

PR Kit: Do-It-Yourself Public Relations for Small and Home-Based Businesses

Introduction

PR Kit is designed to help you, the owner of a small or home-based business, seize opportunities to promote your business with free or low-cost public relations techniques. The ideas outlined here will help you build public awareness of your business – awareness that can help you gain new customers.

The information in PR Kit has been distilled from more than two decades of journalism and public relations experience, and five years operating a home-based business. You'll find real-life techniques that worked, and some that didn't. Our objective is to get you to think about inexpensive ways to get your business noticed – and remembered – by people who could be future customers.

What is public relations? It's not limited to writing a news release or being interviewed by a radio station. In fact, public relations is the sum total of all the ways your business communicates to the outside world. Everything you and your business do affects your public image – the way the world and the community perceive your business. And remember, people are influenced just as much by their perception of reality as they are by the reality itself. The perception is "real," even if it isn't true.

So, public relations is making sure your customers are satisfied. It's being involved in the community. It's the appearance of your business establishment. It's the way you answer the phone and the quality of the message on your answering machine.

Any contact you have with another person affects your business' image. A positive image can help your business, and public relations can help you present that positive image.

What's what?

Before going any further, let's define the key terms as we'll use them in the program.

Marketing is the way a business defines its approach to its customers. It encompasses all the ways a business goes about trying to sell its goods or services.

Advertising is the use of paid announcements in print or broadcast media to attract attention to a product, service or business in order to generate sales.

Public Relations is the use of a variety of methods and activities to establish and promote a favorable image and relationship with the public.

Publicity is information about a business or product that is presented through various media to attract the public's interest and attention.

Putting these terms together gives us the following picture. Marketing is the overall strategy a business uses to meet its financial goals. Advertising and public relations are key elements of the marketing strategy. They are designed to generate publicity that will help the marketing strategy succeed.

Advertising isn't enough

Why should public relations matter to a small business? Isn't advertising enough?

There's more to promoting your business than spending your hard-earned dollars on advertising. If you're not an expert, it's very easy to waste your money chasing customers with ineffective or unfocused advertising. Besides being expensive, advertising is often viewed skeptically by the public. Even if your business is doing so well that you can spend a significant amount on advertising, you still should care about public relations.

Combined with advertising, public relations can open doors and magnify the results of your marketing efforts. In many service businesses, for instance, advertising really can't reach the target markets effectively. And direct mail can be the proverbial chainsaw pretending to be a scalpel. But think about the credibility you gain in the eyes of potential clients or customers if your business is featured in a newspaper or magazine article that quotes you as an expert in your field.

The three goals of public relations

Looked at in this way, we can say that public relations has three goals for a small or home-based business: to identify your business to potential customers, to demonstrate your knowledge and credibility as a businessperson and ultimately, to attract customers and "grow" your business.

Public relations doesn't work like magic, however. You can't snap your fingers and get publicity – unless it's bad publicity. Finding the right public relations approach for your business takes some work. In fact, what you are doing is substituting time and effort for dollars when you focus on public relations instead of relying only on advertising.

Three things to do

How do you start preparing for your public relations' efforts?

The first thing you should do is **scan**. That's a fancy word for being observant to what is going on around you that affects – or could affect – your business. You probably already do this unconsciously, in an informal way. You read newspapers and maybe trade publications, you talk

to customers, employees and suppliers, friends and neighbors. But are you really paying attention? Be alert for ideas, trends, community activities. Look for ideas in ads, letters to the editor, stories on the business pages. There are possibilities everywhere, and one of them might click with you as a way to get your business' name before the public. Clip them out, write them down, put them in a file. But don't forget about them. Pull out the file regularly and review it.

The second thing you should do is **plan**. You've already started to do that. Getting PR Kit indicates that you recognize a need for public relations. What you should do next is really think about your business. What's your target market, who are your current customers, who are the customers you'd like to have? If you haven't got the answers to these questions clear in your mind, you need to focus in on them so that you know where your business is now and where you want to take it. Then go to your idea file and to the suggestions you'll find in this program.

