

PictureBUSINESS

STRATEGY FOR TODAY'S IMAGING RETAILER

Mobile
Marketing
Heats Up

MARCH 2007

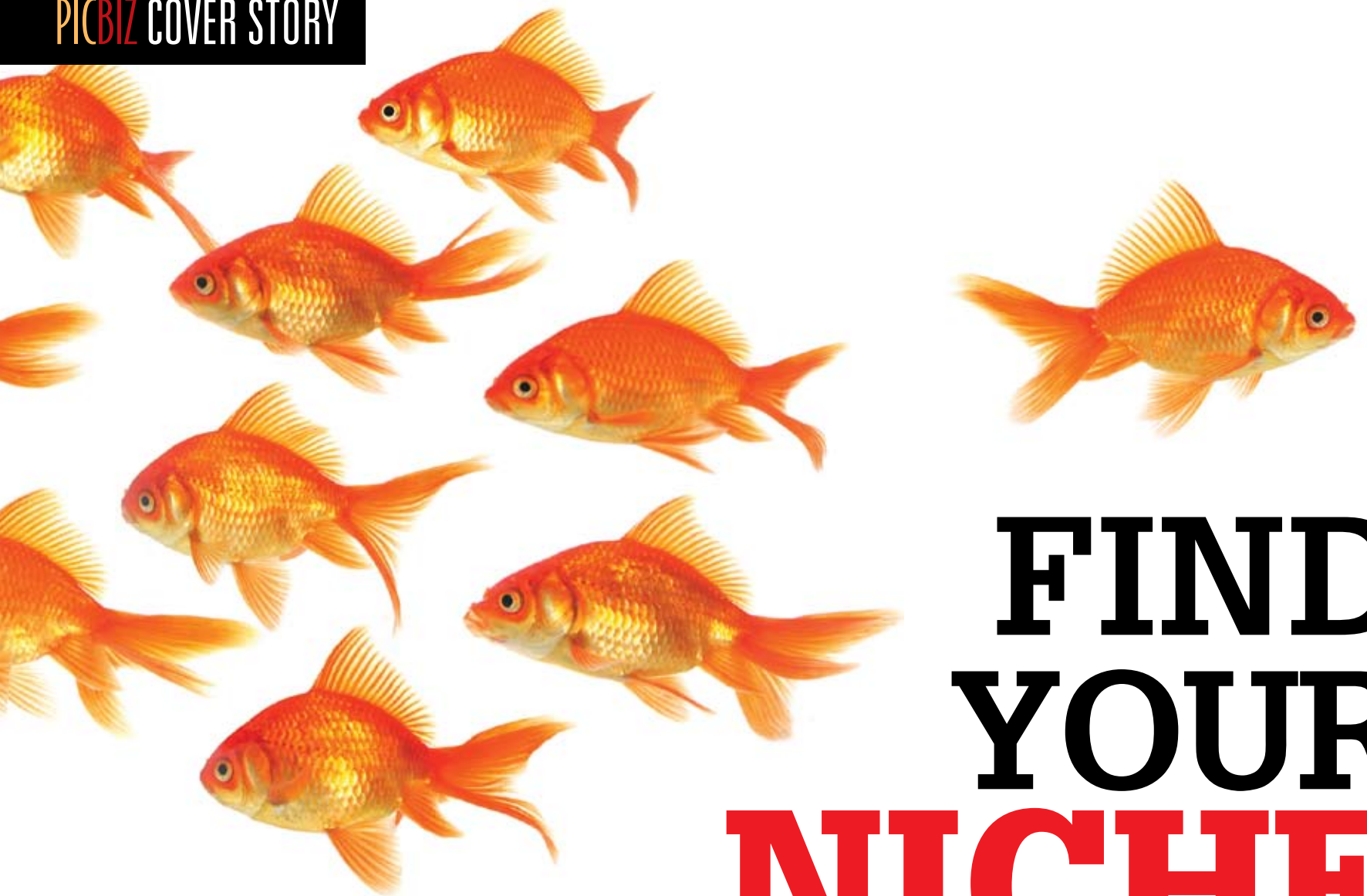
Reignite Your
Retail Engine

PMA Adjusts to
Changing Market



FIND YOUR NICHE

What Makes Your
Location Different?



FIND YOUR NICHE

Expand Your Business by Narrowing Your Focus

Navigating today's competitive waters has never been easy, but does it seem there are more sharks in the surf these days?

Savvy customers schooled online coupled with a crowded marketplace can inspire many of us to wring out hands and meander aimlessly, trying on a host of different tactics as though they were suits in various sizes. If only we could find the perfect fit. When we are fearful of our business going south, we often grasp at ideas, put half-hearted effort into them, feel frustrated that they aren't working, and then repeat the cycle.

Stop it.

If you want to expand, consider narrowing your focus. Can you really be all things to all people? Have you ever met anyone who has succeeded in making everyone happy all the time? Can you recall a time when you jettisoned around feverishly in the hopes of placating several people simultaneously and realized that not only are you failing but you're now incredibly annoyed as well?

That experience has a lot to teach us and can translate into our business life. Each business must work from its own core competencies and strengths. If we try the 'me too' product offering, we risk becoming a commodity. If we attempt to match prices with the giants, we've immediately lost the game because we're playing on their turf by their rules. We can't make everybody happy by copying competitors. There is a third option.

Photography is considered one of the great American hobbies; if photo is considered a niche, it's certainly large enough a pool to drown in, so we need to look at the big picture and consider cutting it into smaller slices. What you may find is that you've got countless different ways of targeting specific audiences and tailoring your messages, and by choosing wisely and following up consistently, your niche will grow beyond your expectations.

