

## LEADERSHIP

# Proactive Public Relations

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Throughout my career, I've seen an evolution in many business functions—one being the changing role of public relations (PR) in daily business operations. In the past, we simply placed an ad in the newspaper and got favorable results, now we must strive for getting mentioned within an article to really make it pay off.

Although PR is generally accepted by larger businesses, many small business owners still don't think they need to invest any resources in media relations. Why should you consider having a PR program or evaluating your existing program? Two major reasons are to promote and brand your business and to establish credibility.

When promoting their company, business owners often overlook or ignore potential news they deem irrelevant or mundane, such as a new hire or hosting a community event. In reality, some of these things might be included in the local newspaper's "people in the news" section or in an upcoming events calendar.

Additionally, you may donate to various organizations, charities, and ministries for which you want to remain anonymous. That said, there are times when it may be appropriate to generate publicity for your company's charitable contributions. For example, if you have donated, or even discounted, your services to help a community organization, work with that organization to get media coverage. This is mutually beneficial because it not only helps your business, but it also helps the other organization get their message to the public.

Equally important to promoting your business is building credibility. By doing so, you position yourself as the expert with your media partners. This allows you to help them by providing interviews and, in turn, you receive publicity. Additionally, when a crisis hits, relationships with the media are key to making things as seamless as possible.

Ideas such as writing guest articles for your local newspaper or winning awards are great, inexpensive ways to build credibility and establish yourself as the expert. In the remodeling industry, there are many design competitions, such as NARI's Contractor of the Year and *Professional Remodeler's* Best of the Best Design Awards. Receiving awards not only generates publicity and builds credibility, but it is also a great way to encourage and motivate staff.

If you're unsuccessful at generating free publicity, you may want to consider using a paid advertorial to help position yourself as the expert and build credibility. This is still a highly effective strategy.

If you own a small business, you might think you can't do what larger businesses have done because your financial resources don't compare. But, I assure you, you can do something very similar by having ongoing, proactive relationships with the media, and by being upfront and honest with them whether there is good or bad news to share. For about as low as a \$500 monthly retainer with a PR firm, you could have the ability to generate some effective PR.

As a business leader, consider some of the following tips for dealing with media:

- **Be patient.** You may discuss a story idea with a reporter for months before it actually comes to fruition. For example, my company presented a story idea to an industry publication in mid-2006, but the article didn't appear in the publication until Spring 2007. News outlets prioritize based on the timeliness of stories, so your story may get bumped several times before they actually print it.

- **Know your key messages.** If you have about three main messages, then you won't be distracted by challenging or leading questions. Plus, you will be able to insure your main points are heard and published. I compare this to practicing a speech—if you are well rehearsed, then you will appear knowledgeable, professional and trustworthy.
- **If you don't know an answer, say so.** Your media partners might push you for an answer, but it is acceptable to tell them you don't know. Just make sure to manage their expectations of when you will know the answer or why you can't discuss something with them.
- **Develop relationships with your media** or delegate this responsibility to someone on your team. As mentioned earlier, consider hiring an agency, especially if you have limited staff resources. You don't have to be a PR expert. There are thousands of PR agencies capable of supporting you, and most will work within your budget.

As technology and media continue to develop, the pace at which consumers get information has substantially increased. This has created a greater need for managing media relationships and information in a timely manner.

If you really want to be a leader in your business, PR is one key ingredient to strongly positioning your company for the long-term. Establishing and managing a PR program does take time and financial resources. Consider looking at your marketing budget and seeing what you can afford. Don't wait for media to contact you—be proactive now.