

Communications Plans for Small Enterprises

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Small business enterprises, including agri-tourism operations, need communications plans that generate positive publicity that translates into enhanced sales. The most common methods of achieving this are positive relations with the media — including local and regional media as well as trade (business-specific) media — and marketing. What is the difference between the two? Media relations efforts often involve free or low-cost publicity for a business because the media (particularly local media) report certain types of information based on its value to the community. On the other hand, marketing efforts, such as maintaining Web sites or advertising, are not free. However, they are an essential investment if the business is to reap good returns.

MEDIA RELATIONS

The media, particularly local media, can be a friend to small enterprises. Newspapers, television programs and radio spots can help publicize special events, new products and awards. Through coverage of special activities or exceptional employees, the media can also raise public awareness of services or products or of the enterprise's community-minded goals. For the plugged-in public, media Web sites as well as an organization's own Web site can be vital links for news and information about an organization and its products and services.

Publicity

The trick to getting publicity or media coverage is to match your organization's needs to those of each of your chosen media outlets.

Here are seven tips to help you determine how your organization can best use the media.

1. Determine your organization's needs.

For most businesses, the need for publicity will fall into one of four categories:

- a). Announcement of a special event or new product.
- b). Article about an award (for the organization or an employee)
- c). Feature article about something associated with the business and also related to the community. Examples might include autumn events, school projects, or holiday-specific products (like Valentine's cookies). A feature about something unique going on with the business like a new product line or a building expansion may also be of interest.
- d). News. Whether an item is news is best determined by the media outlet. Small businesses should submit a news item as an idea for a feature story. The news outlet will determine the best usage for their audience. If they really think your item is newsworthy, they will contact you or send a reporter. Newsworthy stories have a demonstrable impact

of interest to the target audience. For example, a 50 percent-off-sale is not news. Businesses have sales all the time. Donating your profits to disaster victims; now that's news.

2. Identify which media outlets suit your needs and will value your information.

It is best to research your chosen media outlets. Does the paper have a special section that lists meeting announcements or specializes in community-related articles? Does the TV or radio station run business announcements on a daily or weekly basis, say between their weather and sports segments? How far in advance of the event do you need to submit information? The research method is simple: read, watch, listen and scan Web sites.

Submit routine items (announcements and information regarding awards or special events) by the methods described in the paper or magazine or outlined on the outlet's Web site. Often these submission procedures involve sending an e-mail or filling in a form available on the Web site. Don't forget to list events in the calendars featured on local radio stations (usually public stations), TV news shows that list community activities, local cable access TV and newsletters of other similar organizations in the community. Such entries are generally free of charge, except for the personnel time involved. Keep a record of calendars used for future reference.

If your organization or employee has won a significant award consider informing the local media in advance of when the award will be conferred. They may choose to send a reporter to cover the event if it's local. Note the award must be significant within your community or your trade. Employee of the month, while admirable, does not generally rate media coverage.

Submit feature articles or ideas for articles directly to the appropriate editor of a local outlet or to the appropriate editor of a specific (and pertinent) trade newspaper or magazine. If the outlet is big enough for beat reporters, approach an appropriate reporter with your idea. With agriculture topics, the best reporter may be the business reporter. You can contact reporters by telephone or by e-mail. Both have their advantages.

If you submit an actual article, don't be surprised if the article is used, but not in its original form and without attribution to the actual writer or submitter. Remember, you are after positive recognition for the business, not personal recognition. The larger the media outlet, the less likely it will use your original copy. However, don't let that bother you. If an outlet chooses to have a reporter enhance or cover the story, then the topic is likely of interest to their audience.

Local-interest talk shows (morning shows, for example) might also be interested in story ideas or potential subjects to interview. Positioning yourself as an expert featured in local media can be valuable exposure for your business.

3. Answer the typical questions.

Successful articles are short, factual and informative. They also answer the six questions asked by journalists: Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?

As a guideline, ask yourself this question: Can your article answer the above questions in 300 words or fewer? Fewer are better. If the outlet thinks the idea merits more discussion, the editor or producer will happily allocate more space or time.

Finally, be sure your announcements and articles appeal to the target audience. A media outlet is not likely to use a submission that will not hold the interest of its audience.

4. Submit items to media in the correct format.

Each media outlet has a preferred method for receiving information. These days, e-mail is the most accepted format, and most outlets have contact names and forms for submitting story ideas on their Web site. If you directly e-mail a reporter, do not send any attachments to the file. Attachments are viewed with great suspicion and mail can be dumped, unopened.

Also, don't expect reporters to respond to every submission, especially those working for larger outlets. If they are interested, they will call you. For smaller outlets, such as weekly papers, you might try a personal contact first, and then follow the outlet's requested submission process.

You'll have the best success with feature articles or "outside the box" ideas if you contact the editor in advance of submission, and follow his or her recommendations.

5. Submit photographs if you have them.

Every print media outlet has its own guidelines regarding the submission of photographs. Most of the larger outlets will send their own photographer for news or feature articles, but some will accept photo submissions. Weekly papers often accept photos. Just ask the editor whether a photo may accompany an article.

For the greatest success, be sure to follow the outlet's formatting guidelines. These days color digital photographs are the norm. If you don't know whether a photo will be needed or used, or whether it might appear in a magazine or a newspaper or on a Web site, compose or scan the original photo as a TIF file or as a *high resolution* JPG. Not all outlets use TIFs, but more data is preserved in a TIF file or a high resolution file than in a normal JPG file. Submitting a larger-format file will give the outlet some leeway in terms of final photo quality.

