

Public Relations Basics

Craft Your Story – Pitch it Well – Build Relationships

For many businesses, establishing a public relations strategy often isn't included as part of an overall business plan. After all, making a great product and keeping up with operational business demands can be all-consuming - particularly for small-scale producers. The costs involved in hiring and managing a PR agency or even a freelance publicist can be daunting, and going it alone can be confusing. It's easier and faster to just buy a few ads to get your message out, right?

Yes, and no. There are lots of reasons why devoting time, effort and budget on PR can pay off - far more than purchased advertising - to help grow awareness of and respect for your products and your company, and ultimately help grow your business.

Getting publicity through PR offers three key benefits over simply buying ad space:

- * It's considerably cheaper -- sometimes even free.
- * It's more credible. Coverage generated via PR carries an objective, third-party endorsement. A respected journalist, author or editor has deemed the information to be relevant and of interest to his or her readers, and is telling your story for you.
- * It can deliver your message to a broader range of key targets and, by way of that third-party endorsement, can open many more doors for you with key targets than advertising.

Getting savvy about PR doesn't have to be a tremendously involved process. Here are some basic fundamentals in getting free publicity:

1. Create your story. The first and very important step is to carefully analyze your own "story." Many companies don't realize they have a compelling story to tell. Is yours a long-time family business? Do you make a unique product? Have you won awards? Do your products carry whimsical names that in themselves have a story to tell? Do you offer tours and tastings? Did you leave the suit-and-tie business world for your business venture? You get the idea. Review every facet of your business and your background to ferret out the ingredients for a good, compelling tale. Pull them together and paint a picture for the media. Writers' appetites for good stories about great artisan, handcrafted products and the people who create them are virtually insatiable. Feed them well and you'll get coverage.

2. Research your target publications. Pick up a few of the leading consumer food magazines and leaf through them to get an idea of the types of stories they run and how they weave specific products into their features and recipes. Make a list of publications you'd love to be featured in, check their mastheads (staff listings, usually toward the front of the magazine) and start creating a database of food editor and/or feature editor names and contact information. These become your targets. The same is true of local and regional newspapers, city and regional magazines, restaurant and retail trade publications, radio programs that do special food-oriented shows, etc. Your PR contact list should also include names and addresses of target chefs/restaurateurs and specialty retailers with whom you already do business or with whom you'd like to do business. When you have news to share, they should get it straight from you.

3. Press Kit & Press Release Basics. Armed with your target list, you're now ready to develop an initial PR "tool kit." This can be quite simple (or every elaborate, depending on your resources), and at the very least should include a basic press kit. The press kit can be nothing more than a good quality folder containing a press release about your company, information on the products you make, copies of any articles that have been done on your business/products in the past, your company's brochure and/or sell sheets, perhaps a map showing where you're located, a list of noteworthy shops and/or restaurants using your products, photos (if you have them), and any other materials that will help to convey the facts about your business and to paint a picture that will make an editor or writer want to find out more -- or at the very least stash the kit away in his or her file for future reference.

Press Releases - always a component of press kits - stand alone. They're the primary way to convey information about your company and the most fundamental of all PR tools. Press releases are useful and effective when done well. Among the biggest mistakes that entrepreneurs attempting to do their own press releases make is using them to try to tell the whole story. That's the journalist's job. The release should convey the facts, get a writer interested, and offer information on who to contact for more information. Under almost no circumstances should a press release be more than two pages long, double spaced.

A few do's and don'ts about press releases:

- * Follow standard press-release format. Do a quick web search on "press releases" to find examples on wire services, if you need formats to look at.
- * Include a date, particularly for timely information such as awards just won or new products released. For more general releases, a specific date isn't as necessary.
- * If you're not a proficient writer, or you don't have a good writer on staff, try to hire one. Don't make the mistake of sending out a release that may have grammatical and/or spelling errors. Sloppy releases rarely get a second look. If your budget is very tight and there's a good university nearby, seek out the communications department for senior-level students looking for practical experience.
- * Make sure the first two paragraphs answer who, what, when, where and why. You must convey up front what the story is. Don't waste the first paragraph being cute or as a set-up to the real story. Keep in mind that journalists receive hundreds of releases each week. Many don't get read beyond the first paragraph so yours needs to catch them or it will likely get tossed before the writer wades down to discover the real information you're hoping to get covered.
- * Make sure a name and contact information appear near the top of the page. It must be easy for journalists scanning the release to figure out how to contact you. Include phone number and e-mail address, if possible. And by all means, when an editor or writer tries to reach you, **CALL THEM BACK** right away.
- * Only send out press releases when you have something to say or news to share. Don't flood editors with empty releases just to keep your name in front of them. That strategy can backfire and create annoyance vs. interest.
- * Resist the urge to call editors/writers after sending out a release to see if they received it. Trust that they did. Call to follow up only if you have some additional information to share.
- * If you're planning to send samples with a release (a good idea, as tasting is believing), do so only if you've called ahead to alert the editor/writer that you're doing so and to find out when would be a good time to make the delivery. The last thing you want is for a mail room clerk to plop your precious cheese on an editor's desk who is out covering a conference for the next three days. Also, if sending samples, take the trouble to make sure that you're sending your very best.

"You only get one chance to make a first impression."

4. PR Tips & Tricks. A few final tips that can make a difference:

- * When dining at a restaurant, introduce yourself to the chef. Chefs are typically delighted to meet food makers.
- * A website is important. Increasingly, it's the first place journalists go to find out about you and your products. Always include a source guide with your phone number and address. It doesn't have to be fancy. If possible, place downloadable images for media in one area. Also include stories done on your company.
- * Decide if you're targeting a region or the whole nation. That will depend on your budget and the availability of your product. Get to know your region and especially local chefs and media outlets.
- * Join regional chapters of national food and wine organizations. These are great for networking.
- * Thank writers who include you in their articles. A simple call or a written thank-you note is best. Many can't or won't accept gifts from story sources.
- * Don't get angry or snippy with editors. If a story you thought was going to run doesn't, it may have been pulled for space and it's usually not the writer's or editor's fault. It may take a few months before it all comes together but it will.

- * Decide who should be the spokesperson for your company - a PR person, the owner, etc. Whoever it is has to be the go-to person so important queries don't get lost and so that messages conveyed are accurate and consistent.
- * Develop relationships with culinary schools. Today's students are tomorrow's chefs and they'll remember you.
- * Invest in some good photography to make available for media use. Don't splash your brand on the picture; they want to see your product, not your name. That smacks of advertising so don't cross the line. Let them tell the story for you.
- * Building PR into your business strategy is critical for cost-effective marketing, but it's even more important for when something goes wrong. In a recall situation, for instance, you may have only one shot at getting your side of the story out there quickly and you may be too overwhelmed in a problem situation to do it well yourself. In these situations, a professional PR person can do significant damage control.

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