

## PR: This could be your new best friend for business growth

*By Suzie Boland*

Public relations is probably the least understood and most underutilized tool in marketing. (And it doesn't help that PR practitioners have a relatively low "approval rating" that ranks somewhere near members of Congress in terms of respect!)

One of the best things about public relations is that it's so approachable in terms of the costs. The first step, though, is to decide if it's right for your business. We say there are three times a business needs public relations:

- When their competitors get all the attention (and therefore all the sales queries)
- When they say they are "the best kept secret" (no brand awareness)
- When they don't know how to handle a crisis

Fortunately, something can be done to address all these issues – on whatever scale your budget dictates. There are a number of tools at your disposal, so let's discuss each of them.

### *Community involvement*

What we call "enlightened self interest" allows you to do well while you do good. In other words, you can get a marketing benefit from your good deeds if you select organizations carefully to spend your time with.

First, study the group's membership to see who they are and how closely they suit your ideal client profile. If there's nothing in the relationship for you, it's much harder to justify the time and resources you'll put into it. Many business owners become involved with business-related not for profits in which there are good networking opportunities with other volunteers. Of course, the volunteer time you choose to spend on your own is an entirely different matter.

Next, identify and seize leadership opportunities. You'll get a much greater business benefit if you participate at a committee or board level instead of just being one of several hundred members. And it's of even greater benefit if that involvement has to do with your business. For example, we provide public relations services for organizations we belong to.

Be sure to control the amount of time you spend. Many not-for-profits are extremely short-staffed and rely on volunteer leadership for what would otherwise be staff functions.

Finally, evaluate the impact of the investment of your time. Can you put an ROI to it?

### *Sponsorships*

Other than supporting Tampa Bay Innovation Center, I'm not always keen on sponsorships and am always surprised that people don't expect ROI from them. It's important to decide whether you're making a marketing or a philanthropic investment. Once you've done that, set your budget and decide how valuable the sponsorship is.

### *Speaking engagements*

This can be a very valuable activity for you. Again, though, you'll want to evaluate the audience to decide whether it's a good source of leads for clients and referrals. Then check to see if the size of the audience will be worth the time you'll put into developing your presentation. Then select a topic and method of presentation that are appropriate to your audience and the format of the meeting, while showcasing your company (but in a non-commercial way, of course. No organization wants to give you a platform for a sales pitch!)

### *Awards*

Awards aren't necessarily about ego; they can be very powerful in terms of generating targeted awareness. It's best to nominate yourself or the company for awards that will have the greatest impact on clients and referral sources – but also on your employees or prospective employees.

And that raises an interesting point. I've spoken with a number of CEOs who say they don't want to be the center of attention and don't want to apply for awards, because they think that's at the expense of "the team's efforts." Nothing could be further from the truth. Almost every award nomination allows for giving credit where credit is due. And the halo effect of an award on employee morale can be huge.

### *Special events*

Special events can be challenging and very time consuming, particularly compared with the benefit to the business. Here are a few tips to help you keep the proper balance between costs and benefits:

- Set your objectives and know what you want to accomplish with the event. If it's just a social occasion, that's fine, but if you're using it for business development, you'll want to plan accordingly.
- Tie the event to your business somehow, whether it's celebrating a milestone, an award, a move to larger offices or other accomplishment.
- Keep your budget in line with the expected outcomes.

### *News placements (media relations)*

In the world of media relations, we believe that strategy is king. Not all news coverage is created equal, and in most cases you'll want to pursue coverage that drives sales inquiries.

Here are a few pointers to get you going:

- Know your audience so you can select the proper media. For example, if you're in the B2B space, trade media may well be the most appropriate fit. People are in "buying mode" when they read their trades, as opposed to being in "information gathering" mode when they read something like the *Wall Street Journal*.
- Identify your priority messages – what will further your business objectives but also resonate with your audience?
- Know how to pitch your story. Research individual reporters so you know what they write about and then send a pitch that supports your business while it provides value to the reporter's readers, listeners or viewers. Reporters like stories about people and trends, so do your best to tie those into your pitch. And, for television, be sure there's a good visual.

- Remember that just because the story is important to you, doesn't mean it will be important to a reporter, so put yourself in the reporter's shoes.

In a nutshell, all your PR tools will be more effective if you employ them strategically, with a good knowledge of your target audiences. And then evaluate to see what generates the best results.

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