

## Sporthorse Marketing 101

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### So, you want to sell a horse...

If you have a sporthorse to sell, today, there are more options than ever before. This article outlines a simple four step process to help you choose which avenue will work best for you and formulate a sales plan.

First, you need to decide how much you want to spend on the sale of your horse. Some people will be thinking, "But I want to **sell** my horse, why should I spend money? People should be paying **me** for that horse, not the other way around!" Of course, selling your horse is the ultimate goal, the old adage "you have to spend money to make money" often applies to the business of selling horses.

### 1. Determine your marketing budget...

How much should you spend to market your horse? The answer to that question will depend largely on three factors:

- ◆Your horse's value
- ◆Your finances
- ◆How much you want to sell your horse.

When considering your horse's value, it is a good idea to come up with a range that you feel would be an acceptable offer. This will let you consider your bottom line price up front, and use that lowest acceptable price to calculate your advertising budget. Don't under-value your horse, but also realize that a ridiculously over-priced horse will be a turn off to many potential buyers, particularly if the potential buyer understands the market and knows what prices are competitive. Often, if buyers feel your asking price is unrealistic, he or she won't take the next step and the transaction dies on the vine in the initial stages.

### 2. Finding your market...

Next, evaluate the marketing options available to you. Compare each option's advertising cost, target audience, circulation and deadlines. This may sound excessive, but by taking a professional approach and planning your marketing campaign you will be encouraged to make the best possible choice up front, rather than wondering several months later why no one has bought your horse. Your objective at this phase is to evaluate your options and decide which combination of marketing approaches will give you the biggest bang for your buck. The goal is to reach the largest number of people in your market for the lowest cost.

Start this part of the process by asking where you would look to find a horse like the one you are trying to sell.

The horse market is divided into four distinct categories.

- ◆ **Local market.** The local market includes newspapers, local all-breed publications, your area's riding club newsletters and personal or word of mouth marketing: calling people you know, posting flyers at local barns, tack stores and horse shows.
- ◆ **Regional market.** This includes the same options as mentioned for a local area, as well as regional publications such as area or regional newsletters of the United States Equestrian Association, United States Dressage Federation and United States Combined Training Association. One successful tactic is to ask tack stores which regional newsletters they carry to find out what is available in your region. Some areas also have regional all-breed sales papers. Another option is regional divisions of national organizations, for example, the US Dressage Federation web site lists Group Member Organizations, which are the local USDF chapters. (See <http://www.usdf.org/>, click on "About USDF", then select Regions/GMO and locate your region).
- ◆ **National market.** This is where your advertising options become wide open. There are many publications with a national reach whose targeted audience is the sport-horse market. All of the national horse sport organizations have publications that are sent to members.  
  
Don't overlook all-advertising publications. But consider that many with a national circulation are all-breeds focused, and don't necessarily reach sporthorse buyers. Some will give you a breakdown of readership by discipline.
- ◆ **International market.** Traditionally this market is restricted to horses with the ability to reach international levels of competition, and if this is the case, you will be marketing to a select few individuals. Word of mouth is the way many horses in this category are found and bought. It might be possible to use a direct mail announcement to riders of that caliber if you can compile a list of names and addresses. But, if you choose this option, the horse needs to have obvious international ability, preferably confirmed by highly credentialed trainers and judges.

The other international market that occasionally pops up is for breeding stock. In this case, you are still marketing your horse to a select few potential buyers, but the horse doesn't need to be capable of international competition. The horse should, however, be an excellent example of the breed.

### **Using the Web as a Marketing Tool...**

One of the easiest ways to reach all markets, including an international one is via the web. The internet crosses over the boundaries of target markets listed above and can be an invaluable marketing tool. There are a large number of sport-horse related sites on the World Wide Web, many of which offer marketing opportunities. The options range from a Web classified ad for a single horse to an entire site devoted to your horses for sale or your breeding operation. Cost will vary, depending upon what your needs and what type of ads you want. Some of the options are text only ads, photo ads, or video ads.

The Internet reaches people around the world, and more and more horse owners are using the web as an information source every day.

### **3. Formulate Your Marketing Plan...**

Once you have determined your market, gather enough information about the options to decide which choices are most appropriate for you and your horse. Formulate your 'Ideal Plan', and then weigh that ideal against your available 'spend'.

