Auto Rental NEWS

12 Low or No-Cost Ideas to Market Your Business

From sponsoring community events and generating press releases to creating email coupons and a social network page, effective marketing and sales don't have to cost a fortune.

by Leslie Saunders and Jim Davis

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As a rental car business owner or operator, it's safe to assume that you spend most of your time in three areas: sales, operations and "putting out fires." This is the traditional approach to managing a rental operation, so chances are you spend more time in the latter two areas!

Effective marketing and sales don't have to cost a fortune. There are many low- or no-cost ways you can strengthen your existing relationships with customers and build new ones.

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Create Your 'Elevator Speech'

Your brand and marketing strategies are just as important as the vehicles you rent and the services you provide. One of the first steps to attracting new customers is being able to accurately describe what you have to offer, what problems you solve and what benefits you provide. What makes your operation better or unique from others?

You and each of your employees should be able to describe your business in an "elevator speech." This is a 30-second summary of what you do and what makes you different. Every elevator speech includes strong points that describe your products, services, location and niche. Is your company the value leader? Do you provide the best service? Are you the best in quality or price? Do you have a great location and a new, diverse fleet?

After clarifying your strengths and business proposition, you can then use that information to build and grow your business.

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3 Ideas for Business Development

The best way to develop your business is to "start where you are." Opportunities are all around you.

● **Get involved in your local community.** Are your kids, your employees or the neighbors' kids part of a local sports team? Sponsor a cookout during a game. Or sponsor a "scoreboard" - a dry erase board with your logo on it, which can be used to keep score during the games. For several hours, all eyes will be on your logo.

You can host a car wash at your location to support the local high school band. Also, reach out to a local charity and discuss using your location for a fundraising event. Or sponsor a food drive to support the local food pantry. If you can, donate a product, service or a gift certificate. If you can't, your time is valuable as well. (Make sure to wear your logo!)

● **Make some news.** Contact your community newspaper or radio station when something interesting is going on at your location. Local papers like to print local news. Create a simple press release before contacting the media that answers who, what, when, where and why. Each time you have a "news event" such as hiring a new employee, receiving new vehicles or offering new products, let it be known. Maybe it's time for a grand "reopening" at which you will give away prizes or offer refreshments. This is an ideal opportunity to display all of your products - cars, trucks and equipment - to your community.

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● **Network in your local chamber of commerce.** The chamber is a great organization to meet other business owners/operators and to learn about the business climate in your market.

Make sure you are listed in the chamber's directory and on its Web site. See if you can place flyers in the chamber's welcome bags for new residents.

You don't have to aggressively sell at chamber events, but participate, bring business cards to exchange with other people and add them to your contact list for later opportunities. Ask the chamber for other sources that can provide company names and contact people.

Suggest to your local chamber to sponsor a "dine out" night. Local businesses can participate by providing a salad, small entrée, dessert or coffee. Attendees would move from business to business, spending a few minutes in each business enjoying a small course and getting to know that business and its employees.

In addition, offer to host a "business and bagels" breakfast for all of the other chamber members at your rental operation.

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3 Ways to Use Social Networking

According to Nielsen Online, Americans spend almost 23 percent of their online time on social networking sites and less than 9 percent of their online time on email now. But where do you start?

● **Develop a social media plan.** The advent of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and many others have created an online world that may seem overwhelming. Take it one step at a time to create a social media plan that's right for your business. Decide how much time you want to designate to your online presence. Make sure that your company's mission, vision and points of differentiation are all represented consistently.

● **Create a Facebook page.** There are more than 500 million active Facebook users, with 150 million of those accessing Facebook through mobile devices! Create a Facebook page for your location; keep your friends and customers informed of new products, services and specials. More and more local businesses are using Facebook as a way to engage in regular dialogue with customers, who often share their enthusiasm for your business with their friends when they "like" your page.

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● **YouTube Yourself!** Are you proud of your facility, your fleet and other products and services? Show it off on YouTube! A digital video camera and a well-scripted, 60-second video can communicate a lot about your business and your culture.

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3 Ways to Retain Existing Business

Bane & Company, a Boston-based strategic consulting firm, says it's five times more profitable to spend advertising dollars retaining current customers than acquiring new ones.

● **Thank your customers.** Make your appreciation known - too many times we take our repeat customers for granted. Let them know how much you appreciate their business. Send them a card on a special occasion or, for no reason at all, to say thanks. Offer them a small token of your gratitude with a branded calendar, magnet, pen or local sports team schedule. Make sure to include special "bounce-back" offers to existing customers.

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During the slow periods of the day, call up your past loyal customers, thank them for their business and request that they keep your company in mind for future needs. Ask them if they have any occasions coming up where they might need a rental. Even if the call doesn't result in a reservation, it will keep you top of mind with your customers.

● **Get your customers' e-mail addresses.** It's surprising today how many firms don't try to capture their customers' e-mail addresses. After receiving the customer's permission, put him or her on a special e-mail list for your best customers. Create a simple e-mail template with your logo, and always include an offer, redemption instructions and a "call to action" (what do you want them to do?).

There are several low-cost e-mail marketing services that will make your e-mails look professional and allow you to track who opens them. Most e-mail readers only scan the message, so get to the point quickly. Be sure all of your e-mails contain an easy way for the customer to "opt out."

● **Know how to be good when things go bad.** We all know that issues will arise such as mechanical problems and service delivery failures.

Anyone can operate well when things are smooth, but what about when things get tough? Customer loyalty is built when a customer sees you address a problem head on and resolve it. Make sure all of your employees are trained and empowered to effectively resolve problems as well.

