

OWEN MORRIS BULLETIN

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PROMOTING YOUR BUSINESS WITH FREE PR !

Many people think 'PR' refers to scattering a load of press releases, or holding a boozy 'show-biz' event, or 'spin doctors' trying to make you believe something.

This image of PR is unfortunate because 'public relations' – to use its full title – is actually a legitimate, sophisticated field of skills and activity that can achieve great results for any business. What's more, PR can be an extremely low cost activity to employ as well as being extremely credible and influential.

PR is really about developing and maintaining good *relationships* between a business and the different groups of people ('stakeholders') it deals with. For a typical business, these groups include customers, employees, suppliers, agents or distributors you may use, any business or joint-venture partners, regulators, relevant professional or trade associations, local media, local community groups and even your local competitors.

Think, then communicate

A lot of PR is about gaining more publicity. However, PR also involves designing specific communications that build positive relations with each stakeholder group.

The first priority in PR is identifying the main groups of people your business deals with and keeping a watching brief on their key views and opinions on issues that relate to how you run your business. The easiest and best way to do this is to meet and talk regularly with people from each group. Ask them questions, listen to what they say, and reflect on what may be implications for your business.

Secondly, you need to check that your business has something appropriate and credible to show to or talk about with each main stakeholder group. If you are a retailer, for example, and feedback from your local community tells you that you are expected to keep a clean and tidy pavement frontage, you had better ensure you respond. If you are a manufacturer, your customers and the local media will expect you to 'support the environment', so you had better have appropriate policies concerning areas like how you dispose of your factory waste and your transport fleet.

Then comes overall corporate image – how you present your business in visible terms to your stakeholder groups. A key requirement is presenting an attractive, consistent identity. The main ‘tools’ include logo, company strapline, letterhead and other stationery, literature, website, internal and external signage, and the design and layout of your premises.

After you have looked at these three areas, then you will be better informed and have the strategic perspective to begin publicising your business and addressing the specific issues between you and your various stakeholder groups.

Benefits of PR

There are many benefits to using PR for your business, particularly publicity that uses public media (e.g. newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet):

- Third-party credibility value. When the public reads what reporters/editors have written, even if it is based on companies’ own supplied press releases, they generally attach a high level of trust and respect to what they see, which rarely happens with advertising.
- Media publicity can cost next to nothing – essentially just the cost of drafting some material and then circulating it to the media. There are no production, design or space costs as incurred with advertising.
- Regular media publicity increases your perceived stature and helps to position you as an expert or leader in your field, which in turn attracts more demand for your services
- Creative and multi-media flexibility. The wide range of different tools and techniques of PR allows a huge amount of creativity and presentational style for communicating.
- Good PR can be targeted and well-focused, compared to many forms of advertising (e.g. TV and newspaper ads) which involve a lot of wastage in terms of audience profile
- Publicity can greatly broaden and expand the audience that knows about you, not least because media and information sources routinely monitor and lift each other’s stories.
- PR is ideal as a ‘general background’ communications tool to reinforce your marketing communications activities. For example, publicity can particularly help to increase traffic to your website.

The basic tools of media publicity

- **Credentials data for journalists** - your starting point – before you go courting publicity - should be to draft some succinct reference notes about you and your business and have these as hard-copy sheets and a section on your website.
- **Prepared company spokesmen** – before you have the media contacting you, ensure you have decided who precisely in your firm is going to be a spokesperson. Use just one or two senior individuals and ideally give them some training in how to handle the media.

- **News release** – this is a piece of information distributed to journalists which is intended to be published or broadcast as a piece of news. It can cover a variety of topics, such as information on a new product or service or news of a new staff appointment. An effective press release should contain actual news rather than thinly disguised advertising, and it should reflect readers’ interests. There is no guarantee the release will be used by the media and the story is likely to be cut back to fit available space. *See the box opposite for tips for how to produce a press release.*
- **Feature articles** - typically between 500 – 2,000 words in length, these are detailed drafts of editorial covering a topical, technical or business issue in detail, published by a media title but crediting the organisation that wrote it. If the piece is reasonably well-written, the article may be used with little modification.
- **Advertorial** – this is a special category of feature article. Identified often with the title ‘advertisement feature’, the piece is produced in the form of editorial but acts as a ‘subtle’ ad for the sponsoring company that pays for the space used.
- **Media interview** – this involves a personal conversation between you and a reporter/journalist, either face-to-face or over the telephone. The format nowadays is very likely to be a 3-7 minute telephone-based interview (pre-recorded or live) with you not leaving your office. Other formats could be you taking part in a radio ‘phone-in’, doing a studio-based interview for TV or radio, doing a ‘down the line’ fixed camera interview, or taking part in an outside broadcast. Detailed coaching and interview practice is needed if you want to do lots of interviews.
- **Briefing conference/reception** – this is where you invite a group of reporters to visit you (or a convenient hotel or public venue) to hear an announcement or briefing on a newsworthy topic. These occasions are costly for journalists in terms of their time, so you should use this tool sparingly.
- **Letters** - this classic, traditional method involves writing a letter to the editor of a media title and giving your view on a topical subject. What you write needs to be very succinct. Your name and company name should be credited.

