

Profiting from Publicity: Online Public Relations

By Philippa Gamse

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Introduction

One of the cheapest ways to market your business is to take advantage of the many opportunities that exist for free or low cost public relations. The exponential growth of the Internet provides constantly expanding virtual public relations resources.

So how can you capitalize on it? First, let's be clear. This can make a tangible difference to your business. I recently wrote to the excellent e-mail discussion "SpeakerNet", asking for experiences about the use of Web sites for marketing. Here are some of the comments that I received about the public relations aspect:

"My Web site has allowed my articles to be published in many national magazines, such as Presentations, T&D, numerous newspapers and industry publications. My free articles have are downloaded by over 50,000 people each year from over 60 countries."

- Lenny Laskowski, <http://www.ljlseminars.com/>

Richard Thieme's site, at:<http://www.thiemeworks.com/> has received numerous awards, including both a "Hot Site of the Day," and a "Cool Site of the Day" from USA Today. Readers forward Richard's weekly column, "Islands in the Clickstream," to numerous friends and other online discussion groups. Richard receives frequent requests from many different countries to republish the column, for which he charges a reprint fee. So, although his original articles are available for free via his Web site, they are highly leveraged into other media, and speaking engagements.

Hopefully now you are inspired to look for free PR opportunities, and ready for some practical tips.

Integrating your PR message

One key factor is that your total message and corporate image should be consistent both in the real world and online. Used effectively, public relations activities in the traditional media can draw traffic to your Web site, and conversely, articles on your Web site can generate business. Jesse Weeks told me: "For each article I print, at least one inquiry for services results, often many."

Therefore a cardinal rule is to keep the look and feel of your Web site in line with your printed materials. Your Web site is your online press kit. As David Arnold says: "I have my company logo prominently featured both on my Web site and printed materials. As soon as my package arrives meeting planners connect it with my site, and that in turn reminds them of our phone conversation,

reducing the common "Hmmm, who's this from?" or "Gee, where have I heard this name before?"

Promote your articles!

If you have any published articles, (or even unpublished ones), consider putting each one on a separate page of your Web site. This has several advantages:

- * it plays to the Web philosophy that "content is king", and showcases your expertise and the breadth of your knowledge

- * you can construct keywords and descriptions specifically for each article, and promote them individually in the search engines. This allows you to further differentiate yourself, and significantly improves your chances of being found online.

For example, I recently discovered from my access logs that my Web site was receiving many hits from Sweden. I checked all the Web sites that currently link to mine (which I had neglected to do for a while), and discovered that an article I had written about effective online research techniques was being cited as a resource for a course at the University of Uppsala!

Searching for Web links can be done in Alta Vista by entering link:yourdomain in the search box, e.g. link:CyberSpeaker.com

I have noticed that a number of Web sites state that visitors may request articles that are not immediately available. For the reasons explained above, I am not sure that this is the best tactic. It may be a great way to get leads and build a mailing list, but it doesn't help your visibility.

And while we're on this subject, don't just put the plain text into your site exactly as it is on paper. The article should be formatted so that it reads well on the screen, and has good navigation both within the page, and back to other areas of your site.

Online press releases

There are ever expanding numbers of newspapers, newsletters, and e-zines (electronic magazines) online, and also reporters looking for stories. Since Web sites have to be constantly updated (even more than in the real world), they are hungry for your news!

A great resource for finding appropriate places to send press releases is Mediafinder. This site can be searched under numerous different subject areas, geographic locations, etc. It provides Web site addresses, e-mail contacts and media kit details.

E-mail releases

Remember when sending an e-mail press release to follow some basic rules:

- * not all e-mail readers can display formatted text, so stick with plain 10pt Courier, and keep your line lengths to 60-80 characters

- * be sure to include your contact e-mail address and Web site URL in a prominent place, and make sure that you have a great signature file (the piece of text that appears at the end of every e-mail message). It should be brief, but contain your name, company, one line about what you offer, telephone, fax, e-mail and Web site address. Your e-mail program should help you to create this, unless you are using America Online (where you can cut and paste)

* use a "knock their socks off" subject / headline, such as "Internet Benefits For Business Discussed On Web Site Broadcast" - not just "Press release" to entice the editor to read your message; and

* don't "spam" reporters (i.e. blitz your e-mails indiscriminately). Send your release to targeted and appropriate places only.

Some real world rules also apply here. Don't bombard the editor with e-mails asking why your piece was not accepted. But if you do make it into "print", perhaps a real card to thank the editor is a better marketing ploy than e-mail (and I don't often say that!)

Caryn Amster picks up postcards on vacation and uses them for media thank you notes. Why a postcard? Because everyone in the newsroom sees it, wonders why someone is sending a card from Disney World to the newsroom. One card gets a lot of mileage.

Press release Web pages

There are some major advantages to using press releases on your (or others') Web sites. You can include:

- * hyperlinks to related stories, or further background information;
- * sound and video clips to enhance your presentation; and
- * buttons to access your release in different languages (great for international speakers!)

You can also easily track where your press releases are published and how many people read them. If they are included on your site, you can find this information from your own access logs. If you submit press releases for other publications, consider using different e-mail contact addresses for each. Often your Internet Service Provider will supply multiple e-mail boxes as part of their Web hosting service, which is a great way to quantify your responses.

There are several Web sites that allow you to submit free press releases under a number of different searchable categories. Two such sites are: PRWeb and Webwire.

Online Radio Shows

In addition to "print" publications, there is an increasing number of "online radio shows". In fact, Yahoo! has a whole category devoted to them.

The shows are generally broadcast in "Real Audio", or a similar program. This is software that is free to download and easy to install on your computer. The "streaming audio" is heard as it comes to your machine, so you don't have to wait for the whole clip to download before you can hear it.

Again, these shows are looking for content and guests. The Yahoo! listing often includes each one's subject matter or focus, so you can identify appropriate targets for your message.

So Do It!

Other than an investment of time, and some research savvy, all of the opportunities outlined in this article are free. You don't need to have a Web site to pursue many of them (although I believe that it enhances your visibility and credibility if you do).

Public relations is an area that most of us can take better advantage of. So venture into Cyberspace, and "PProfit from Publicity!"

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