

Make Public Relations Part of Your Small-business Marketing

When marketing your small business, you need to include all possible options in your tool kit.

One such option is called public relations. Many business owners think of it as free advertising. This is a myth because it isn't free and it isn't advertising.

Parts of public relations, or PR, such as announcements of new hires, training for staff, or an expansion or relocation of your business, can get you into the media.

Yet those items represent only a small part of what public relations means. Most owners want more. They want everything they do to be seen as newsworthy. They want to be looked at as an expert and regularly seen in various media outlets.

“The first thing to remember about getting PR for your firm is that it takes effort, sometimes a lot of effort,” says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. “It may not cost you directly in terms of dollars, but it takes time to build the relationships that puts you regularly in front of an audience.”

Building an effective public relations campaign means establishing a relationship with your target audience as well as the media who focus on that audience. It means building relationships with individuals who are considered opinion leaders or influencers in your area of business or expertise.

Remember that the media is looking to reach an audience. They want material that attracts the reader. Ask yourself what is in your story that would interest an audience.

One way to attract attention to your business is to become the expert in an area, whether it's a subject or geographic.

“Being seen as an ‘expert’ in a particular area can bring the media to your door,” says (Insert name and title) of (Insert county). “Reaching that point, however, does not occur overnight. It takes time, plus an understanding of the industry, the market and the needs of individuals.”

So how do you know when you are the go-to person? You won't until the phone begins to ring or your email box starts filling with questions.

Remember, though, that now things happen outside of your control. Conversations will be based on someone else's time frame. If a call comes in when you are busy, you need to get back to that person quickly or he or she will move on to someone else.

Also, you will not have control about the agenda. The contact will not be a time to sell your product or service. The person contacting you has specific questions he or she wants answered.

This means you need to be prepared. Having a file or notebook where you can keep bits of information or reference material that you can use at a moment's notice is helpful. This also is where you have your short tagline as to what you and your company do.

“If you have done your homework and have made a case for your product or service as a solution to a problem, there are times when the conversation may be directly about your business,” Muske says. “Yet even then, don't be surprised if you get more questions as to the needs of the consumer or what is already on the market than time to pitch your business.”

At this point, you may wonder if public relations is worth it.

It certainly can be. While it's not free, you can't directly measure what it brings, and the timing and types of questions are out of your control, being seen as the contact point in an area gives you credibility and builds your reputation. That's worth the effort.

For help, contact your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU's small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter. Or check out Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/NDSUextsmallbiz> or Twitter at @gmuske.

Other resources include <http://powerofbusiness.net> and www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship. The Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and SCORE, also can be valuable resources.

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For more information, contact glenn.muske@ndsu.edu or call (701) 328-9718. You also can visit our website, www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness.