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Arm your business with knowledge

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It's not a small business; it's your business. Maybe it hasn't yet reached its full potential, but it faces challenges as critical as those of any larger company. Though you may not have the same resources and support system as the big guys, you can arm yourself with information and advice. Added with your own experience and expertise that might be more than enough.

Here are several books that could improve your chances for success.

Creating Competitive Advantage: Give Customers a Reason to Choose You Over Your Competitors. Jaynie L. Smith, William G. Flanagan. Currency. 240 pages.

Unless your product is completely and utterly unique, you have competition. And even if you sell a one-of-a-kind item, it still competes with other products and services for time, attention and dollars.

What you need to do is figure out what your competitive advantage is. Then the reason customers should come to you instead of the guy down the street becomes clear. Hollywood-based Jaynie L. Smith explains this notion and provides tools for defining what makes you better than the rest. It's an excellent way to figure out how to promote your company, starting with its most potent quality. If you can't define it, maybe you need to rethink your mission.

Selling the Invisible: A Field Guide to Modern Marketing. Harry Beckwith. Warner Business Books. 272 pages.

Harry Beckwith's classic mostly looks at service businesses, the "invisible" part of the title. By examining the reasons people choose to buy one thing over another, the elusive and ephemeral qualities they seek are revealed and analyzed. Beckwith's forthcoming book, *You, Inc: The Art of Selling Yourself*, written in collaboration with his wife, Christine, is due for release next week.

Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive: Outsell, Outmanage, Outmotivate and Outnegotiate Your Competition. Harvey B. Mackay. Collins. 288 pages.

Harvey Mackay has had a series of bestsellers, but they're all, in my opinion, variations of this first one, *Swim with the Sharks*. The theme is the care and feeding of networks and relationships, which provide personal and professional support. Some of his stuff is as corny as, um, heck, but its core is genuine, honest and really useful.

The Big Book of Small Business: You Don't Have to Run Your Business by the Seat of Your Pants. Tom Gegax. Collins. 448 pages.

This is not a collection of theoretical musings from ivory tower academics who haven't worked a day in business in their lives. Instead, it's loaded with insights and strategies from the founder of the Tires Plus chain, dealing with real-world situations and solutions that most small firms face. You may not agree with everything he says, but that's all right; there are more than enough things here that are valuable and provocative to warrant the purchase.

Purple Cow: Transform Your Business By Being Remarkable. Seth Godin. Penguin Books Ltd. 160 pages.

Any of Seth Godin's books are ideal for small-business people but *Purple Cow* may be the best. Like Jaynie Smith, Godin stresses the importance of being better than the crowd, but in a slightly different way. Your customers' experience in its totality, he argues, must have a "wow" factor or your product or service will not

succeed. Excellent but boring is bad. Imperfect but fascinating is wonderful.

MBA in a Box: Practical Ideas from the Best Brains in Business. Joel Kurtzman, Glenn Rifkin and Victoria Griffith. Crown Business. 448 pages.

Here's an instant business library, with more depth than you'll find from a Google search and not a bad resource to have around the office.

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