



How to promote your business

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Public Relations (PR) is a profession we love to hate. It has inspired satirical TV shows and been dismissed as spin, yet it is also the engine driving most successful Australian businesses.

At its heart, PR is about communication – getting your message out to the people most likely to respond. And, whether you're paying for professional help or going it alone, it can be an effective and low-cost alternative to paid advertising.

When Tina Shaw started her online magazine The Single Parent Bible, she had virtually nothing to spend on promotion. Advertising was out of the question, but the PR strategies she followed were so successful that she was inspired to write a book about them. Start a Business With Less Than \$100 is now available nationally through Officeworks and online.

"You don't need to spend a fortune promoting your business," she says. "All it takes is time, energy and enthusiasm. Don't get me wrong, advertising has its place, as do publicists. But I took a leaf out of Donut King's book; they have never paid a cent for advertising in 20 years of business."

Where to start

The first step in any promotion is to identify your target market. Who could use what you have to sell? How old are they? Are they male or female? What do they like and dislike? And, most importantly, what do they read, watch and listen to?

Once you know, you can create a wish list of relevant newspapers, magazines, radio programmes and TV shows.

You can phone for details of the best person to contact. "If you can afford it, it's also a good idea to purchase a media directory or editorial contact management software to develop a comprehensive list of editors, reporters and writers," says Natalie Moutia of NM Marketing Consulting.

The next essential is a killer media release.

Rachael Bermingham has co-authored and promoted two best-selling books, *Read My Lips* and *Four Ingredients*, and now acts as a consultant for businesses around the world.

"When I started getting really busy, I hired a girl who was studying PR," she says. "The first press release she wrote had no colour, no photos, a boring headline and was sent as an attachment. She said that was the way she'd been taught to do it. When I showed her ones I'd done myself she'd never seen anything like them!

"I just try to think what would jump out at me if I were a journo receiving 200 press releases a week. I make them colourful, always with photos, a logo – a bit of flash and bang – and always a curiosity-peaking headline, something to spark people's imagination and make them want to know more."

One trap many self-publicists fall into is making their media release sound like an advertisement.

"If it does, the recipient will either bin it or pass it on to the advertising department," says Shaw. "To prevent that from happening, you need to think of an angle that is appealing for a general editorial readership. Try to think of yourself as a reader, not the owner of a

business who wants a plug.”

However well-produced, a single media release very rarely gets results.

“You must call and follow up,” Shaw continues. “Email again, or phone and tell them your story verbally. Be likeable, friendly and enthusiastic; no-one will promote your business if you aren’t approachable and pleasant.”

You must also be available.

“If a reporter rings, you must take the call,” says Moutia. “Journalists are often on a tight deadline and, if you don’t take the call or call back promptly, they will find a new source that is more reliable. That’s why you should give journalists all of your numbers even though you might occasionally be interrupted at home.”

Even when it all comes together, there’s no opportunity to rest on your laurels.

“I believe business is 80 per cent promotion,” says Bermingham. “Marketing never stops. If you’re not continually getting out there, the business will run down. You need to keep on coming up with new angles that make your business newsworthy. Successful promotion is hard work.”

It’s also work that not everyone feels able to do.

“You need to know your strengths,” says consultant and entrepreneur Jacinta Richmond. “If PR is not something you enjoy or feel confident about, you really could be better off paying an outside source.”

Katherine Sampson, founder of the Healthy Habits franchise, chose to focus on other aspects of her business from the outset.

“We started with a very small PR agency,” she says. “They managed to get us a number of mentions and little stories, one of which was in the Herald Sun. A producer at Bread TV saw it and asked whether we’d be interested in talking about our experience with business banking for a segment they were doing on NAB. We got a three-minute spot – but the producer liked our story and said he’d like to do something bigger. Coincidentally, the following week we were launching in Sydney and opening a new store in Queensland, so the team came with us and gave us a lot of exposure.”

Luck? Not necessarily.

“PR builds PR,” says Sampson. “You never know where things will lead. I’d say never turn down an opportunity because it seems too small.”

Sampson also reiterates the need for a good story. She found that being a single mother of two young children who was going it alone in the franchise sector generated a lot of interest. She also acknowledges that not everyone has an attention-grabbing personal history.

“In that case, you need a really great product or service, and to be able to create a powerful story around that,” she says.

Finding the right agency

If you do decide to go with a PR agency, Sampson recommends searching out two or three that suit your style then asking them to submit a quote.

“We once went with someone simply because they were a friend of a friend,” she says. “That was a big mistake. We paid them \$8,000 to launch a store but they were working in the wrong circles and we got absolutely nothing out of it. It was money wasted.”

It’s also important to understand exactly what you will be paying for.

“An hourly fee is not necessarily a flat fee,” says Richmond. “Many consultants also charge costs. For instance, when they make a five-minute phone call you pay for both the time it takes and the price of the call. That can all add up very quickly. So be sure to do your due diligence when searching out a consultant and get a final quote in writing.”

While larger companies might have more contacts and command more respect from some journalists, big is not always better.

“If you’re a client paying a \$3,000 retainer while others are paying \$15,000, you have to question whether your brand will get the attention it needs,” says Dionne Moskow of Polkadot PR. “Also, if your agency specialises in a particular industry, you need to know whether they have a direct competitor on their books. This can work well in certain industries – fashion, for example – but can be a big negative for others.”

Large or small, no agency can work miracles.

"Many SMEs seem to believe that, once they've signed with a PR agency, they can switch off and not worry about it," continues Moskow. "This is not the case. Agencies need a lot of input from the client, particularly at the start of a campaign."

PR also needs time – it takes a minimum of three months and sometimes six months or even longer to build a rapport with media relevant to your organisation, laying the foundations for a media programme that will bring success over the long term.

Even then there are no guarantees. Success is determined by a number of factors, many beyond the control of both you and your agency. For instance, your story could be pre-empted by the launch of a similar product or ousted by a major news event.

It's also true that, unlike advertising, PR gives you very little control over your brand.

"What you say isn't always what you read," says Peta Ellis of Red Carpet Projects.

"Journalists don't purposely misquote people, but they can be selective in what they use and how they present it. So don't be surprised if occasionally something comes out that doesn't exactly reflect what you were saying in an interview or, in the worst case scenario, is placed in a context that may be contrary to your expectations or desires.

"While, in most instances, media coverage will flow as you expect, there will also be times when you – and your agency if you have one – will be disappointed with the outcome. You might work hard to be included in a feature and then be left out. Or a journalist will interview you and the story won't ever see the light of day. It's important to set realistic levels of expectation, and to review disappointments with a view to learning from them."