



Business Essentials Library



Harness the Power of PR

Seasoned business owners know that when it comes to marketing, publicity—not advertising—rules supreme.

By Matt Alderton



At 24 years old, Jonah Ansell looks more like a college student than a CEO. Sitting across from you at a conference table, he concedes, he looks too young to be accomplished, too inexperienced to be legit. After all, he says, he lacks the “proverbial gray hairs”—not to mention the real ones—that his peers in the business world associate with success.

While he may not look the part of a successful businessman, Ansell plays it well. Upon graduating from college in 2003, he joined forces with two buddies to create Chicago-based Rivalfish Inc., a sports merchandise retailer that thrives upon team rivalries and an “us vs. them” mentality. The company flourished among its base—young, die-hard sports fans—but struggled to legitimize itself among its corporate peers. “No

matter how great our business plan was, people had a hard time looking past the fact that we were just a couple of kids,” he says.

Eventually, however, Ansell convinced people to look beyond his youth. And he did it not with expensive advertising, but with a push for free publicity. “Media coverage has given us a credible third-party endorsement of our business concept and business model,” says Ansell, whose promotions have earned Rivalfish exposure in Yahoo! Sports, on local TV news and on the cover of sports sections in newspapers nationwide. “PR enabled us to become well-known within our own backyard.”

Having a strong PR strategy can help any business—including yours—gain recognition and growth. It doesn’t take a lot of cash, either. All it requires, in fact, is time, tenacity and a working e-mail address.

Why PR?

The idea of public relations is simple. Rather than purchasing space in which to market your business—on television or in print—you work with the media to distribute your message as news. And if you’ve ever written a successful press release, you know that it’s a stronger, more cost-effective way to get inside your local paper than purchasing an advertisement in it.

“We’re inundated with so many advertisements each day that you don’t want to fall into the backdrop and be just another ad that is glanced over. By doing PR effectively, you are the content, not the clutter,” Ansell says. He recommends dedicating at least several hours each week to your PR efforts, because “one successful placement in a popular newspaper or magazine can be more effective for your business than one individual sale to a customer.”

Philippa Gamse agrees. As president of Internet consulting company Total 'Net Value Inc., in Santa Cruz, Calif., she has learned firsthand that PR is king. “PR is supposed to carry seven to nine times the credibility of paid advertising,” she says.

That’s not to say advertising shouldn’t be part of your overall marketing plan, cautions Shel Horowitz, owner of FrugalMarketing.com and author of *Grassroots Marketing: Getting Noticed in a Noisy World*. Advertising can be helpful, he says, but should be used sparingly. PR, on the other hand, is something you can’t get enough of. “You have to get inside the mindset of your [customer],” he says. “PR does that much better than advertising.”

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Meet the Media

To achieve PR success, you need an intimate relationship with the press, and that requires strong press releases, Horowitz says. He recommends making news and recruiting local reporters to cover it. The key, he says, is to spin story pitches with unique angles. "A typical reporter will get hundreds of press releases a day," says Horowitz, adding that a creative and catchy headline will make yours stand out in the crowd.

Worthwhile subjects for press coverage might include an innovative promotion you're sponsoring or a local cause that you're contributing to. "Just as in sales, you're selling more than what's on the page," Ansell says. "You're selling why your story is meaningful for an editor's readers or a producer's viewers."

Of course, you don't always have to go to reporters; you can encourage them to come to you with news, too. If you run a restaurant, for instance, introduce yourself to local food writers as a source they can interview about local dining trends or tastes.

Gamse, a regular guest on The Small Business Advocate Show, recommends using ProfNet, a leads service that specializes in connecting reporters with expert sources. "I've been interviewed and quoted in a number of major publications," she says. "I also write articles and offer them for free to targeted publications and Web sites."

Beyond the Press Release

PR may start with local reporters, but it certainly doesn't end there. The most successful publicity, experts agree, is more innovative than your garden-variety press.

To truly go the distance, consider these creative ideas for more effective PR:

Enrich your Web site. The Internet is an important vehicle for generating publicity. To be relevant, however, your site doesn't just need to function; it needs to engage, too, and that means generating content that is useful for your customers.

In January 2006, Rivalfish launched "The Rival Room," an online sports humor magazine that Ansell says has given his business approximately \$75,000 worth of free PR and an 800 percent increase in Web traffic. "When we do PR around our Web site content, it isn't overtly commercial," he says. "In fact, it's our genuine content that gets fans truly caring about what we have to offer."



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Enter the blogosphere. When it comes to marketing, recognizing new media with which to spread your message is key. These days, that means blogging. "I think the blogosphere is going to become more and more important," Horowitz says. "Bloggers are beginning to be taken seriously as journalists."

To take advantage of current trends in blogging, Horowitz recommends publishing your own blog, using a service such as Blogger, and also posting comments on others' blogs—always with a signature that includes your URL to initiate links back to your site, thereby improving your ranking in search engine results.

Get on your soapbox. Networking is essential in corporate America. A great way to meet people—and sell yourself at the same time—is to become a professional speaker or teacher, according to Gamse, who delivers regular seminars for small businesses. If you run a landscaping business, for instance, you might address the local park district about water conservation, or if you run a hardware store, you might offer free home improvement classes for the public.

Enroll in online discussion groups. Another venue for fruitful networking exists in online discussion groups and electronic mailing lists. Horowitz participates regularly in these, which he finds via simple Internet searches and industry Web sites, and says that by contributing he has found customers and referrals, not to mention fresh business opportunities, such as invitations to participate in business panels and write books. "By presenting yourself as someone who's willing to

help," he says, "amazing things can happen."

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