INSIDE THIS FEATURE: With competition for consumer imaging dollars beginning to show up everywhere, finding unique and unusual products and services has never been more important. Retailers who find and properly work a niche business are scoring big with their customers who are always looking for something new.

By Laura Oles

Niche Your Market

"You have to know what makes you different from the competition," states Kim T. Gordon, a well-recognized small business expert and author of *Maximum Marketing, Minimum Dollars* (Kaplan Business, March 2006). "This is especially true when there is a parity of products. Why should this customer buy from you?"

Gordon encourages small businesses to thoroughly evaluate the customer experience and recommends a hard look at all points of customer contact. "Your customer wants to know how easy you'll be to work with, what your return policies are and how he will be treated," she says.

Analyzing a business' Web site is critical and must be done with the customer experience in mind. For example, does your site simply list digital camera models and 'back of the box' tech specs? Do you have customer testimonials to establish a trusted reputation? Is the site easy to navigate, and can someone speak to a knowledgeable person right away if necessary?

Building a company's brand as one that truly values and enhances the customer experience—and delivers on that brand promise consistently—can propel a small competitor into an enviable position when it comes to customer retention. After all—exceptional service and long-term relationships are simply more difficult to scale to 'big box' proportions.

Niche Your Customer Base

While many of us believe we know who our best customers are, few have made the effort to clearly define and measure who our best customers are and how to better serve them. The conscious effort of evaluating past and current customers—along with their spending patterns and overall sales figures—may uncover some surprises and opportunities. You may find some premier customers are being taken for granted while small spenders take the most amount of support.

Once you've defined your best customers, make sure that your employees know who they are and their specific preferences. Briefings in staff meetings as well as appropriate notes in a customer's file will help ensure that the special knowledge of your top tier customers is recognized. While all customers should receive the best your business has to offer, recognizing your 'A list' and their preferences can greatly improve retention and revenues.

Education: The Ultimate Niche

Although there is an almost incomprehensible amount of information available on the Internet, confusion often reins now more than ever. Part of

this may be due to different learning styles—while some people may gain mastery through reading, others may be more visual in nature. Still others may require a hands-on approach to learning. These different learning styles can mean great opportunities for retailers.

If you want to create a niche, consider positioning yourself as the local expert. Allen Showalter of King Photo in Harrisonburg, VA, has done just that. Showalter recalls a time in the mid 1980s when his business was competing with a now-defunct large catalog showroom and was being "beaten pretty badly" by the behemoth competition. Showalter decided it was time for a new approach.

Bought Your Camera Somewhere Else? No problem! Showalter began his now popular 'Camera Clinic' for his mall location and specified certain days where he would check people's cameras for free, even if they didn't purchase them from him.

may one day become podcasts. They have the same great information, but are now able to be packaged to reach a new audience using new technology.

A Niche Can Have a Long Life

Harry Reiter, President of the Town & Country Buying Group, has a long history in the photo industry and a love of the craft. After selling his store a few years ago and concentrating on his T&C obligations, he also rediscovered a niche he loved—sports photojournalism.

"I started shooting photos of the Philadelphia Eagles back in 1982," Reiter recalls, "and I've always loved sports and being on the field." Reiter continues to shoot NFL games and NASCAR events and recently returned from covering the space shuttle Discovery.

Reiter has found a way to combine his two loves—photography and sports—and builds them into a niche that is rewarding. He has also built a reputation and relationships that will help him continue to grow this niche.

Think Presentation

The Japanese culture is particularly adept at the art of presentation. Imagine a Vegas-style all-you-can-eat buffet. Now imagine a simple sushi bento box with all its color and spare space. See the difference? Much like the buffet visitor, our customers can quickly be overwhelmed with so many choices and decisions, especially if they aren't sure what they want. By contrast, a well-presented but simple meal appeals directly to a particular audience. Its existence brings clarity and is meant to resonate with your best customers—not all customers— primarily your best customers.

The analogy above isn't to belittle buffets but to help us better understand how our customers might feel with so many products and services in their immediate view. By paying attention to a particular area and speaking to that customer segment, he (or she) will relate to the message and be intrigued to learn more. The opportunity to earn a sale and a new customer lies therein.

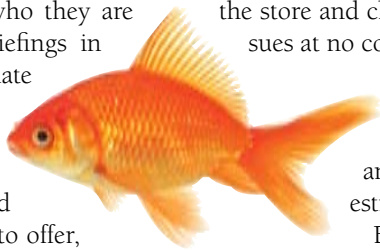
Focus and Consistency

In a world that throws information at us faster than a Nolan Ryan fastball, it's all too easy to get distracted and lose our way or become embroiled in the latest gimmick to boost business. Photo retailers must know what they're good at and stay true to that knowledge. It isn't necessary to know everything about all aspects of photography; consider picking a few key things that most resonate with your best customers and remain current and skilled in those disciplines.

Once you stop mimicking the competition and leveraging your strengths, that clarity will take you down the right road for your business. ■



Allen Showalter of King Photo in Harrisonburg, VA, has set his retail business apart with ideas like the Camera Doctor and the Camera Clinic.



"What I was doing was no different than many other businesses—most camera stores would check these things for free—but I looked for a way to present it differently," he offers. He then took it a step further by creating the persona of the Camera Doctor. Wearing a lab coat and a stethoscope, he and a manager would sit at a table at the front of the store and check batteries and other basic issues at no cost to the customer.

"We would often have a line of people waiting for 45 minutes for us to check their cameras, and we would also write up repair estimates," Showalter says.

By taking the expert role as the Camera Doctor, he was able to differentiate himself and stand out among the competitive clutter. His success led to a regular radio spot on local personality Jim Britt's radio show on WSVU. "He had tremendous market penetration," Showalter notes, and from there he added an occasional TV spot. The Camera Doctor radio spots