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Trust the key to growing without spending big on advertising

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Cracka Wines was launched in 2010 as a platform connecting winemakers directly with customers, cutting the supermarket-owned bottleshops out of the equation so winemakers could make a greater return on their products.

Beyond supporting the makers, this concept led us to build a unique daily falling-price auction and allowed us to pass on savings to customers. For the last three years, we've spent almost nothing on advertising, and generated 25 per cent year-on-year growth by focusing on the most important element of any relationship: trust.

The decision to take this approach was triggered by an incident a couple of years ago, when a new customer promotion we were involved with over performed all expectations. Our joy was quickly replaced with panic after discovering the 30,000 cases of wine we'd sold, couldn't be delivered to us because of a national glass bottle shortage.

We worked around the clock and brought on more staff than we had desks to try and salvage thousands of potential new customers, but temporarily lost sight of our most important asset: our existing customers. Those we had spent years building and nurturing relationships with.

This was a steep learning curve, but reminded us to reconnect and focus on the aspects of our business that require our attention most. While we'd been squarely focused on "making good" and trying to salvage the promotion, while the core of our business suffered.

Bouncing back, we've made customer happiness our single greatest priority. The business has been thriving as a result, with year on year growth exceeding the online retail industry at large. The majority of our new customers have come from word of mouth and online search, with trust being our greatest marketing tool.

Without spending big on advertising, we've managed to grow by focusing on these five core things:

1. Customers

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Make the happiness of your customers your number one priority. Always do that well, and you'll never need to spend a dollar on advertising and marketing. Happy customers will become your biggest brand advocates.

2. Staff

Surround yourself with great people with skills and experience that you don't have. Hire long and fire fast. Don't be afraid to let average people go to make room for great people. Create a workplace with a great culture. It helps attract great staff, which attracts great suppliers and in turn attracts great customers.

3. Quality and reliability

Right from day one we've been very selective about which wines we stock and recommend, so that when we get behind a wine we can move an entire vintage. For example, we recently sold over 10,000 bottles of an \$80 shiraz to our customers without even telling them what the wine was.

4. Partnerships

Ignoring competitors, there's lots of businesses out there with customer databases just like yours. Tapping into these the right way can be a great way to grow your own database. Often the best performing partnerships are those with small niche operators as they have trust and much stronger relationships with their customers that can be leveraged with clever messaging.

5. Convenience

We live in a society obsessed with speed. When a customer order turns up quicker than they expect, they're always impressed. We're continually investing in our logistics and plan to roll out some concepts that will enable same-day delivery soon.

Once you have the basics of your business right, growth is organic. Look at the core of your business and what it is your customers value most.

Dean Taylor, Founder and CEO, Cracka Wines

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