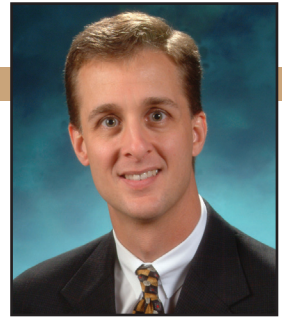


# What's Your Niche?



Once upon a time, I was the co-founder of a travel company that became the official travel service of the University of Notre Dame. That was our specialty: coordinating travel for athletic teams, alumni, faculty and students. With universities as our foundation, we expanded our customer base to include large groups – up to 5,000 people – traveling to all kinds of special events such as Odyssey of the Minds and the National Senior Games.

Many successful businesses sell their products and services into specialized niches, whether travelers, toddlers or teenagers. Focusing on a niche will allow your business to capitalize on your strengths, and, hopefully, give you a preeminent place in the marketplace.

An excellent example of slicing a business into an underserved niche exists in the \$50 billion haircutting industry. The big three franchises – Great Clips, Regis (four brands) and Fantastic Sam's – have nearly 7,000 locations. Starting a new franchise to compete with them might seem a daunting task. However, along comes Sport Clips a few years ago with a different approach: serve only men and boys “with an environment and haircutting system that delivers the best experience in the business.” Sticking to that laser focus, Sport Clips now has nearly 350 locations including Tomball, Cypress, Spring, Champions and Willowbrook. Their slogan says exactly what makes them unique: “Guys get haircuts. Guys watch sports.”

The first step in creating and/or defining your niche opportunities is to answer this question: “Who benefits most from doing business with us?” With your team, be as specific as you can about your target audience. Define how your products/services provide greater productivity, reduce hassles or problems, and/or lead to more satisfaction. Basically, what are the benefits customers receive from doing business with you? Keep your own goals in mind, too. With our travel company, we focused our structure and processes on groups, so that it became easier and more profitable for us to handle a single trip with 250 people than 250 different trips for 250 different people.

It's common for new businesses to start out trying to be all things to all customers. However, as businesses evolve they often narrow their target audience by focusing on fewer products/services that match their overall goals. For instance, after beating ourselves up for many years competing in corporate travel, because “that's something travel companies are supposed to do,” we finally said to heck with it and stuck with what we did best – providing excellent service to universities, athletes/fans and large groups. Defining your target audience in terms of your ideal clients – who they are and what they do – will enable you to become a more efficient and profitable business.

Having identified the benefits your clients receive from using your products/services, leverage these into higher margin returns via a niche-based

marketing plan. Start by taking the following steps and asking your team: “What will our target audience pay more for that requires little or no investment on our part?” Then work through the exercise included in this article.

A business owner we know specializes in creating corporate identities. Over the years, she noticed that, due to the number of user-friendly design/publishing programs, clients were creating a lot of their own proposals, presentations, etc. Every time a client needed their logo in a different format, they would call and ask for it to be sent to them. When the owner evaluated this niche using the above approach, she decided to enhance their offerings by including a logo variety disk with each new corporate identity package. These contain the new logo in various colors, formats and sizes. This simple offering increased their clients' personal satisfaction: Now they get the logos they need before they need them, and the owner uses this as a marketing differentiator...building the cost into her proposals.

With your team, do some brainstorming on all of the value-added “inventions” you've made to your products/services over the years. Perhaps it's a system you created to better serve a customer, or a step you eliminated to make a process more efficient. Consider the entire organization: your products/services, your team, your marketing, your production and your delivery. Think about ways to capitalize on these things you do differently and better than others by uncovering niche-based opportunities like the logo variety disk.

In 1988, I awoke from a dream wondering, “How do people get to Notre Dame football games?” – never envisioning where that nocturnal inspiration would lead. Yet by keeping in tune with the demand in the marketplace and by looking for opportunities to grow our niches, we became a successful company in an increasingly challenging industry. There were 33,000 travel agencies in the U.S. when we started; today, there are about 24,000. While I sold my half of the company to my partner seven years ago, Anthony Travel is bigger than ever, still focusing on expanding its niches. You can do the same in your business! 🇹🇽!

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*Tomball resident David Handler, The Coach, is the founder of Success Handler, LLC (www.successhandler.com), and specializes in helping business leaders, franchisees and franchisors achieve their dreams. He understands the challenges of running a business, because he's been there – as a business owner, trainer, corporate leader, and in a franchisee and franchisor environment. For a complimentary copy of David's list – “11 Things Business Owners Can Do To Identify Their Niches” – send an e-mail to coach@successhandler.com.*

## team exercise

1. Write down the benefits of your products/services. List them all one by one.
2. Circle those benefits that best match the satisfactions/ needs of your target audience.
3. Narrow your list by identifying those items that are different than your competitors.
4. Determine what, if any, modifications need to be made to turn these into an advantage.
5. Create a marketing plan by shaping your client's experience around these benefits.