6. Follow up on your submissions.

If your organization is submitting announcements and articles that never get used, give the editor or producer a call. Start with the least-senior editor and assume that you have somehow erred in the submission process. One common mistake is missing the outlet's production deadline. Media have strict production schedules. In the case of magazines, schedules run weeks (sometimes months) ahead of the publication date. Newspapers and television run on much tighter schedules, but they, too, like to plan ahead, especially for holiday or seasonal items. Since neither print nor broadcast media have unlimited space

or time, submitting your announcement or story idea in a timely manner can increase its chances of being used.

A second common publicity mistake is failing to understand the outlet's editorial needs and policies. If the outlet doesn't regularly use announcements and articles similar to what you want to submit, chances are such items don't fit their editorial format. Observing the outlet over time will give you a sense of what ideas and announcements are appropriate to submit.

Also, remember a simple "thank you" never hurts. Reporters like to hear compliments if they have captured the essence of a situation and written or produced an informative piece. On the other hand, let relatively small errors pass unnoticed unless they can affect your business. Chances are the general public is ignorant of whether the correct term is straw or hay, so let small errors go unless the point of the story involves the sale of the particular commodity.

7. Measure your success.

While the successful placement of announcements in target media is exciting, the question remains "Has the effort contributed to the greater goals of the business?" Perhaps your goal is to increase attendance at an event or to enhance the business's standing in the community and to demonstrate that you are a good citizen. Be sure that your use of publicity is tailored to your organization's specific goals.

Also remember to measure success with a critical eye. If your announcements are being placed, but attendance is falling off, perhaps your organization needs to review its choice of media. One ludicrous example is placing announcements about literacy enhancement programs in a local newspaper. Radio or television spots are likely to be more effective if you want to generate attendance by those who are challenged as readers.

Beyond Publicity

Media relations involves more than just publicity. It includes building a level of trust between your business, the media, your customers and the entire community. The goal is for your organization to be viewed as an asset to the local area as well as to its clientele. Following several simple guidelines can help you earn that trust.

First, suggest only stories that have some value to the entire community (i.e., have value beyond publicity for your organization). Pure publicity puff pieces are easily spotted, and all media outlets have a limited amount of space or air time. They must be judicious in how they allocate it. The only exception to this rule would be announcements of employee achievements or items submitted to community calendars.

Next, always be honest and forthright. Answer all questions truthfully, and if you don't know an answer, say so. If you are unsure of an answer, tell a reporter that you want to

check a fact before you give an answer that is incorrect. Don't forget to call the reporter back!

Next, don't be a bother. Constantly submitting article ideas or calling local reporters with tips that are not newsworthy will get you an unflattering nickname in the newsroom.

Finally, be prepared in the event of an emergency. How will you handle an environmental or personal injury accident on your facility? What if one of your products causes a consumer to become ill? What if a child falls off your hayride? Every organization should maintain a crisis communications plan.

Whole volumes have been written on developing crisis communications plans. Some plans are extremely detailed and include contact numbers for local emergency services, specific federal or local regulatory agencies, the business's owner/operator, and a designated spokesperson. Many businesses include contact information for their attorney in the event of an emergency. The level of detail in your plan will be dictated by your business and your perceived level of risk.

With respect to crisis communications, remember the first rule in dealing with the media during a crisis is the same rule as for dealing with the media in general: answer all questions truthfully. If you don't know an answer, say so. If you are not prepared or are uncomfortable commenting at the time say something like, "I am not prepared to comment on that topic." Never say, "No comment." It always sounds negative.

MARKETING: WEB SITES AND ADVERTISING

Marketing is a vital part of an organization's total communications effort. Done well, marketing is worth the investment. Done poorly, it can cause the demise of a business. Two of today's basic marketing tools are maintaining a Web site and purchasing advertising. Any business enterprise should consider obtaining professional help to implement a marketing plan.

If your business chooses to maintain a Web site (and it probably should!), remember that the effort is as much a commitment of time and resources as purchasing a new heifer. The Web site must be fed and maintained — often. Nothing is more frustrating to a potential customer than to visit a business's Web site that has not been updated recently. A stale site leaves a poor impression of your business and will discourage potential customers. If you maintain a Web site, or pay to have one maintained for you, schedule dates on your calendar at regular intervals to remind you to post new information.

Remember to include several methods of contacting your business on the Web page. Address, telephone number, and e-mail address are all necessary parts of the home page. Today's customers want choices, and some will turn away if their preferred method of contacting you is not listed online or if they cannot tell where your business is located.

Advertising is the lifeblood of any business. Regardless of your product, if no one knows about its attributes, you won't be able to sell it. As you form a communications plan for your business, buy advertising from local, regional and trade media outlets whenever doing so would be appropriate and necessary for meeting your business goals. Occasionally purchasing ads can be appropriate for meeting your community service goals, too.

Remember, when you purchase advertising, you get what you pay for, literally. An ad will say exactly what you want about your products and services (provided your ad falls within the guidelines of accepted community standards and is an accurate representation). Like Web sites, ads also represent your business. Consider hiring local advertising firms and graphics professionals to generate appropriate designs. Such firms can also help you decide on advertisement placement to attract potential customers.

Finally, remember that media outlets, Web services, and marketing firms are businesses, too. When your business purchases advertising space or professional marketing services, you are supporting other worthwhile business assets within your community or trade. Together, you can help each other be successful.

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Note: Many public relations resources are available online. Use search terms like "media relations tips," "crisis communications plan" and "publicity for small businesses." Keep in mind that much of the information on the Web is intended as a marketing tool for the agency that posted the information in the first place.

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