

Generating Free Publicity

Every business is keeping a watchful eye on budgets these days. All too often the first thing that gets cut is the marketing budget. What that means is you have to find a way to do more with less. While that can be a challenge because, let's face it, marketing efforts do take time and money, it's not an impossible challenge.

One place to start is by going after what most people call "free publicity." While that's a commonly used phrase, we generally don't use the term "free publicity" because it's really a misnomer. Any "free publicity" you generate with the media really is "earned media" because you have to understand what the media is looking for and then work to give them something they find useful. This kind of approach won't cost you a lot of money, but you do have to put in some of your time and effort.

How do you start earning media? You'll need a plan and you'll need to consistently implement that plan in order to be effective. Start by answering some basic questions:

- **What is my goal? What do I hope to accomplish with this effort?**
- **Who is my target audience(s)? (And beware of answering that question by stating "everyone." You cannot be everything to everyone!)**
- **What media markets or outlets reach that audience?**
- **What information do I want my target audience to know?**
- **What do I want them to do?**
- **What is it about my business or this story that makes it interesting to others?**

That last question is especially important when you develop a media relations or outreach plan. You need to understand what kinds of stories will generate media/news coverage. It helps to remember that news is:

- **Something new**
- **Something different**
- **Something people want to know about**
- **Something people should know about**
- **And, finally, news is whatever the reporter/ editor says it is.**

No matter how good you think your story is, if you can't interest the reporter/editor, you need to come up with a different topic or approach.

Likewise, you should understand that you won't get free publicity just because you advertise, you know the reporter/editor or they've covered a similar event or business. Don't make your PR efforts sound like an advertisement. Avoid phrases like "the best company" or "top provider" unless it's something you can actually substantiate. Earned media can be very powerful and influential, but it rarely sounds like an ad and you generally won't have control over the finished product.

The next thing you need to do is think about the upcoming 12 months in your business or organization. What kinds of things do you want to promote or publicize?

- Are there newsworthy items that tie in with local/national news or holidays?
- Are there developing trends in your industry that would be of interest to others?
- Do you have any human interest stories that you can pitch to the media?
- Any recent new hires or clients you can talk about?

Put together a simple month-by-month action plan and plug the ideas into the plan. Then implement that plan – on a regular basis! When you're ready to contact the media, there are several places to go to for media lists:

- The Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce
- The phone book (just look under newspapers, radio stations, TV stations)
- Trade associations
- Internet

You may want to contact specific reporters or media outlets that cover your industry or business to introduce yourself and your expertise. Ask them what they look for in a story and how/when they want to receive information about story possibilities. As is true with many things in business, building positive relationships always help.

When you're sending out a news release or pitching a story idea, you should tailor your information to the media outlet you're approaching. It will increase your success rate. For newspapers it can be a feature story about a new business or it could include announcements about new hires, new products or seminars. With trade publications, it needs to be industry specific. For TV, you need something visual with action or activity. For radio it's something quick and easily understandable. With new media (Internet based) it might be an advice column that you place on a specific Web site or a blog you create to have "conversations" with your clients or other interested parties.

So while it does take time, dedication and know-how to generate earned media, even the smallest business can learn how to do it. The results will be well worth it! 

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