myweeklymarketing.

176. From Feast or Famine to Consistent Clients

Janice Hostager: [00:00:00] Hey, friend. Welcome back to My Weekly Marketing. I'm Janice Hostager. If you run a service business, you're a coach or consultant, designer, accountant, whatever, you have felt this.

One month you're slammed with work, and the next month, crickets. Feast or famine. This is something that I experienced a lot in my early entrepreneurial life when I had a design agency. For months, I had to hire a team of contract employees just to get jobs done, and then just as quickly, nothing.

So I couldn't reliably plan on income for the year or even for any particular month. And of course, we need to be able to do that when we run a business. So of course, steady income is important. But there's another thing to think about. Every month that you ride that swing, you're making decisions out of fear instead of strategy.

So out of desperation or fear, you end up taking the client who's just a wrong fit, or you end up discounting your service just to fill a gap. The real cost is not just the money, it's the choices that those famine days force on you that drive your business in the wrong direction. So today I'm giving you three things that you can do to overcome that cycle, and stick with me to the end because the last one is one of the fastest way to fix it. Okay, quick reality check first. Is the feast or famine cycle normal? The short answer, kind of, and that's exactly why it's so hard to deal with.

Income swings are common for any service-based business, really common.

Service projects have a start and stop, so some up and down is inevitable in any business and something to plan for. Almost every service business owner I've ever worked with has ridden this wave. So you're not bad at this. But because something is common doesn't mean that it has to happen or that it's permanent.

That swing has some causes, and once you see the causes, you can plan for them and [00:02:00] alleviate them. So there are three reasons that these up and down financial swings exist, and that's what I'm gonna talk about today. Okay. Reason number one, your marketing stops when you get busy. Makes total sense, right?

You're slammed. You've got revenue coming in. There aren't enough hours in the day. So marketing is the first thing off the calendar. After all, who has time for that? But here's the thing, when you stop marketing, you won't feel the effects right away. Marketing is a longer game, so you feel it two to four months later, right as your current projects wrap up.

So by the time you start promoting again, you're already in the famine stage, and you resort to doing what I talked about earlier: taking any client that comes along or discounting your rates. That wave that you thought was just how business goes is really a stop-start habit disguised as famine. This would always happen to me right before the holidays.

When I had my design agency, people would often want something done by the end of the year or for their holiday promotions. So that lull really hit me hard in January. But here's the fix. You can't control what's outside your business, but you can create a rhythm. Small, regular actions on a schedule, so there's no cliff waiting when the project's in.

For me, that meant getting ready for that inevitable lull in business by getting promotions together before I got busy in the late fall that would run at the end of the year or early in the following year. In my business, it meant promoting a comprehensive marketing plan that aligned with items that my clients might want designed: landing pages, promotional emails, etc.

Often, my clients were too busy to even think about what they should be doing in January, so that provided a reminder for them. It also gave them more time to plan, which reduced their rush deadlines that they would give me. Not only did it help me ride the quiet time, but it also helped my clients plan so they could see what was coming earlier.

So [00:04:00] it spread out the projects to a more manageable schedule. You might also be in a position to guide your clients on what they need to do next or to automate follow-ups. For example, if you have a hair salon, an automation that goes out six weeks after their last cut would be a no-brainer. Or if you're a photographer, maybe an email that gets sent every six months to families with small children would be a good thing to do so that you can photograph their kids growing up.

Might not be something they think of on their own, But with a reminder, they'd be more likely to book. So you don't really need to hustle harder, you just need to plan ahead and get into a rhythm that can actually keep running in the background.

When things get slow, people often panic and start chasing individuals that they have maybe worked with or that have shown some interest in the past, like cold outreach. You know those emails that say, "Hey, I'm just checking in"? And honestly, it reads as desperation because it kind of is. You're manually generating leads one at a time, and that's exhausting and frustrating and really not a great use of your time.

The better move is to build marketing that brings people to you on repeat. My Trail to the Sale framework is how you do that without doing everything at once. Here's what that looks like. The Trail to the Sale has eight stages altogether: awareness, consider, compare, evaluate, sell, supersize, serve, and send.

That's the journey most people take to buy, buy again, and refer. But to generate quick business, you really need to focus on just the first two, the awareness and consider stages.

Awareness is a stage where people initially find out about you. That could be through anything from attending a networking event to running an ad to SEO and producing content to social media.

It could be even basic things like a promotional flyer posted at the gym or a promotional magnet on your car. The trick here is to keep these things manageable and humming along in the background all year [00:06:00] round, not just when your sales pipeline dries up. That means making them part of your weekly and monthly rhythm.

It's committing to s-posting on social media whatever amount you can do consistently. It also means maybe adding a networking event to your calendar every month so you can t-attend it consistently enough to develop relationships with those people that would hire you.

It can also mean starting to grow an email list because that's an asset that turns a stranger who found you into a lead that you actually own. Somebody lands on your site, trades their email for a helpful freebie, and now they're on your list instead of gone forever. That email is in the consider stage, and it's a quiet engine that keeps leads coming in while you're heads down on client work.

We'll come back to what to do with that email list in just a minute because it's a fix for reason number three. For now, just know the list is a thing that can keep your pipeline full in the background.

