

# Building Your Brand

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Public relations. It's a topic plenty of businesses think about, but then again it's something that plenty of businesses never give much thought to.

And that's a shame because every business can benefit from having a good strategic public relations plan in place; so says one of the area's premier public relations firms, Leonard and Finco Public Relations Inc. of Green Bay. "Doing a good job isn't good enough anymore," notes Susan Finco. "You have to let people know how good you are and what you're doing."

Small, medium, large. It doesn't matter the size of your business. You need to be thinking about public relations. Whether you're a one-person shop building cabinets and looking toward future growth or a real estate firm that's seen plenty of successful deals lately, thinking about public relations should be an important part of your business, says Finco.

Why? Credibility. Public awareness. The implementation of a public relations plan can help you build and grow your business. Marketing and advertising may be important in getting a business's name out, but public relations has a lot to do with making your name part of the household vocabulary of your area and your professional world. When people think about buying a cabinet, you want them to be thinking about you. And when it's time to buy or sell a piece of property, they won't need to look through the telephone book for an agent. You want them to be thinking about your business from the get-go.

## PR in a Nutshell

The Institute of Public Relations defines public relations this way: "Public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain good will and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics."

That in a nutshell pretty much tells any business owner what he or she needs to know. There should be a plan. There should be an ongoing effort. You

need to find ways for your public to understand what your business is all about.

If you're new to the concept of public relations or if you've pre-occupied your time with other aspects of your business, take a fresh look at what you can be doing every day to build good will about your business. One of the first places to get your feet wet, Finco suggests, is by attending Chamber of Commerce events. Here you can mingle with fellow businesspeople of all kinds. Network. Share ideas. Become part of the business scene.

"You can't operate in a vacuum," Finco says. "You can't be isolated, not in this day and age." →



KRISSY BEHNKE (L) AND SUSAN FINCO (R) OF LEONARD AND FINCO PUBLIC RELATIONS INC.

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#### → The Corner stone of Brand Building

Four years ago Scott Bushkie had a dream, and it came true. He decided to start his own business, Cornerstone Business Services Inc. In that short time the firm has positioned itself as Wisconsin’s largest firm dedicated exclusively to selling businesses in the lower middle market. Its motto is: “Because you only sell your business once.” A young entrepreneur, Bushkie and his team made \$6 million in sales his first year in business. Since then they have closed more than \$30 million in transactions, and in 2003 Bushkie, president of Cornerstone Business Services, was named the Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce’s Small Business Person of the Year.

With a degree in marketing from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and from the professional experiences he already had, Bushkie made the decision that having a public relations plan would be an important part of what Cornerstone Business Services would be from the start. “When I started it up I brought Susan’s team on right away,” he says.

I saw the benefit of what she had done for other people when I worked for another firm,” he explains.

Bushkie encourages new companies to think about “exposure” from the beginning. He believes developing his company’s “brand” with public relations has been a key reason for Cornerstone Business Services’ success these past four years. Reputation has a lot to do with a company’s success, Bushkie adds.

For Cornerstone Business Services, developing the reputation it needs to be a player in its field hasn’t meant a lot of conventional advertising. Instead, Bushkie decided that a public relations plan would “give me the best bang for my buck.” In his case, the general public isn’t his audience. But those who might be interested in using the services of a firm like his that specializes in the sale of ongoing businesses with revenues from \$1 million to \$40 million is. Together with the Finco team, Bushkie decided to focus more on “indirect” ways of getting its story out, he explains. →



→ Finco's plan has focused on introducing Bushkie and Cornerstone Business Services to media outlets locally as well as within the industry. When a question comes up with a writer or editor, the goal is Bushkie and his team have become so familiar to the editors, writers and producers that they'll turn to them for advice and answers on stuff like real estate, brokering, and selling a business. "It allows you to showcase some of your talents," says Bushkie, adding to the credibility of the business. Beyond that, "It helps the editors in that they are only going to bring specialists to the table," he says.

"Having a public relations plan in place is essential," Bushkie says. In his opinion, growing a business happens faster because you become viewed as "a specialist in your niche," he says.

Turning to a public relations firm was the answer for Bushkie because, he says, "They have all the connections." He notes that small businesses in particular "don't have time to reinvent the wheel every time." Public relations is part of the overall marketing plan for Cornerstone Business Services. With every business looking at different financial constraints, his recommendation about public relations is simple: "Something is always better than nothing," he says, "whatever budget it can be."

His advice to fellow businesspersons is to start thinking about public relations. "There's something [that you can do that you are not doing right now]," he says.

### It's in the Bank

Public relations specialists can play a key role in helping a business get a fresh perspective. It's an eye from the outside, and it's something that even a visible business, like a bank, needs to think about. For F & M Bank, this April will mean a very public change in persona. On April 25 new signs will be unveiled; what the public has known as F & M Bank will be renamed Citizens Bank.