The third thing is to **do it** (and you thought it was going to rhyme)! Seize the opportunities that present themselves. If you get an idea for a letter to the editor, a talk to a community group or a news release, give it a try. And don't be discouraged by rejection. You may be turned down for reasons that have nothing to do with you, your business or your idea. Keep trying! Don't pass up an opportunity that could bring positive results.

The media in a nutshell

Working with the news media is an important part of the public relations process. But where do you start?

The first thing you need when trying to get publicity for your business in the media – whether it's radio, tv or newspaper – is a contact. The contact is the person to whom you send your news release, public service announcement, story idea or offer to appear on a call-in show. Initially, you should deal with the media in writing. Once you have established a relationship, phone calls are appropriate.

Until you get to know a reporter who's written about you or your business, you should deal with an editor at a newspaper – in the case of a daily paper, the business editor, city editor, feature or living section editor, depending on what kind of business you have. At a weekly paper, you'll generally be dealing with the editor or managing editor, since the staff is small. At a radio station, it will be the news director or public affairs director; at a tv station, the news editor or assignment editor.

Before you submit a news release or anything else to a media organization, call and get the name of the right person to whom to send it. And if you don't get a response to your submission, don't bother the person with phone calls. Once you send it, it's out of your hands.

What do the media consider to be newsworthy items? You can tell that by reading, listening and watching. But obvious examples are business expansions, construction of new facilities, contracts, employee promotions or appointments, awards, trends, new products, demonstrations

of social concern. The media are always looking for material that appeals to human emotion as well: items that are unusual, timely, have human or public interest, or contain conflict, mystery, tragedy, humor, novelty, sex, romance or money.

For a small or home-based business, the logical approach is to focus on the obvious things about your business. That would include personnel items – promotions, awards, attendance at seminars – and new products and services or expansion plans. If there are trends developing in your field that might be of interest to the public, that would be a legitimate story to propose to a business editor. Recognize that you might not be the whole focus of the story; the paper may want to speak to others in your field, and you can help by making the names of experts available. But you'll probably be quoted as part of the story. If your business is truly unique, the story may well focus exclusively on you.

Remember that you are dealing with the “news” media. The idea you propose must have a news angle. In working with the media, you have to craft your approach so that what you propose has obvious appeal to an audience broader than you. Your idea should be presented as an opportunity for the media to inform, educate or amuse their audience. You must avoid a total focus on your business that will appear self-serving. The media, like you, are in business to make money. They don't owe you anything in the way of free publicity.

In other words, you have to sell them on the benefits of your idea to them and their audience, not to your business.

Rules for dealing with the media, or how not to get burned

Recognize that you have absolutely no control over the use or placement of a news item you submit. A story idea or news release you think is important may be nothing more than junk mail to an editor or reporter.

Don't demand that a news item be used because your business is an advertiser. Because of the inherent hostility in the media between the news and advertising departments – especially at newspapers – nothing turns off a reporter or an editor more quickly than the suggestion that advertising influences the news.

Never ask to see a story before it's printed. This immediately brands you as a rookie or worse, a pain in the a__.

Don't send duplicate copies of your news to different people at a media organization. This can cause embarrassment to the media and damage your chances for future coverage. You should try to deal with only one person as your contact.

Give yourself time to prepare for an interview. Develop a list of the key points you want to get across, no matter what questions you're asked. This will sharpen

your answers and help you overcome nervousness.

Always tell the truth! You can skirt a sensitive question, but don't lie. A falsehood inevitably will come back to haunt you – and your business.

“Off the record” doesn't exist. There is no such thing. You should respond as if everything you say is on the record. If you don't want to see it in print or hear it on the air, don't say it!

Don't lose your cool if an error is made. If it's not significant, forget it. If it is, politely point it out to the reporter and request a correction. If you aren't satisfied with the response, talk to the reporter's editor or news director. If that doesn't work, be satisfied with pointing out the error in a letter to the editor or station manager. An overreaction on your part can damage your relationship with the media outlet permanently.