To do this, you need to begin by contacting the publications you feel have the most marketing potential for your horse and request information about classified or display ads. If you are interested in web ads, the prices are listed on the actual site. You want to gather information on circulation costs, terms of payment and deadlines. Based on this information, you can decide whether classified advertising or a display ad is a better fit for your budget. You should also be able to determine whether you need to stay local or go to regional or national publications with your advertising dollar. Another decision you need to make is whether you should put all of your financial resources into one advertising medium or spread your budget over several marketing options. The best bet is generally a combination.

### **4. Create Your Ad...**

The next step is composing your ad. The first rule of advertising is **honesty**. You don't have to name every bad thing your horse has ever done in his lifetime, but what you do say should be true.

The second rule of advertising is you should always use correct terminology and spelling. Incorrect usage in an ad gives a poor impression of your knowledge and experience. Common mistakes can dismiss you in the minds of serious buyers. For example, "conformation" spelled "confirmation" and confusion of "by" and "out of" when referring to a horse's sire and dam.

Writing the actual ad requires a combination of clear communication skills and good marketing sense. Include all the basic information-age, breed, height, color, sex. Mention discipline and potential, and highlight exceptional traits, accomplishments or bloodlines. The more specific your comments about the horse, the better. For example, telling a potential buyer that a horse is "truly special" doesn't communicate any specific traits, leaving the reader to guess at your intent or assume this is just your opinion, but not actual fact. Also, since most of the market tends to be novice riders, temperament is an excellent selling point, assuming you have reason for that comment! Also remember to include important limitations the horse might have that would restrict his usage.

Including price is optional, but some people just won't call or email about a horse if there is no price listed. If your advertising budget will support multiple ads, you can try listing the horse with and without price and see which is the most effective for you. Finally, at the end of the ad, include your contact information (phone number and / or e-mail address), and you are ready to submit your ad.

If your horse's value justifies the additional expense, a regular display ad with photos will have much more impact than a text-only classified ad. If you are going to make that investment in the additional ad cost (sometimes it isn't that much, of a difference, particularly for web ads), the photos need to be good ones. The horse should be clean, the photo should be clear and the horse should be posed in such a way that lets the potential buyer get a good look at his conformation or ability. If you are selling a sporthorse athlete, the photo should make that obvious. The traditional pose for a sporthorse is a side view with the neck arched and allowing the head & neck to reach slightly forward, rather than up.

Any photos under saddle should be a good representation of the target discipline. Ideally, if the horse is moving, his motion should be caught just as his foreleg is extended all the way forward for the best effect. A photo of a horse's motion caught in mid-stride can make the horse to look out of balance and could mislead a potential buyer into thinking the horse is inferior. A photo taken of a horse jumping should ideally show the horse in the air, mid-jump, legs as neatly tucked as possible. Another point of care should be the rider's expression. A grimace on the rider's face implies this horse is NOT a joy to ride. Resistance showing in the horse's expression can also give a potential buyer the idea that the horse would be hard to handle.

You can take the photos yourself, but if you don't have the experience, hire a professional. Make sure the photographer knows that you plan to use the photos in advertising, and find out the cost and credit requirements. If you use a professional photographer, ask to see samples of the photographer's work. Some photos are very pretty and artistic but don't show the kind of information (such as conformation) that a buyer wants to see. If a photographer's book is full of photos of Western Pleasure horses, this doesn't mean you can't use this photographer, but you may want to show him some sample photos of the type you are looking for and make sure that the photographer is comfortable with taking the type of photos that you want.

A print display ad also offers you more options in text size and arrangement, letting you customize your visual impact in the ad. In a display add, less is generally more. Focus on some key words and display them prominently in order to grab a reader's attention. Larger type will get more attention. However, you plan on placing a costly, large sized ad, you would be better off hiring a professional graphic artist to prepare your ad. Web display or photo ads offer less flexibility but also tend to be much less expensive than a national publication, so keep this in mind.

The secret to marketing your sporthorse is to create an honest, eye-catching ad and get it in front of the right people who are interested in purchasing sporthorses.

### **What is the next step?**

Now that you have placed your ad, what is next? There are several key factors in selling a horse beyond getting the right ad in front of the buyer... I'll call these

factors “Seller Etiquette”. Many of the points I’m going to make sound like common sense, and if you believe you consistently follow all the “Dos” and avoid all the “Don’ts” listed here, then you are ahead of the game!

The message I'm trying to relay here is that in general horse buyers tend to scrutinize their purchases rather than purchase on impulse because it is an expensive purchase and often the horse becomes like a member of the family. Also, it is much easier to buy than sell! With these comments in mind, please realize that **unless** your horse is just what the buyer has been looking for and is the deal of the century, if the seller makes the process of horse hunting too difficult, the prospective buyer may find the temptation to move on to the next add positively irresistible!

## **Dos**

- ◆ Treat a prospective seller the way you would want to be treated if you were looking for a new horse.
- ◆ Return phone and email inquiries promptly.
- ◆ If you are selling regionally, nationally or internationally, be prepared with additional photos and video to mail to prospective buyers.
- ◆ Answer all questions asked, if you don't know an answer, say you don't know, rather than avoid the question. (Avoiding questions or ignoring questions can lead potential buyers to believe you have something to hide.)
- ◆ If you are emailing photos, resize them so that the download time is not excessive for a potential buyer with a dial-up connection.
- ◆ If you are sending out a video, be sure it has footage needed to effectively evaluate a horse
- ◆ Give direct, clear answers to all questions. Even if you think the question is silly or you have already answered it, do so again with the best, clearest answer you can muster!

## **Video Hints:**

- ◆ Include conformation shots of the horse standing still (sides, front, & back) with the horse standing squarely so that the viewer can evaluate his conformation effectively. If the horse is standing crooked or resting a leg, it can give a viewer an incorrect impression of a horse's conformation and in some cases, the horse's soundness.
- ◆ Show the horse's movement, all gaits, from the front and side so that the gaits can be evaluated effectively
- ◆ If the horse is being sold as a jumper, the horse should be shown over fences, either free jumped or with a rider (or both).
- ◆ If the horse is old enough to be ridden, include some footage of the horse at liberty as well as under saddle.
- ◆ If the horse is being sold as breeding stock, examples of its offspring are a definite plus to the potential buyer.
- ◆ If you are using video with the audio on, speak clearly if you intend the potential

buyer to follow your conversation. If the recorded conversation is not pertinent, copy the tape without sound or dub music over the tape. The bottom line is that unintelligible conversation can be a distraction and you want the buyer's attention on your horse, not on your private conversation.

- ◆ Show enough footage to allow evaluation of the horse but not so much to cause the potential buyer to fast forward through the tape (they might pass something you really wanted them to see).

- ◆ If you include parts of a horse show, show only enough to give the idea of what the horse is capable of doing. (There is no value in including multiple classes at the same level, such as multiple training level dressage tests or multiple jumping classes from the same show and at the same fence height, unless part is from a cross country course and part is from a stadium course.)

- ◆ Be polite and courteous at all times. Rudeness and aggression will lose a sale fast! There are just too many horses out there with similar qualities to pressure a potential buyer and you may risk losing a sale.

### **Don'ts**

- ◆ Don't place ads on the web with a contact email address and then fail to check your email on a regular basis. Some buyers email and move on to the next prospect, leaving it up to the seller to remind them they inquired about a horse on the web.

- ◆ Don't ignore questions asked or give vague answers.

- ◆ Don't give a seller any 'attitude' unless you intend to lose the sale. If you want out of a sale, the better option is to tell the seller the truth, you don't feel the horse is right for that person or you don't want the horse to be sold out of state or whatever your reason might be. Remember, you have a reputation to maintain.

- ◆ Don't misrepresent your horse or the horse's sire and dam.

- ◆ Don't play one buyer against the other. For example, don't offer a horse to a potential seller in order to pressure another seller into making an offer or coming through with a deposit.

- ◆ Don't apologize for bad photos. If your photos are bad, they should not be used to attempt to sell that horse!

### **Web site dos & don'ts**

- ◆ If you don't have a web page, you should think about getting one. It is a wonderful marketing tool and available 24/7 to potential buyers!

- ◆ Keep your web site up to date and accurate.

- ◆ If your web site has photos of your young stock, keep the photos current. Showing photos of a two year old stallion when you are selling a 5 year old can be misleading.

- ◆ If you decide to take a horse off the market, remove that horse from your sale page.

- ◆ Design your web site so that it is easy to navigate and easy to use.

- ◆ If your web site loads too slowly, some prospective buyers will move on to

another web site. If this is the case for your web site, consider redesigning your page to speed up the load time.