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Promote Your Business with PR

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Publicity isn't just free; it's effective. Work with the media in order to make news, tell your story and find new customers.

By: MATT ALDERTON

For more than 20 years, Nancy Kirk and her late husband, Bill, sold quilts and antique fabrics from a small store in Omaha, Neb. They started their business, [The Kirk Collection](#), out of necessity—they adopted a son and Bill wanted stay at home to raise him—and grew it into a global source for collector textiles, one cubic yard of fabric at a time. More than that, though, they did it with less than \$2,000 in advertising, spent over the course of two decades.



"We started our business with \$700," says Kirk, who has supplied costume fabric for award-winning films like *Forrest Gump* and *Titanic*. "That was our total capital."

With just \$700 to spend on their start-up, the Kirks couldn't afford advertising. Instead, they pursued PR—media coverage that's earned, not purchased.

"In business, it's really about who knows you," Kirk says. "The way people get to know you is by the publications they read, the television they watch and the radio they listen to."

In other words, small businesses succeed not by selling themselves, but by telling their stories. "Stories are what people want to hear," Kirk says. "Nobody cares that a little shop in Omaha has been opened, but they love hearing about the movies and they love hearing about a business that was started because a couple was adopting a child. It's the human stories that people relate to."

If you're looking for a fresh, effective and inexpensive way to market your business, public relations—PR, publicity, press—might just be the solution you've been looking for. All it takes is a little bit of time and a few good stories.

PR vs. Advertising

Like advertising, at its core PR is about media exposure. The difference is in the entrance fee, according to [Sandra Beckwith](#), author of *Streetwise Complete Publicity Plans: Create Publicity That Will Spark Immediate Exposure and Excitement*.

"Publicity is the free exposure you get in the news media and advertising is the paid exposure you get in the news media," she says.

PR isn't just cheaper than advertising, though. It's also stronger thanks to the implied editorial endorsement that your company gets when the media *chooses* to write about it. "Publicity has 10 times the value of advertising because of that implied editorial endorsement," Beckwith says.

Robert Smith, a.k.a. The PR Doctor, agrees. Founder of Rockton, Ill.-based [Robert Smith & Associates Public Relations](#), he says that implied editorial endorsements can help your business boom—literally—overnight. He points to media-driven characters like Dr. Phil as proof. "Advertising is you telling people how great you are," he says. "Publicity in a sense is third-party validation."

Meet the Press

In PR, all roads lead back to the news media. Getting publicity for your business, therefore, begins with building relationships with reporters, journalists and editors.

In order to single out the folks you need to know, Beckwith suggests finding out first who your customers are and, more importantly, what they're reading, watching and listening to. "Find out where they're getting their information," she says, "and then be there."

Maybe your customers are reading the local newspaper or your city's business journal. Maybe they're watching local news and listening to local talk radio. Maybe they're reading national trade magazines or niche industry Web sites. Whatever the case, identify the media outlets that are most important to your customers and then make contact with the key media gatekeepers at those outlets, including writers, beat reporters and news directors, which you can find via media directories such as those from [Bacon's](#) and [Bulldog Reporter](#).

Once you've identified important players, reach out and give them newsworthy information about you and your competitors, offer them visuals for their stories, give them access to unique research, introduce them to key contacts and even meet them for lunch to talk about story ideas.

"Do anything you can to help them do their job better," Beckwith says. When you do, she adds, media outlets will begin to see you as a valuable resource. "It's all about relationships. People like working with people they like. Help them see you're likable."

Kirk believes in the power of media relationships so much that she recently started a second business, [PRM Associates](#), to

help other small businesses build them.

"Call your local newspaper, call your local talk show radio station, call your local television station," she recommends. "They can only [report on] the people they know about, and you're the only person who can tell them you're out there. It literally is as easy as picking up the phone."

Tell Stories, Make News

Of course, once you've got the media on the phone, you've got to have something newsworthy to say to them. To get ideas, Kirk suggests signing up for [Google Alerts](#) with search terms that are relevant to your industry; use the results to come up with article ideas that you can pitch to the reporters in your Rolodex.

The best ideas, however, are likely to be the ones that come from your own experiences. "The key is to look at your own life and your own circumstances," Kirk says. When you tell stories that only you can tell, chances are good that folks will want to listen to them.

If you don't have news, Smith suggests making news, then writing a press release to spread the word. His ideas include writing a letter to the editor, making up an award to give to influential people in your community and creating a new holiday or commemorative celebration. At the very least, he says, you should get your hands on publications' editorial calendars; they'll tell you what articles are already on the docket for the year so that you can proactively offer your expertise as a source on relevant topics.

Editorial calendars are useful to you, but Beckwith encourages business owners to spend their time, instead, on giving journalists something that's useful to them. Her favorite tool is a "tip sheet"—a type of press release that offers succinct tips and advice in the form of a bulleted or numbered list. If you're a contractor, for instance, you might send a tip sheet to the Home editor at your local newspaper offering tips on making common home repairs. If you're a florist, you might send a tip sheet to the Garden editor with ideas for pest control. If you own a restaurant, you might e-mail a tip sheet to the local Food editor with tips for fine dining etiquette. The ideas are endless, really.


Whatever your story, just get out and tell it, Beckwith urges. "It's not rocket science," she says. "It does not take a gifted intelligence to conduct a successful publicity campaign. It just takes knowledge and understanding of some basic tools and tactics."

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 Sandra Beckwith
<http://www.sandrabeckwith.com>
 Robert Smith & Associates Public Relations
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