

More Brains Than Budget? Steal These \$0 Marketing Strategies.

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Ten years ago, **Chris Dingman** launched his company on the flimsiest of grounds. It's called **The Dingman Group**, and it relocates professional athletes -- so, say, if a guy is traded from the Miami Heat to the Cleveland Cavaliers, The Dingman Group would arrange to sell the house in Miami, pack it up, move the stuff and find a new home in Cleveland. It's a clever, one-of-a-kind service, but there was a hitch: The "Group" was just Dingman, and he had no experience in real estate or professional sports. Also, he was damn near broke -- and it took him almost a year and a half to find his first client. "It was gnarly," he says. "No matter how much you're struggling as an entrepreneur, you have to put a face on."

His fortunes are considerably different now. When he spoke to *Entrepreneur* one day in early April, The Dingman Group -- now a five-person outfit in Newport Beach, Calif.-- was in the middle of relocating 115 athletes, coaches, personnel and entertainers, plus opening offices in Denver and London. He has much to be proud of, but here's one of his biggest sources of pride: "When it comes to PR and **advertising**, we've never paid for anything, ever," he says. "I dig my heels into that. I really enjoy being able to tell people that."

So, yes, Dingman is one of *those* people. When one entrepreneur says, "We did it with no marketing dollars," 50 other entrepreneurs simultaneously gnash their teeth. It seems unfair. Also, it seems impossible. Really? Nothing? What -- do clients just show up at the door waving money?

Of course not. Here's what's happening: These companies are **marketing**, but they're doing it in a far more personal way.

"When you say 'no **marketing**,' you're talking about **advertising**, broadcasting, taking a traditional **marketing** approach," says Ann Handley, chief content officer of **MarketingProfs**. "But the best marketing is more about brains than it is about budget. Really think through who you're trying to attract, what value you can offer them and how you can put your product or service in the context of their life."

You don't need to hire someone to do that. The job is yours.

Earlier this year, an email arrived in Handley's inbox. It was a contest announcement from Baking Steel, a cookware company she likes: Tell them what sandwich you'd make on their new mini griddle and you might win one. So she entered (sandwich: fried eggs, arugula, avocado, bacon). A few days later, the company's **CEO** emailed Handley to say she'd won, and then he wrote a blog post about her culinary vision. "It was thrilling for me to win, but it was more thrilling to talk to *the guy*—the brain trust for this product I'd been using for years," she says.

Handley says there's an instructive lesson here: **Founders** and **CEOs** often forget what a powerful presence they are. Nobody wants to meet a publicist—they want to meet a visionary. "There's always this assumption that marketing is relegated to a lower level, that it's never the job of the **CEO**. But why not?" she says. "That's the role that you are: You're the face of the company."

Lifelong oilman Paul Chittenden knows that well. In 2013, he founded Bad Ass Work Gear, which makes durable vinyl bags and heavy-duty gloves for seriously dirty work, including oil-rig repairs and offshore drilling (as well as firefighting and environmental cleanup jobs). Rather than build a marketing team, Chittenden relied heavily on Facebook and leveraged personal relationships he already had in the industry—to make sure that, say, his bags became desirable gift items for any drill ship preparing to launch. Each completed project (ship, rig, etc.) earned him hundreds of new customers. And he slipped vinyl Bad Ass Work Gear stickers into each order, because he knew the slap-happy oil culture: "The more stickers, the cooler your hard hat is," he says.

(Yes, sure, the stickers did cost money -- but we're talking pennies each, and well worth it. Soon Chittenden's buddies were texting him pictures of the stickers in drilling locations from the Gulf of Mexico to the North Dakota Bakken.)

First-time entrepreneur Lisa Murphy also suspected her personal story could help her brand's story. And so, as she developed Sosu Sauces, her line of specialty ketchup and sriracha hot sauce, she was careful to always be the face of it. When she went to her local San Francisco farmers' markets, she'd talk about her passion for food traditions from her native Shanghai, how her travels through Southeast Asia helped her come up with her sauces' flavors and the sourcing of quality ingredients from local growers. "A compelling story helps build a brand," she says. When she took that tale to Kickstarter, she raised \$104,146.

But let's be real: Not every brand works at a farmers' market, and not every founder will have insider knowledge. In a cutthroat, competitive industry, some brands simply can't survive without an expert eye. But before you start shelling out, consider the advantages of having limited resources: It can make you more creative and resourceful -- two things every startup needs. What opportunities are you overlooking?

Sharelle Klaus found hers out of necessity. When she launched her sparkling-beverage

company, Dry Soda, in 2005, she took out a \$15,000 home equity line of credit and set aside \$3,000 for brand identity, a meager fee to launch a brand. But she found a former colleague's spouse who'd just opened a branding agency and was seeking its first clients. "We had to be scrappy," Klaus says.

The agency, Turnstyle, took a chance on Dry becoming a loyal, long-term client and swung for the fences -- creating award-winning consumer packaging that helped both client and agency. In the decade since, Klaus has paid the agency hundreds of thousands of dollars.

That was, finally, marketing money she was happy to spend.

So how did dingman do it, turning his dream of relocating athletes into an actual business? "I said, Who are the people I need to build relationships with?" he says. "Players, team personnel, advisers, business managers -- if I could choose one of those, which do I have the closest connection to? How do I get in there?" He had a couple loose connections to athletes and started reaching out -- introducing himself and inviting them to call back if they ever needed his help. "I was so nervous to make cold calls. Those phone calls were miserable for me."

After a year and a half, though, one finally paid off: In 2006, tight end Eric Johnson was traded from the San Francisco 49ers to the New Orleans Saints, and the player's then wife -- an old college friend of Dingman's -- remembered their conversation. Dingman sprung into action. One client led to two. Two to three. A few years later, he'd persuaded players to connect him with other players, their advisers and their teams, and that's when business really took off.

Now, here's the critical moment -- the one in which a company transforms, and founders must decide what roles they still want to play. There's no shame in easing your burden, Handley says: Hire staff to help connect with new clients, and maybe even a **branding** agency to refine your message. But the smart leader never withdraws from marketing -- never stops penning blog posts, never stops making that first phone call -- no matter how big the company gets. "Why bother?" she says. "Because you value that interaction with the people who are ultimately buying from you, and because you want to know your product better than anyone else."

As his business grew, Dingman eagerly took on the role of publicist, too. **Twitter** was still new, and he saw it as a great way to reach people in the media. One time, he sent a direct message to Darren Rovell, who was then a reporter for **CNBC**. It was a long shot, sure, but wouldn't you know it: A full year later, Rovell replied. "Call my cell," he wrote. Not long after, Dingman was on television talking up his business. Athletes may not have watched, but he was pretty sure a lot of team front-office employees would.

"You have to get in the mind of your consumer and figure out, What's the avenue they use to go about finding you?" Dingman says. "What's the avenue they use to validate the credentials of someone they might do business with? Once you determine that, you do what you need to do to stay on their radar in a professional, legitimate manner. I think everyone is capable of that. It's all about positioning. It's all about how you sell it."

No marketing budget required.

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