



Getting PR to work for your business

From the point of view of business, the media's search for the new and newsworthy represents something of an opportunity; an opportunity for publicity. The art of persuading the media to devote their airtime and column inches to a business is known as public relations.

Unlike advertising, PR does not set itself explicitly to sell. PR seeks to achieve two things: to raise the profile and the understanding of a business among a community; and to create a climate of opinion or perception that is favourably disposed towards that business. Put succinctly, PR is about getting noticed, being liked and respected. It is – or can be – a remarkably effective promotional tool for smaller businesses, largely because it depends on the possession of a little imagination and media savvy rather than an extensive marketing budget.

THE MEDIA

PR is essentially a co-operative activity. It hinges on persuading editors and journalists of the advantages of allocating editorial room to a business story. In truth, most of the media is either local – defined by region – or specialist – defined by specific readerships. What's more, most of the media possess nothing like the news gathering resources of the big national papers and broadcasters. They often rely on others to bring the stories to them.

IDENTIFYING THE RELEVANT MEDIA

Before drawing up a list of media targets and contacts, it is useful to find out just how influential – or otherwise – individual titles actually are. To do this, a business should turn to a media directory such as BRAD Insight. Not only does BRAD segregate publications by industry sector and geographic region, it also gives such important information as circulation figures, profiles of the readership and copy dates.

THE STORIES

Journalists are always anxious to find people to write about and events to cover. But there is a proviso. In return for the publicity they can offer your business, journalists want a real news story: not opinions or a company speech.

YOUR OWN NEWS

So what makes a story newsworthy? Most news stories, whatever the medium, whatever the audience, will comprise one or more of three elements. They will be topical; original; and they will be diverting. That is, they will be of relevance or interest to the audience; they will tell people something they didn't already know; and they will possess a 'personality' or angle.

Most start-up businesses are in themselves of interest because they are new. But you don't have to be a new business to get in the news. A new product or new service are worth a press release, either to the general or the specialist press. Organising an event, winning awards, landmark anniversaries, or orders from a famous customer or from an unusual part of the world can work as well. The secret is to give the story the feel of hard news and a hook on which a real interest narrative can be hung.



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PRESS RELEASES

The first point of contact between a business and the media is normally a press release. A title, or a radio or television station, will use a press release as the basis for its story. The purpose of a press release is to convey as much relevant information as economically, clearly and plainly as possible, and in an order that allows the reader access to the main points almost immediately.

The introduction is essential: start off with the core of the story – new product, event, etc – and mention your company's name. Since reader interest demands that you include as much information as early as you reasonably can, the introductory paragraph must outline the whole of the story. Another useful guide to judge whether a release is earning its keep or not is to check whether it answers those five perennial journalistic questions: 'who, what, why, when and where'.

You should ideally include a quote from somebody at the business, giving them a name and saying who they are. This has two effects: firstly, it adds authority to what is being said; and secondly, it personalises the piece. The release should close with what is known as the editor's note. Essentially, this is to provide additional, background information about your business – how long it has been going, how it started – and its products or services. It is in the editor's note that you should also include contact details.

The media is nowadays driven electronically, so send your press release by email. Once it has been sent, a polite follow-up call should be made to the journalist to enquire if they wish to take the story further.

OTHER PR OPPORTUNITIES

Good PR, however, isn't just limited to the supply of stories. There are other PR tactics open to a small business.

COMMUNITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

There is little – certainly not size and not cost – to stop a business from developing a wider involvement in its locality. This can take any number of forms, depending on the nature of your business: it could be a matter of donating a computer to the local scout troop, for example, or offering work experience to pupils at a nearby school. A few pounds invested in supporting a tree-planting scheme or in encouraging employees to travel to work in an environment-friendly way can garner a far greater return in approving publicity.

EVENTS

If you are launching a new product or celebrating a milestone, it is a good tactic to invite customers, potential customers, staff and some local opinion formers along to a specially planned event.

SPONSORSHIP

Sponsorship is a major element in many large-scale PR campaigns. A smaller business, however, can adopt the same useful approach in a more modest arena. There are myriad opportunities for local sponsorship: the programme for the latest amateur drama society production, perhaps, or a trophy for the under-12s football league.

NEWSLETTERS

A business does not need to depend on getting a mention in the press; it can always set up its own publication online. Electronic newsletters are an invaluable way of treating an audience of prospective clients to an intelligent, engaging soft sell. They tend to work best for businesses that have a product or a service with a reasonably wide client base, since this provides ample scope for genuine news stories. The room afforded by a newsletter means that case histories and product reviews can sit alongside lighter, informative pieces on industry trends or market views.

We trust this business advice sheet is of help to you.