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Even if the issue is resolved to the customer's satisfaction, you can follow up with a "We're sorry" postcard that includes an offer for a complimentary car wash or a free day.

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3 Ideas for Generating Referral Business

The most important way to get referrals is the simplest: Just ask! Let people know that you welcome referral business and that the greatest compliment you could ever receive is their trust in referring business to you.

● **Develop a circle of 50 friends.** These are people who like you and will help you succeed. Create a simple list or spreadsheet and record all of the information you can get on this group, such as birthdays, anniversaries, children's names and ages, etc. Send them something every other month. Call them quarterly and visit them personally at least once per year. These items don't have to be extravagant, just small tokens of your appreciation. People who feel connected to you and your business can be your best advocates.

● **Engage your employees and keep them satisfied.** Your employees don't live in a vacuum. They have friends, outside activities and multiple opportunities to speak positively about your business and make recommendations.

Customers and the company benefit when employees actively 'live the brand.' When employees are engaged and satisfied, their organizations enjoy the benefits of word-of-mouth marketing, greater profitability and financial results and a more differentiated brand.

Help employees share their enthusiasm by giving each of them business cards with an employee referral discount offer on the back, which they can give to people they know.

● **Get rated on a referral network.** Third-party referral networks, like Angie's List, are national in scope but local in nature. Although there is a cost (usually paid by the consumer) associated with joining some of these networks, it can be worthwhile as they use the power of reviews and testimonials to rank and rate businesses. Encourage your satisfied customers to rate your business on these listings.

It doesn't take a lot of money to market your business, build customer loyalty and attract new customers. Implementing even a few of these low-cost or no-cost ideas right now can get your business growing!

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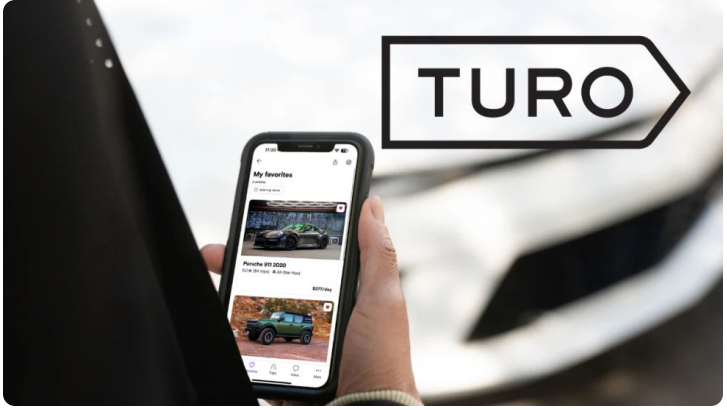
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The International Car Rental Show seeks session proposals on the business, operational, and technology issues facing car rental operators. Submissions are due Jan. 15.

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A test of rental searches under the old PBI and new DJT airport codes returned largely different sets of brands and vehicles, highlighting a potential distribution problem for rental operators.

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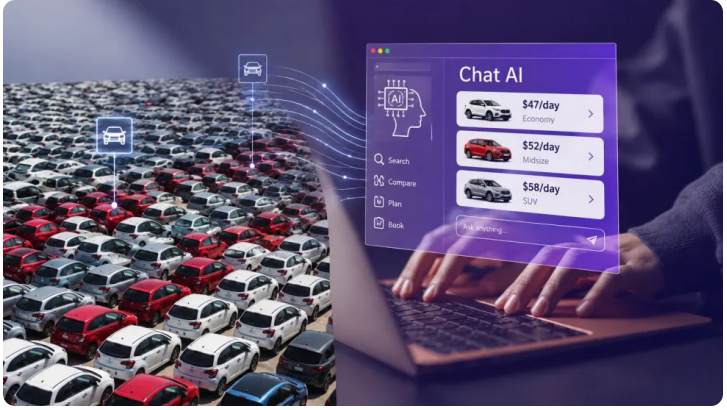
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U-Save Continues Dominican Republic Expansion with Launch in Punta Cana

The new franchise location builds on U-Save's existing Santo Domingo operation and will begin taking reservations for October 2026.

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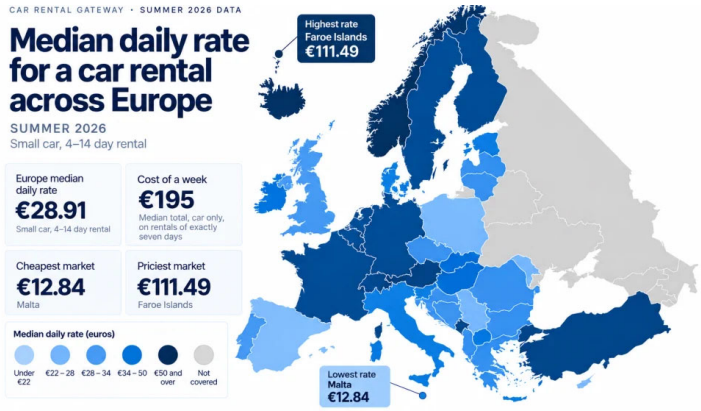


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Is It Time to Rethink Rental Categories?

As traditional economy and compact cars disappear from the market, longtime rental operator Mike DeLorenzo asks whether the industry's familiar vehicle categories still make sense — and what operators need to rethink along with them.

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Who Owns the Rate? AI Is Creating a New Distribution Problem for Car Rental

Generative Engine Optimization asks whether AI can find a rental company, but operators also need to know whether the agent inspected enough of the market, compared equivalent offers, and presented a rate the traveler can actually book. (Part 1 of 2)

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