

Public Relations for Your Small Business

This short course will introduce you to what public relations is, what it isn't, and what you can do to get more publicity for your small business, whatever its size. Get tips about developing a consistent company identity and message, and follow practical steps to spread the word about their services or products.

Welcome to Public Relations!

The term "public relations" (PR) can have several different meanings to several different people. The PRSA ([Public Relations Society of America](#)) provides a good blanket definition of this communications discipline:

"Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other. . . public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony."

In other words, PR performs much the same role as translators at the United Nations, ensuring that everybody stays on the same page. It's a way of delivering the message you want to the audience you want. For a company, PR is a way to communicate with the media and the public, using existing channels of information and creating new ones to spread awareness and promote itself.

How PR Differs from Marketing and Advertising

You might think of marketing and advertising as direct methods of generating sales, and PR as an indirect approach to achieve the same ends. People usually recognize marketing and advertising when they see it (and in some cases, tune out what is said), but they're not as aware that PR may be behind the message they're receiving. That's because PR gets its messages across by making news, and people are more likely to trust a newspaper or news program than they are an advertisement.

However, PR isn't just about getting your name in the news. Some of the primary PR functions listed by the PRSA show how this discipline differs even further from marketing and advertising. Successful PR does the following:

- Translates a company's private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action.
- Researches, evaluates, and conducts communication with the public to help an organization achieve its goals.
- Drums up new opportunities for a business because it gets people in the organization interacting with audiences.
- Helps protect a company when it's under attack.
- Helps keep the company's management from isolating itself and losing touch with the public.
- Helps organizations change successfully -- something they must do to stay competitive

and efficient.

So as you can see, PR increases and enhances the visibility of a company without coming across like marketing or advertising.

Why Small Businesses Need PR to Enhance Their Visibility

Every business owner has one thing in common: the desire to create a stable, steady business that achieves profitability and grows over time. If you're a small business owner and you want to publicize your products or services, you don't need a massive marketing or advertising budget. You can do it through PR.

Whether you want to raise awareness of your company, help spread the word about a new product, or even lobby the government, PR is a low-cost, highly effective method to fill in the gaps of communication that marketing and advertising can't reach.

In the section, we'll take a look at the first step in a successful PR campaign: *defining your business identity*.

Defining Your Business Identity

Before spreading the word about your business, make sure you understand the identity of your business. If you don't know your business and how others perceive it, your PR efforts will be that much harder.

First, Ask Four Questions

When determining your business identity, ask yourself four questions:

1. What does your business (or product) do?
2. What's the core benefit you provide?
3. Who's the recipient of that benefit?
4. What's your unique selling position?

Here's an example: You have a business that enables you to post family albums online. To construct a mission statement for your business, answer each of the four questions, and then fold the answers into one brief, compelling statement. Like so:

1. What does your business (or product) do?: *It offers an easily accessible, private, Web-based site for posting family photos, movies, news, and other significant information.*
2. What's the core benefit you provide? *Families stay in closer touch.*
3. Who's the recipient of that benefit? *Families who live in far-away locations and have Web access.*
4. What's your unique selling position? *There are several options here. This company could offer several months free access, or it could offer services such as digitizing photos on site, and then returning them to the owners, while waiving start-up fees.*

Have an Elevator Pitch Ready

Once you know the answers to the four questions, try to shape the answers into a simple paragraph that sums it all up. You can call this your mission statement, or your elevator pitch -- ideally, it should be short and clear enough that you can explain your business to a complete stranger in the course of an elevator ride from the first to the sixth floor. Alternately, it could be called your mission statement.

Based on these answers, this company's elevator pitch might read something like this:

<Name of company> gives families their own private corner of the Internet to share photos, news, recipes, and family history, receive automatic e-mail reminders of birthdays and other events, and send alerts in case of a family emergency. Staying in touch has never been so simple!

Know Your Strengths and Weaknesses

If you want a good picture of where your business is now and where it's headed, take an objective look at its internal strengths and weaknesses. These two components are essential to understanding your business' identity.

Make a list with two columns: one for strengths and the other for weaknesses. List all that you can think of in each of these categories:

- The people on your team
- Your available finances (both cash and credit)
- If applicable, your manufacturing or production capacities

Take a clear, honest inventory of the strengths and weaknesses you can observe in your business on a daily basis. Employee personality traits, employees, cash flow, expertise, and other such strengths and weaknesses all factor into a company's character. The key is to be rigorously truthful. If you have a talented employee who never finishes work on time, consider him a weakness. Label a talented and productive employee as a strength. Count employees with lots of expertise in your business as strengths. If some of those employees lack certain basic business skills, though, label that as a weakness.

Don't shy from getting outside opinions, either. If your business deals with customers face to face, ask your employees to report complaints or compliments they receive from customers. You can also try reaching the customers directly with a survey that has them rate your employees' performance.

Once complete, this list will help you leverage your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses.

Fine-Tune Your Image, Message, and Strengths

When crafting your identity, be sure that you always focus on the benefits you provide, not the features you offer. Your customers don't care about digital quality for any other reason than it makes music sound great. Digital isn't the selling point -- it's a feature. Great sound is the selling point -- it's a benefit.

At this point, your job is to identify the benefits that your customers crave. Marketing guru [Jay Levinson](#), author of *Guerilla Marketing*, lists some of the most common desires of people, which are:

- To be safe
- To be happy
- To have fun
- To be attractive
- To be sexy
- To be successful
- To like themselves
- To be liked by others
- To be free from pain
- To have more leisure time
- To accomplish more in a shorter time
- To feel good
- To eat well
- To be healthier
- To connect with their loved ones

Understanding how the products or services you sell match these benefits helps you craft an identity that appeals to your customers and promises them something they really want. This is the first step toward building a lasting relationship with them.

