1: MAKE CONNECTIONS.

Referrals are the number-one way to land professional services customers, according to this year's State of the Industry survey. Leverage this statistic by getting active with the local chamber of commerce and other professional networks, says Krissi Dane, owner of EmbroiderMe in Green Cove Springs, FL. Attend community functions that attract up-and-coming businesspeople, or set up a LinkedIn account to work the professional side of social media. "Talk to everyone, and take every opportunity you can to show your work," Dane adds.

TACTIC 2: BRING OUT YOUR BRANDS.

When you're putting together good-better-best polo and golf shirt samples for prospective clients, include some recognizable brand names and tout a garment's performance features. Giving the buyer a chance to see and feel an item is often instrumental in winning the sale, Dane says.

TACTIC 3: BE CREATIVE, BUT DON'T PUSH THE ENVELOPE TOO FAR.

Though many professional service firms

prefer traditional attire, some can be persuaded to shake up their image with a bold color or design, or a creative approach. Dean Schwartz of Miami-based SOBO Concepts (asi/329592), for example, was able to steer a bankruptcy lawyer away from the logoed pens he'd requested, creating instead a decorated black sleep mask with the slogan: "Credit card debts keeping you up at night? Call us. We'll help you sleep better." That said, Schwartz is able to suggest more creative solutions as a law firm or other group gains more confidence in SOBO. The company created USB drives in the shape of the African continent for a large law firm holding a conference in Africa.

TACTIC 4: START AN APPAREL PROGRAM.

This is a surefire way to ensure steady repeat business, and corporate clients will appreciate the opportunity to order only the items they need when they need them, confident that the styles and color will match previous orders. "Our largest customers do an apparel order two to three times a week," says Devin Jones, owner of Proforma Gateway Solutions (asi/491471) in Houston.

TACTIC 5: KNOW YOUR WORTH. Like any other client, professional services firms are looking for a good deal. You have to stress what sets you apart – whether it's great customer service or creative solutions – rather than try to offer the cheapest deal. "Never lower your price to get a job because then you'll always be lowering your prices," Dane says. – TH and MW

CASE STUDY

How I Landed Walker Footings

A referral got Krissi Dane's foot in the door, but it was her quality work, persistence and creative ideas that helped the owner of Green Cove Springs, FL-based EmbroiderMe win the continued business of Walker Footings, a company that makes foundation supports for buildings.

After Dane's former employer recommended her to Walker, the firm invited the small business owner to show them some samples of her work. She visited the company several times, presenting sewouts of a dozen hats, polos and captain's shirts, before Walker representatives settled on the styles they liked. "I sold myself to them," Dane says. "I went to them with samples and new ideas, invited them to visit a website that allowed them to see many hats and visor styles and ordered samples for them."

The personal touch worked. Walker Footings now orders 120 to 200 hats from Dane two or three times a year, purchasing Columbia fishing shirts regularly as well. "I spent time with the customer, showed them that their needs and wants were important, invested my time and energy to give them new ideas and showed interest in their business," she says. "It has been an account that was well worth the time."

The partnership continues to pay dividends, with Walker Footings referring her to several other small corporate accounts.

FROM THE BUYER'S MOUTH

Where does the traditional professional spend recreation hours? At the links, of course. Billy Drake, pro shop attendant at Hyde Park Golf Club in Jacksonville, FL, relies on EmbroiderMe to provide golfers with embroidered goods, whether shirts, hats, visors or golf bags. "Our general manager sends [EmbroiderMe] golf bags from Titleist, and they personalize them with golfers' names,"

Drake says. "We like to provide personalized things to golfers and companies that hold events here because they like taking home a nice souvenir, a memento of their visit." The golf club has been working with EmbroiderMe Owner Krissi Dane for two years and appreciates that she can do whatever they need. "Her prices are very competitive also, and she does first class work," he adds.