What much of the general public hasn't realized is that F & M Bank has actually been owned by the Michigan-based Citizens Banking Corporation since 1999. Randall J. Peterson, who had been president and CEO of F & M Bank, with its headquarters at the Allouez branch, becomes regional chairman for Wisconsin and Iowa with Citizens Bank. He explains that the name change will serve to positively brand the bank for the full range of services they are able to offer customers.

Both Citizens Bank and F & M Bank have communications departments that are part of educating the public about the name change, but the decision was made that an outside firm like Leonard and Finco would bring a new approach.

"We were the local hometown bank, and in many ways we are still the local hometown bank," Peterson says. The goal during this process is to help the public understand that Citizens Bank will still have the responsiveness and agility of a small-town bank. But with the resources of Citizens Bank – the 64th largest bank holding company in the United States – many more financial opportunities are available to current and future customers of the bank.



RANDALL PETERSON, CEO OF F & M BANK

Much of what Leonard and Finco did in terms of public relations was to help the bank decide how and when to let the news out that the name change would be coming, "making sure that we are reaching the right people at the right time," says Peterson.

With a new leadership team in place, spring 2005 seemed the right time to make the name change. It was Krissy Behnke, account executive with Leonard and Finco, who was charged with putting out the press release to the media earlier this year [that the change was coming]. The message "that they still will be the same community bank" was the one she needed to communicate, she explains. Customers of the bank had been told in late 2004 that the change was coming and there was no need for any concern about changes in account numbers or service.

But with a statewide business like F & M Bank, the message may be delivered in a different fashion in different communities. "We have many rural locations, but we are also in some very key growth markets in Wisconsin," Peterson says. Strategy and planning sessions were part of the process for the bank and Leonard and Finco. "We are spending a lot of time upfront discussing how we position things. In the Fox Cities and Green Bay, it may be slightly different than in the Milwaukee area," Finco says.

For Peterson the name change has brought an excitement, a "sense of urgency" to employees, and he hopes this is communicated. "What makes the difference are people. If you have the right people in the right positions selling the right products in the right market, you've got it made."

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He continues, "Our focus has been to build a strong team in all our markets."

**In the end, "We are just trying to get our client's story out," Finco says.**

Banking is competitive, and it's the goal of Citizens Bank's public relations plan to let the customer know that nothing changes from his or her viewpoint. "The only thing that changes is the name," he says. In terms of efficiency behind the scenes it will make a world of difference, however. Citizens Bank wanted to grow and yet stay in the Midwest, so when it acquired F & M Bank in 1999, Peterson says it was a good move for customers. And with the name change, financial reporting and dealing with government regulations becomes much easier.

Adding Leonard and Finco's team to the communication efforts of the bank has helped make the transition a successful one, Peterson says. "She's a great strategic thinker," he says of Finco, explaining, "She reminds us; don't think internal, think external, too."

"We have a marketing department in our company. We selected Susan to be part of our public relations marketing team because of her local knowledge, because of her experience in the market. She's been a big help in how we need to communicate."

Wisconsin Public Service has also been another one of Leonard and Finco's clients. It too has a busy communications department, so it was the Leonard and Finco firm it turned to when it needed help with public listening sessions concerning the building of a new power plant for the Wausau area. Finco says her company developed a "multi-layered approach" to the community outreach that was needed there.

### **Get in the Know**

Strategic thinking skills are what a good public relations specialist can offer a business, says Finco. Anyone can write a news release, for example, but writing one that piques the interest of a busy editor or producer, that's where skill is involved. And there are times a business needs to think more about getting the word out about what it offers to other businesses, she says. Good business-to-business communications could make all the difference.

A small business with limited resources can accomplish public relations tasks on its own, but remember to think big picture and that "public relations is more of a cumulative affect," Finco says. Take classes that the Chamber, Northeastern Wisconsin Technical College or professional organizations offer. Read a lot. Talk to other people in business. Those are suggestions Finco offers to those just beginning to think about public relations. Find out what has

worked for other businesses. "You have to get involved," she says.

Finco says that at any one time her firm is probably assisting 30 different clients on their public relations efforts.

"It's not a one-shot deal," Finco emphasizes. One of the key components of any public relations plan is having a plan in place in the event of a crisis. Every business can have one, and being prepared ahead of time makes communicating to the public and employees all the easier and more effective.

Charitable giving and sponsorship, those can also be part of a good public relations plan. Communicating well with employees within the business, helping them understand what's going on, that's another aspect of public relations and creating good will, notes Finco. Selecting just the right trade shows to participate in — that too plays a role in helping a business communicate with just the right audience.

If you decide to hire a public relations specialist, Finco's advice is simple: "A good public relations firm should ask a lot of questions," she says.

"Almost every business has a great story to tell," says Finco, "but they need to realize it." **END**