Other publicity tools:

Backing up the above list of media-oriented communication tools, a host of other ‘soft promotional’ techniques and methods are available for gaining publicity. Here’s brief mention of half a dozen:

- **Case studies/testimonials** – producing write-ups of how you have helped individual customers, with verbatim quotes from them, can be a great way of demonstrating how good your firm is !

- **Public speaking/lecturing** – seek out external opportunities to speak on topics you are knowledgeable about
- **Advice/tip sheets (web and/or printed)**– offering free, objective advice and guidance about how to handle specific problems experienced by your customers/patients can really build goodwill in your marketplace
- **Hold an event/reception** – for example, an informal but informative meeting for customers around a certain theme e.g. active living for senior citizens
- **Sponsorship** – attach your name to a community or external project, event, service, or activity
- **Exhibitions** – have a stand at or at least be a delegate at a relevant sector or community seminar, conference or other type of meeting

The three keys to gaining free publicity

If you follow three guidelines when presenting your information to the media, you will come as close to guaranteed coverage as any law-abiding person can:

Firstly, ensure your news or information is relevant to and matches the interests of the readers/viewers/listeners of the media in question.

Secondly, ensure your communication is not only clear and coherent but it has a distinctive focus (journalists call this the ‘hook’ or ‘angle’ of the story). Editors can receive several stories about exactly the same basic topic every day, so they are more likely to take note of a story that has an unusual or different angle. Note that your story does not have to be actual news but, if not, should ideally relate in an interesting way to a topical issue – for example, you give a comment or opinion on the topic or you give some practical advice or statistics relating to the issue.

Thirdly, try and make your story as ‘timely’ as possible. Editors like to find a compelling reason for how your story relates to “now” and how not including it will be a missed opportunity.

A dozen ways to be newsworthy and timely

To help you think of presenting attractive ideas to the media, here is a list of some specific suggestions:

- **What’s new in your organisation ? Any notable accomplishments ?** Examples: a new store opening, introducing a new service or product range, achieved record sales or profit levels, recruited a new manager, won an award, reached X years in business, new management structure, a merger or joint project with other firms.
- **Anything particularly unusual or distinctive about your business ?** Examples: two of your counter staff are studying an open-university course in their spare time or the founder of your business was formerly a successful chocolate-maker.

- **Are you holding an event/seminar/customer meeting you could publicize ?**
- **Have you done or could you do a research survey to merit press coverage ?** The media love to quote findings from surveys, no matter always how large or representative the research was.
- **Can you make your products or expertise relevant by piggybacking on current news ?** For example, if you are a pharmacy or health store, following news about a group of holiday-makers returning home very ill from an overseas holiday, you could issue a release suggesting to consumers what should be in their travel medicines box.
- **Could you sponsor an interesting contest or award ?**
- **Is there a holiday, anniversary or themed occasion you could hook onto ?**
- **Is there a trend in the general or local population that your service or expertise can relate to ?**
- **Make predictions, preferably outrageous and unexpected, but with a credible explanation**
- **Find an employee with an out-of-the-ordinary personal story, preferably one that will tug at the heartstrings of some readers or listeners**
- **Launch a community service project**
- **Offer surprising or little-known facts**

PR offers endless opportunities for you to be both creative and clever ! PR is not simple, though, and results are not automatic. Get some support from a professional marketing/PR person, if you are a first-time user. Good luck !

AND FINALLY, SOME EXTRA TIPS....

10 Tips for producing a News Release:

- At the top of your communication, use the header 'News Release' in big print. Your firm's name should also be shown here, preferably with your address.
 - Compose an eye-catching, informative headline that brings out the angle of your story. Just as in newspaper headlines, you can use a compressed style e.g. 'Local pharmacy offers free healthy-living advice for commuters stressed about the credit crunch'
 - Present the key facts of your story in paragraphs one and two. Answer the journalist's "Five W's": Who? What? When? Where ? and Why ?
 - After setting out the key points of the story, include a lively 'quote' from a relevant individual.
 - End your release with the basic information you want known about your company.
 - Indent paragraphs and use double spacing. Keep the release to one page.
 - At the end of the release supply a name, phone number and email address for a contact editors can use to get more information.
 - Write clear and short sentences. Use short paragraphs. Use a factual and objective tone.
 - Send out your press release by letter, fax, or – more commonly nowadays – by email. Check all contact details before sending.
 - Attach a relevant photograph to support your release, if you have one.
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