Specific public relations vehicles

The following are some of the specific public relations approaches you might use to increase awareness of your business.

Send a news release. This has been and continues to be the basic tool of public relations for businesses. As its name suggests, the news release announces information that is assumed to be of interest to an audience beyond the organization issuing it. In other words, as we said previously, there must be “news” in a news release.

Before sending out a release, you should prepare a media list – the names, addresses, phone numbers and contacts, if you know them, and deadlines for all the newspapers, radio and television stations serving your community. The local Chamber of Commerce probably has such a list already, or you can develop your own with the phone book. Naturally, the number of media on your list will depend on the size of your community; in a small town, you may have only two or three choices. If a weekly newspaper serves your town, be sure to include it.

In general, you should mail your news release to all the media on the list. As you gain more experience, you'll develop a sense of what kinds of news will appeal to which media, and you can be more selective in your distribution.

You should also be aware of the media's deadlines. With dailies, this generally isn't a problem, but it is with weeklies, all of which list their deadlines in the paper somewhere. Try to plan your announcement so that you submit it in plenty of time for maximum impact. If you're announcing an event, don't expect the media to use your release unless you get it to them well in advance. If you're only going to give them the information a day or two before, it may not be worth your trouble; chances are it won't be used.

The file **_Samples.wri** (_Samples.txt) contains a typical form you should use for your news releases. It gives you the standard information you should provide, including date, contact's name and phone number, and shows you how to format the release. The file also contains sample releases for specific kinds of news items that you can adapt for your business.

Write a letter to the editor. As a businessperson and a citizen, you have the right to express your views on public issues. If the issue has a direct impact on your business, it is perfectly legitimate for you to write a letter to the editor presenting your viewpoint. It is also appropriate to offer your opinions on issues that are indirectly related to your business or field. And a thoughtful letter commenting on a significant local or national matter will earn you recognition as a concerned member of the community.

Remember, however, that if you take a position on a highly charged public issue like gun control or abortion, you run the risk of alienating potential clients or customers who are on the opposite side of the issue. The same is true of controversial local issues. In these cases, the recognition you'll gain will be negative roughly half the time. That's not a good trade-off.

There is no guarantee that a letter you write will be used, of course, but the effort will begin to position you with the paper as an interested citizen and concerned member of the community.

Your letter to the editor should be submitted on business letterhead, if you have it. The text should identify your business and explain how your knowledge or experience relates to the topic of your letter. You should sign the letter with your title and include a phone number for verification. Check the editorial page of the newspaper for length restrictions; many papers limit letters to 250 or 300 words.

One final caution: be sure your letter is calm and rational. Don't go off half-cocked, attack individuals or make wild charges that could backfire and hurt your business. Demonstrate that you are thoughtful and concerned about the issues.

Be a resource. A stockbroker friend of ours, who runs a very small firm, has been quite successful in getting quoted on the business pages of the local newspaper. As a matter of fact, his name appears more often than the local managers of the national brokerage firms. And being quoted, he says, has brought him new accounts.

How did he do it? He developed a relationship with the business reporter by being available to offer opinions on developments affecting local companies and their stocks. The reporter now views him as a valuable resource, a source who helps him do his job.

A relationship like this takes time to develop, and trust is a key element that must be present. If you've dealt with a particular reporter, why not offer your services as an expert whom he or she can call for comments or story ideas? It costs you nothing, but it can pay big dividends.

Pitch a story. The media are always looking for trend stories, particularly if they have a consumer angle. With the proliferation of lifestyle sections in newspapers and soft features on

television news shows, there's a high demand for this kind of material. The media also like to find ways to "localize" a national story by featuring people or businesses that are involved. Even our local paper, which is not exactly a small-town *New York Times*, jumped on the "Information Superhighway" bandwagon by doing a story on Bulletin Board Systems in the area.

