



Educator advises on marketing, competing

By [MONICA LUNDQUIST](#)
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HACKENSACK - Pat Swarthout has taught in Central Lakes College's Business and Industry program 22 years.

He offered Cass County business owners advice Wednesday during a Cass County Economic Development Corporation seminar on how best to market their businesses and to compete with others, including with the big box stores in neighboring counties.

"Communications with customers needs to be a priority daily," he said. "Big box doesn't have the intimate relationship small business does (with customers)."

All marketing is about communicating who you are, he said, but he warned that a customer's experience when they come into a store must be a reality in keeping with the promises made in advertising.

"Your employees are your business," so they, too, must reflect the degree of knowledge, service and type of quality product or service you plan to offer, he said.

"What we think we are may be different from how we are viewed," he said.

It is important to find out why a customer chose your business, then advertise that. Find out what customers do and don't like about your competitors, what the customer wants to find in a store or service, then provide that and promote it, he said.

Consumers have changed, so be proactive for the future, Swarthout said. The more distinct and difficult to copy, the better a customer's suggestion can be for your business, he said.

Whatever price range you decide is right for your business, be sure the customer gets real value for that price, especially if you chose a higher range, he said. Your goal should be to improve your customer's situation.

Capitalize on your strengths and the competition's weaknesses, he said.

Whether advertising in newspapers, on radio and television or over the Internet, Swarthout said most people mainly list the name and location of their business and the products they sell and possibly brands and service or quality, but they don't advertise what is unique about their business.

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