

Underestimating the Power of In-house PR

By Carolyn Moncel

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Do small-business owners always have to rely on large PR agencies to get attention from the press? An entrepreneur recently asked me this question during a networking event for women business owners. Of course my answer was, "No," but not for the reasons one might expect.

Ultimately, I do believe the time comes when a company needs professional guidance from a PR agency -- be it a large or small one -- to secure media coverage. But I also believe that a really media savvy small-business owner, or a two-person marketing team can do a fantastic job in promoting an organization. Here's how I know it can work.

A few years ago during the dot.com boom, I worked for a small online publishing company. We had a terrific technical team and staff, two great products, but no one knew the company existed. As a start-up, it was crucial for the company to gain awareness through media exposure because advertising was too expensive.

Since our marketing department only consisted of two people -- the marketing director and myself, there was a bit of concern within the organization as to whether we had enough in-house resources available to successfully get the company much-needed ink. So the company's executive team hatched an interesting plan. They offered our in-house marketing team the chance to bid on the company's PR project as if we were an outside agency.

My experience had always been in public relations, rather than product marketing. My boss' experience had always been the opposite. We seized the opportunity to combine our knowledge, skills and research.

Our tiny two-person team matched PR wits squarely against four established pros - including one former White House aide. Guess what? Our ideas prevailed, and the company decided to ditch the notion of hiring a big PR firm in favor of keeping the in-house team.

Before long we were generating some memorable press for our company. Over a two-year period we placed stories on our company in more than 100 media outlets - from MSNBC and Forbes to the Wall Street Journal and Wired News online. We did it by studying what the big PR agencies did well, and also by using our department's "smallness" to our advantage. Here's how you can do it, too.

Research your company.

Forget that you own or work within the organization. Really invest the time in understanding your

company's structure, the executives and their backgrounds, the products and technology, the industry in which your company belongs, competitors and experts, and most of all the target audience -- the people who stand to benefit most from your product or service. If you know all of this information, then you'll be in a better position to brainstorm ideas on how to get the media's attention. Doing this also helps in flushing out your overall marketing plan -- which PR is only a part.

Research the reporters who cover your company's industry and study the types of stories that they like to write.

Learn their deadlines and how they prefer to be contacted. Introduce yourself by phone and make it a point to speak with them regularly -- not just to talk about your company, but also about the industry in general. Use those conversations to offer up source materials that will help reporters write terrific stories. If you are able to do this successfully, you will become a trusted source that reporters return to repeatedly, and you will significantly increase your chances of gaining coverage for your company.

Always Return Media Phone Calls Immediately.

Keep yourself and your organization at the ready to receive phone calls from the press. Make sure that reporters know how to reach you in a 24-hour cycle. This means they should have your office, cell, home, and pager numbers, as well as a contact e-mail address. If you still happen to miss the call, return it ASAP. Always prepare yourself or members from your organization to conduct interviews from anywhere, at any time.

Conduct proper follow up after the interview.

This is not a call to find out when a story will be published, but rather a call to make sure that the reporters have everything they need in order to write a favorable story on your organization.

Whenever our company executives were interviewed by reporters, one team member would always accompany them to the interview to take careful notes. Alternately, the other team member would remain in the office on standby. If, during the interview, the reporter indicated a need for specific information, an urgent message would be relayed back to the office so that the team member had time to gather the information. Without fail, we always had the requested information waiting in the reporter's e-mail inbox before they arrived back to the office. This may seem like a small task, but getting it right could really decide whether or not a reporter selects your story, or moves on to a new one.

The important point to remember here is this. Never underestimate the power and dedication of your in-house staff. Before you make the investment in retaining a PR agency, look at your internal talent first. What you find just might surprise you, and their drive to succeed will become contagious throughout your entire organization. And when the time comes to hire a PR firm, you will have a ready-made collaborative team in place to work with your outside agency. Your in-house team knows your company better than anyone and that's where you, as a small-business owner, have an advantage over the "big boys" at the large PR agencies in getting the media's attention.

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