You propose a trend story like this, or even a feature story about your business, by writing what's called a "pitch letter" to the business or lifestyle editor of the newspaper or the assignment editor at the tv station. In the letter, you should summarize the local focus of the development or trend – how your business is involved, for example – and its impact on the public, if there is any. One technique is to use a "hook" – a "did you know?" – to attract the editor's interest. You should suggest some contacts for the reporter to speak with and indicate your willingness to provide information and be interviewed.

In "pitching" a feature story on your own business, you should take a similar approach. Highlight what's unusual about what you do or the way you do it. Differentiate yourself from others in your area who might have the same kind of business. Emphasize how your approach benefits your customers or the public at large. This letter shouldn't be a commercial, but it should tell the editor enough to attract his or her interest.

Pitch letters should be brief and to the point. Don't go on for pages; editors are busy people, too. Keep your letter to one page, and close by telling the editor you'll call within a certain period of time to follow up. Make sure that you do. And include your phone number so the editor can call you if he or she has questions.

Don't pitch the same story idea to more than one media organization at a time. If you have a pitch pending with the local newspaper, you shouldn't propose it to the tv station. But if the paper says it isn't interested, then offer it to the tv station. There's nothing more aggravating to an editor than investing time in a story and having the competition run it first – especially if the source of the idea was the same person.

Teach a course. Another idea worth considering is teaching a course related to your expertise in an adult-school or continuing-education program in your area. Many high schools, vocational-technical schools and colleges and universities offer such programs as a way to generate income and increase the use of their facilities. The offerings can cover a wide range, from arts and crafts to personal finance and investing to self-improvement to career and business information.

You won't get rich teaching a course; the fees are low. But your business will be listed in the course description, which is either mailed to many households or run in a newspaper ad. You may find potential customers among those who see your course listing or sign up for the course. We taught several courses at an adult school that mailed its eight-page, tabloid-size listing to more than 30,000 households twice a year.

Remember, though, that preparing to teach a course is hard work for low pay. Once again, you're trading your time and effort for free publicity.

Offer a seminar. If you run a business whose market is other businesses or clearly defined segments of the public, holding an informational seminar may have public relations potential. You can't produce a seminar at no cost, but you can do it at low cost. Unfortunately, planning an event takes time and preparation. That's why meeting-planning businesses are doing so well. And you also have to be careful about how you promote the event and how you present the content.

Before you do anything, you need to decide what message you want to convey. Do you want to present a new product line, announce an enhancement to your existing services or showcase what your business can do for your target market? The message you are trying to convey should determine how you promote the seminar. You may decide to invite your current customers, a new group of potential customers you're trying to attract, or even the public.

If you are promoting the seminar to the public, news releases, public service announcements or even a small newspaper advertisement should be your promotional vehicles. If you are targeting a defined group, such as existing customers or new customer segments, an invitation letter is the proper approach. To help your planning, you should ask that people who wish to attend call to register in advance.

Where do you hold a seminar? Your local library may have a meeting room that it makes available free of charge or for a nominal fee. Holding the event in a hotel or motel meeting room, however, will give the seminar – and your business – more credibility. This will increase the cost somewhat, although many hotels don't charge a fee for the room if they provide refreshments. Hotels with meeting facilities usually have a manager who will help you with the arrangements.

Critical to the success of a seminar is careful thought about the presentation. Again, the target audience and the message will help you determine the approach to take. The presentation doesn't have to be elaborate, but it must have substance. You don't want your audience to feel that its time has been wasted.

Submit a PSA. Public Service Announcements are used by radio stations to announce upcoming events of interest to the public. They are free advertising for community groups. However, if you are having an open house, a seminar or some other event of community interest, it certainly would make sense to prepare a PSA.

Your PSA should answer the traditional “who, what, when, where and why” questions. Radio stations require that you provide a script of specific length, normally 15 or 30 seconds. You usually have to submit a PSA at least two weeks in advance. You should check with the public affairs director for each station's specific requirements.