Start building it now, not the month you get slow. Okay, reason number two for the feast or famine, you're leaning too hard on referrals. I can't tell you how many people I've talked to say they rely on word of mouth for business. Referrals are lovely. They're warm leads, they're pre-sold, all really good stuff, and I get it.

They're awesome. We all love referrals. But if your whole pipeline is referrals, you've handed control of your income to other people. You don't get to decide when those conversations happen or the message that's conveyed. They do. Referrals are really good. In fact, they're one of the most powerful forms of marketing out there. They're actually the eighth step on my trail to the sale. But relying only on referrals is kind of a problem. You're waiting on other people's timing. Last month's referral doesn't pay this month's bill. You're rebuilding your income from scratch every month then.

That's what makes the famine month feel so scary. So the fix for that, besides creating a marketing rhythm that I talked about [00:08:00] earlier, is adding stability under your income that shows up whether or not someone sends you a referral this month. That's recurring revenue. For service businesses, the easiest ones are monthly retainers with a clear scope.

If you're a designer, maybe it's a twelve-month update package for a website. Or if you do photography or videography, prepaid session packages for ongoing work are a great solution to that. Maybe a maintenance or care plan would work best for you. Or you could also toss in a discount for paying up front.

You're not reinventing your business here. Converting even two or three existing clients into recurring relationships, and you've suddenly got baseline income that doesn't require getting new clients every month. I'm not saying not to seek or ask for referrals. Definitely keep them running in the background as one source of marketing.

Then your referrals become bonuses, not the whole plan. That's actually one of the reasons why I moved to accepting fractional CMO clients from just creating marketing plans. I found that many clients would get into their plan and be really well-intentioned about completing it, but life gets busy and things on the list just don't get done, or they didn't know how to do a couple of things, or they didn't know who to outsource.

So by creating a retainer package for clients, I'm able to keep up with their marketing, keeping it humming along as they focus on their business in a way that fits their budget. And for me, that gives me consistent income. Win-win.

Okay, Reason number three for feast and famine, you give up on the follow-up too soon because you're afraid of being annoying. Hey, when somebody reaches out, you probably follow up quickly. So you might reply, maybe hop on a Zoom call or give them a quote, and maybe you nudge them once or twice, but when you don't hear back, you stop.

Why? Because a third email or a fourth, it starts to feel like you're bugging them, right? And nobody wants to be that person. And truthfully, the just checking in email is kind of annoying.

But [00:10:00] a follow-up that hands them something useful isn't pestering. That's helpful. So one thing I talk about in my Modern Marketing Mastery course is to give every touch something to hold onto to look through. It could be a simple, nicely designed, and branded PDF that you can send to every inquiry that sends you an email.

It'll walk them through your services and how you work and how you're unique so that when someone reaches out, you're not scrambling. You're sending real compelling information along with a bid that they probably are looking for. That way, they have something more than just an email or a call to refer back to.

And as a bonus, this is something that AI can easily design for you in Canva or another tool. So then you can have it ready when the inquiries come in. Then ask if you can add them to your email list. Here's where that list I mentioned earlier earns its keep. Because once they're on it, they're just getting your emails on a regular schedule just like everybody else. The follow-up happens naturally. The person who wasn't ready in March is still hearing from you in June because it's in a system now, and it's not a task you have to remember.

You just show up in their email list as a reminder. But here's the part that actually makes it work. Those emails have to give a value. There's a phrase in marketing that says, "The money is in the list," and it's true, but only if you're not just sending them emails to buy, right? Nobody likes to be sold to twenty-four seven.

So give them real value. It might be a quick story about a project you just wrapped up or an FAQ that you get all the time, or maybe it's a tip that you've learned. You know a lot about the things in your business. Give them something they'd actually wanna open that would be genuinely helpful for your customer.

For you, that might be a paragraph or two once a week, and I'll be honest, there are many nights when I was in my office, like at 10:00 PM, throwing together a last-minute email newsletter, and it's hard. It's hard when you're slammed, But staying in their inbox can turn them into a client [00:12:00] six months down the line.

Just know this going in, a list is a slow build. Sometimes people sit on an email list a long time before they buy, which is exactly why you can't wait until business is slow to start it. You can't grow a list overnight. Like the saying goes, " The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago, but the second-best time is right now."

So you're not following up more, you're actually following up in a way that helps them, and it runs itself.

Okay, let's tie these together. The feast or famine cycle isn't a reflection of how well you do your business. It's a systems problem, and it traces back to three fixable habits: marketing that stops when you get busy, a pipeline built entirely on referrals, and no consistent follow-up.

But those three fixes only work when they're connected. That's actually what my whole Trail to the Sale framework is built to fix. It's eight steps that mirror how people actually buy, all connected into one pathway so nobody falls through the cracks.

And my recommendation for you is to find your biggest leak first, then fix that one. I made you something to find that leak. It's called a marketing gap audit. It takes just, like, three minutes, and it will tell you exactly which step on your trail is leaking, so you know the one habit to fix instead of guessing.

Not only that, but I let you know how to fix it. So you can go take it. It's linked in the show notes, or go to janicehostager.com/quiz. Take the quiz. Find your leak. Fix the one thing this week.

All right. Thank you so much for joining me today. If you know of somebody struggling with the feast or famine cycle, please send this episode to them.

For more information about anything I talked about today, visit myweeklymarketing.com/176. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.