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## Narrowing company focus can broaden appeal, sales

By Jeffrey Steele  
Special to the Tribune

Anyone who has ever run a small business knows all about challenges. At the start, and often later as well, there's the hurdle of building a customer base, the issue of finding qualified staff and, above all, the continual quest for cash flow.

But small businesses also boast advantages their much larger rivals don't enjoy. Because they are local and often highly specialized, smaller firms can avail themselves of niche markets and beat bigger players to customers in those segments. And because they don't have to promote nationally or regionally, promotion budgets can stretch further, freeing vital resources for other growth opportunities.

But the biggest advantage small brands possess may be the chance to promote to a narrower window of customers by positioning themselves as experts, said Kate Koziol, president of Chicago's K Squared Marketing and Public Relations.

"You can be an expert on animals or South American bird watching or even the Chilean woodpecker," Koziol said. "The more narrow your scope, the more valuable your expertise to your clients. ... If you narrow down to a focused market, you can concentrate on advertising to that market, doing public speaking to that market, pursuing trade or business press opportunities in that market.

"You're able to hone your fo-

cus, and deliver a more impactful message. If you try being all things to all people, you wind up being nothing to no one," she said.

Koziol and staff put that philosophy to good use, focusing on serving Chicago-area entrepreneurial companies.

"You need to narrow your scope," she said. "We serve a narrow and finite universe."

### More intimate relationships

K Squared client Alice Lerman is prospering with a narrow market scope and a status as an expert in her field. Lerman is president of Barker & Meowsky, a 10-year-old Lincoln Park store offering products "for both pets and their people," she said. Products range from collars to dog beds, all functionally and aesthetically of higher quality than those sold at mass-market stores, she said.

Lerman became an expert on her product line by listening to both customers and vendors, she said. That expertise enables her, for instance, to provide the right rubber toy to a customer with a dog that's an "aggressive chewer," she said.

"The difference between a big-box store and a smaller store like mine is being able to work with customers on a more intimate basis and determining what their needs are," she said.

"I'm able to work on a one-on-one basis with customers, and we all enjoy and learn from that interaction. And our vendors are people who share that same passion and have a desire to bring those better products to

the marketplace, and couldn't produce the quantity of products necessary to serve a larger store."

Jennifer Bertoglio, president and chief executive of Chicago's LawyerLink LLC, a 2-year-old contract legal staffing firm, also narrowed her company's focus and in so doing became an expert in electronic discovery, the process in which attorneys provide facts and documents to each other before a trial. That transition took place when she saw the chance to serve law firm and law department clients whose lawyers were increasingly swamped by the task of sifting through gigabytes of data to review or prepare their cases.

"When we first opened our doors, we were the traditional legal staffing firm, but we saw clients being burdened by the critical activities surrounding the document-review process," said Bertoglio, herself a lawyer. "Now we've become the experts in e-discovery, providing a project-management model for corporate law departments and law firms. ... We take care of the nitty-gritty, laborious details, saving companies thousands of dollars by eliminating overhead and management burdens associated with managing data, technology, people and productivity."

To properly narrow their focus, small-business owners need to first determine whom it is they want to reach, Koziol said. They must look at the product or service they sell and determine what kinds of people



Photo for the Chicago Tribune by Joel Wintermantle  
Marketing expert Kate Koziol (left) helped Alice Lerman narrow the focus of her Lincoln Park pet boutique, Barker & Meowsky.

are likely to be buyers.

"If you don't have a market research firm you can count on, start your own market research," she said. "If you have a high-end designer dog collar you're selling, ask, 'Who's likely to buy it? Are corporations, soccer moms, empty nesters-likely to buy?'"

"And then find out where do these people live and work, what

do they read and where do they shop. That will help you be at the right places at the right time. That will give you an opportunity to intersect with those potential customers."

Another key is listening closely to your first customers and suppliers, as well as other business owners, Lerman said.

"I always assume going into a situation that I should do nothing

'If you try being all things to all people, you wind up being nothing to no one.'

—Kate Koziol, president, K Squared Marketing and Public Relations

but learn," she said. "There are many small-business groups in the city that offer you a sounding board and can offer innovative ideas and ways to solve problems. A smaller business can integrate those right away; a bigger business can't."

### Technology pays off

While staying narrowly focused on what you do best, there are ways to appear bigger than you are, Bertoglio added.

"Use technology to play big," she said. "Technology has helped our business succeed. The only way we could do what we're doing is by using technology to service a larger clientele. ... So even though we're located here, we can service clients nationwide. Technology has allowed us to focus on accuracy, speed and lower bottom-line costs."

For many small businesses, narrowing market focus brings sales, profits and increasing success, and with those attainments the natural inclination to grow larger.

But that doesn't mean you have to lose your focus.

"As you grow, you can expand without completely reinventing yourself," Koziol said.

"We work with all sorts of entrepreneurial companies in all kinds of industries, but we can focus by company size and by whether they're public or privately held. It allows us to stretch, without having to reinvent ourselves or step into a whole new arena."