Take to the airwaves. Many radio stations have interview or call-in shows that use local guests. Such forums are another opportunity for you to promote your business at no cost. Think about a topic or aspect of your business that would be of interest to a general audience, and then propose it in a letter to the host of the program.

To overcome the inevitable jitters you'll feel, prepare in advance. Put together a list of questions

you think might be asked; jot down some notes about things to talk about with the host during the times when there are no callers on the line. And remember that you're not doing a 30- or 60-minute commercial for your business. The idea is to make people aware of your business and enhance your credibility, not to hawk your wares.

Give a speech. Local service clubs like the Rotary, Kiwanis or Lions usually have luncheon meetings featuring short speeches on topics of interest to the membership. This is another way for you to build awareness among an audience of local business people. Let members of these organizations know that you are interested and available and what subjects you can discuss. Pick topics relating to your business that would be interesting to a wide range of people.

Sponsor a contest. You can generate goodwill and publicity by sponsoring a contest in cooperation with a charitable organization or school district. For instance, you might approach a charity about cosponsoring an essay or poster contest. Charities are experienced at running such events and will publicize your sponsorship. You provide the prizes, typically U.S. Savings Bonds. Contests often offer several opportunities for publicity: when the contest is announced, when the winners are selected and when the prizes are awarded. In each instance, your business is mentioned as the sponsor.

A school district also might be interested in a contest, especially if you can relate it both to your business and to the curriculum or to current events. Propose the idea to the school principal.

Remember our stockbroker friend? He sponsored an investment contest in conjunction with the local newspaper. The contest was somewhat expensive because he ran an ad every week promoting the contest and listing the people with the best results, but it was cost-effective because it generated new business for his firm.

Be community-minded. A business is part of the community in which it operates. If you are involved in the community through the Chamber of Commerce, service clubs and other groups, your business benefits. In effect, you are your best advertisement. There is value in patronizing local businesses, joining local organizations, contributing time or services to local activities. Help with community fund-raising efforts. By all means, tell people who you are and what you do. Build up a network of people who know about you and your business. The value of such word-of-mouth publicity can't be calculated!

How's your boilerplate?

“Boilerplate” is a term for a standard paragraph that's used to describe something. Your business should have a boilerplate paragraph that you use in all your public relations activities. It doesn't have to be elaborate; it doesn't have to cover every facet or nuance of your business. But what it should do is convey, in a sentence or two, what your business is about.

Here's a sample: “Founded in 1988, ResearchWorks provides businesses with customized market and competitive information by researching on-line computer databases and other sources.”

(You'll see this boilerplate in the files in _Samples.wri. Notice how it changes.)

You should develop a paragraph of boilerplate for your business and use it in all your public relations activities.

Manage your reputation

The reputation of your business is precious. You should do nothing to hurt it, and that includes ill-advised public relations efforts.

While we encourage you to use PR Kit to get started immediately on public relations for your business, we also want to caution you that doing the wrong things can damage your image. Just as one unhappy customer might far outweigh one satisfied customer in terms of the potential impact on your business, so too will one public relations mistake far outweigh the positive public relations you gain.

Think through what you are planning to do. Weigh the positives and negatives. Would this activity upset my current customers? Could the idea be misinterpreted? Is it ethical? If you're not sure, ask a colleague. Get someone else's opinion. Make sure you're comfortable with it before you do it.

And don't ignore the benefits you get from satisfying your customers. That's the best public relations activity of all.

In conclusion

This is where we leave you – with a kit of ideas you can use to increase awareness of your business at little or no cost other than your time and effort. It all may seem overwhelming right now, but it isn't. Just start slowly, trying one technique at a time. Come back to PR Kit from time to time for a refresher.

First scan, then plan, then do it. Write your boilerplate. Keep your eyes and ears open for ideas and opportunities. Make yourself known to the media. Make yourself known in the community. And don't be discouraged if your initial attempts aren't successful. Building awareness is a long-term process. PR Kit gives you the place to start.

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