



## Marketing on a Shoestring

### PR Secrets for Free Press

When a spiraling economy pinches marketing budgets, it means marketing money goes away. It doesn't mean the need for marketing goes away. In fact, you may need to market even *more*.

Luckily, marketing – and that includes public relations – doesn't have to cost a lot of money. Keep in mind that what you don't spend in dollars and cents, you'll have to make up in energy, time and creativity. Simply put, you can make up for a small budget by rolling up your sleeves and putting your noggin to work.

So what does it take to *earn* free press? It's pretty simple, actually. Become newsworthy. Sounds too easy, right? It often is, and the fact that you aren't a PR person is a plus for you. The first thing you have to do is think like a reporter. For a moment, take off your owner/manager hat and put on a reporter hat. The reporter is looking for a scoop – a hot story. She/he's going to look good to the editor when she/he comes up with something that no one else is doing, right? This is your opportunity to be a reporter's resource.

Basically, you want to help the reporter do his/her job. You want to be on the lookout for stories that will help the reporter get the scoop. The stories may be from inside your company, but they could also be inside your clients' companies or they may even be inside a prospect's company. While getting PR for a client or a prospect may not sound like a direct route to getting attention for your firm, it is.

By offering information that is not self-serving, you earn reporters' trust. The best reporters have incredible memories. They work on tight deadlines and when they need a quote from a subcontractor about an issue, guess who they most likely will call first? You are developing a relationship with the reporter as a valued news source. Keep in mind that reporters are bombarded by PR people and others who want to selfishly exploit the press. You want to set yourself apart from those types. You want to appear as unbiased as possible and stick to the facts.

For example, if you are working on a project that is different, unusual, important to the community, or any of a handful of reasons why something is newsworthy, call the reporter that covers that beat and tell him/her about it. Then wait for him/her to ask for more information. That's the difference. You are looking out for him/her – not for yourself. Reporters know people and if you come at them with any other intention than that which is honest, they'll run in the other direction.

So, what could be news? A store opening? Well, yes. It is especially if the store is an oxygen bar (something different) or if the store is filling a critical need in the community or if the store caters to a sector of the community that is part of a trend. An Albertson's opening in the suburbs where there are plenty of grocery stores is not news. A Fiesta grocery store opening in a part of town that doesn't have any grocery stores and that caters to the booming Latino population is newsworthy. See the difference?

The other thing you want to remember about working with reporters is that they are busy. When you call, get to the point. You should practice what you are going to say so you can sum it up in about 30 seconds. Before saying anything, ask if it is a good time. If they are on deadline, they will tell you. When you hand off the idea, your job is done unless they need more information. Trust me; they will contact you if they are interested. If they aren't, don't bug them. The last thing they need is someone following up asking if they are going to cover the story. In the end, it's what they think is interesting that matters. If you study newspapers, soon you will be able to discern what is news and what isn't. You may think that your new service offering is the greatest thing since sliced bread, but will the paper's readers? Scrutinize your idea before you let the reporter take a crack at it.

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## Marketing on a Shoestring *PR Secrets for Free Press* (cont.)

The way you share your idea with a reporter is critical. Do the homework. Share why you think it's important; don't assume the reporter will come to the same conclusion. If you go to a reporter and simply tell him/her about what your company is doing, she/he may not think of it as news. However, if you explain how this new service is part of a trend or an answer to a pressing business issue, the reporter can then see that this is a hot topic affecting a lot more companies than just yours. All of a sudden, you are newsworthy!

So, think like a reporter. Learn how the newspaper works. Request editorial calendars. And start developing relationships with reporters. "How?" You may ask. Well, it's as simple as making a phone call or sending an e-mail. No magic. It's just plain ol' relationship building. It takes action. Don't be afraid. The fact that you aren't sure what to do helps you be honest. Simply tell them that you aren't sure what the correct methods are, but you think you could be helpful to them. Reporters have told me that they truly appreciate being able to trust a person's intentions.

Don't forget to take part in press "freebies." Is a new person joining your company? Did your company recently promote a person? Won a new contract? Send a press release to the local business paper. If you have new team members, announce it by sending one to the local newspaper as well. For personnel changes, try to include a picture.

If you develop your reporter contacts, you will be able to see your company name in print more often than you ever dreamed. Most companies spend \$2,000 - \$5,000 per month to have a PR company on retainer. If you spend a small amount of your time, you will be able to accomplish similar coverage for a lot less than that!