Conveying Your Identity through Minimedia

Everything related to your business -- from your employees' appearance, to your location, to the appearance of your office -- affects your company's identity. Even the details say a lot more than you may realize.

Take the common business card. A well-designed card can help brand your business by describing it with a catchy tag-line and offering valuable information such as a price map or driving directions. Its color, font, and point size can convey a strong impression of your company's sense of style and attitude.

That's why Levinson calls these utilitarian objects of the business world minimedia: They make the first impression to new and potential clients.

Other minimedia include:

- Letterhead

- Web site
- Signage
- Flyers
- Brochures
- Newsletters
- Stationery

When you have a business card designed, be sure that you proofread the printer's work carefully. There's nothing that gives off a worse message than a mass-produced typo.

If you really want your minimedia to look professional, you may want to consider paying a professional designer to create them. A good designer can craft a brand identity to give a consistent and professional look to all your signs, flyers, and business cards.

Project the Right Image

The Key to Good PR: Conveying What's Special About Your Company

Before you can sell your company to the public, you've got to know that special thing your company sells. This is not only a matter of analyzing your products or listing your strengths and weaknesses, but also finding that unique aspect of your company that sets it apart from the competition. It's the most important aspect of your business identity -- the hook on which you hang all of your PR.

What do you offer that your potential customer base can't find anywhere else?

Maybe you've already found this selling point and even incorporated it into a catchy slogan for your company. You may have stumbled on it as you thought about your business identity. If nothing has come to you yet, assemble the same team who helped you list your strengths and weaknesses and get them thinking about what your company offers that competitors can't touch.

Don't limit your thinking to just products. Consider the speed and quality of your business, the friendliness of your employees, and the approach you take to the service you provide. While you're at it, consider who your customer is as well. Seeing your business through the eyes of your target market brings the special qualities of your business to light. It also helps you select which publications, TV channels, and other media to contact with your press releases and other promotional materials, which we'll discuss next.

Once you've narrowed the list down as far as it can go, revisit the elevator pitch you came up with in the last section on your business identity and fine-tune it, with an emphasis on what only you can offer.

For example:

Chrome Dome Magazine is the leading publication for bald men. With a monthly magazine, a book division, a Web presence, and a line of DVDs, Chrome Dome serves today's contemporary bald man across a wide span of media.

As you grow opportunities for publicity (in the case of Chrome Dome, a convention for bald men, or putting issues in a toupee store), make sure they stick to this mission statement. You should also attach it to the end of every press release, providing a nice reminder to the reader that explains what your business is all about.

From there, fine-tune and finesse what you've come up with into a single line that clearly states why customers would find it worth doing business with you. You can make it sound like a slogan ("Mace is the place with the helpful weapon salesman"), or a simple state of fact ("Ted's Taxi: We get you there"). This sort of short statement clarifies what your company is about to the people hearing your PR message.

Getting that message out into the world is what we'll cover in the next section.

Contacting Media

Marketing and advertising cost money. Fortunately, they're not the only game in town when it comes to getting your name in front of big audiences. One of the primary purposes of PR is to alert and entice the media to publicize your business for you. With the right approach to the media, you can generate as much -- if not more -- interest in your company as any marketing firm or advertising agency.

When contacting the media about your company, keep the following rules in mind:

You can't control what they write or say: A few years ago, a nascent technology lobbying coalition launched a big PR campaign. The campaign generated plenty of high-profile coverage, but not all of it was positive. In fact, some of it uncovered and deepened internal rifts within the company -- in spite of the fact that the coalition had hired PR consultants with years of experience. What's the lesson here? Even if you interest the media in what you're doing, you can't control what they write.

Don't expect the media to do your bidding: it has its own ideas about a story, which may or may not cast your business in a positive light. If a reporter makes factual errors, you can ask for a correction. If you just feel like you've been cast in an unflattering light, you can write a letter to the editor for publication, but you might be better off just letting well enough alone. Remember this old saw: All publicity is good publicity.

Give them a hook: Almost no one wants to write about your new business just because it's new. But if you give them a news hook on which they can peg a story, you'll get a better response. Such newsworthy ideas could include launching your business with a conference of industry experts or a party with local celebrities. You can also think about ways your business highlights current trends. Editors of lifestyle sections in newspapers are always looking for local angles on larger trends.

Stay friendly: Don't harangue reporters or editors who show little interest in what you have to say. Stay friendly with them no matter what. Be polite, thank them for listening, and try to pitch them an idea or two further down the road. A reporter's interest in what you have to say varies, depending not only on your pitch, but also on the amount of reportable news on any given day,

so don't take their response personally. If a train derails downtown on the day you plan to make your pitch, reschedule.

Press Kits

One-on-one pitches to reporters can work quite well, but to reach more media and save everybody's time, try targeting the press en masse with a press kit.

Unlike an individual press release, which focuses on a specific newsworthy event, a press kit is an evergreen document. A writer or editor should be able to reference the material inside a year from the time you send it. Even if the media isn't immediately inspired to give you coverage, chances are, the media will very likely file away your press kit and access it later when a story might be more appropriate.

Press kits should contain the following information:

- Clean, well-written copy.
- Accurate, up-to-date information.
- Brief bios of your management team.
- Information about the origins of your business. If there's a strong story to tell about the company's founding, this is the place to do it.
- A succinct synopsis of your basic business.
- Photos of company principals.
- Quotes from previous articles about your company.
- Customer and client testimonials.
- List of clients and customers.
- If the press kit includes photos, make them of reproducible quality so the publication has the option to reprint.

Op-Eds

Keep an eye out for issues on which you can present yourself as an expert in the editorial pages of national and local newspapers. You might even keep a clip file of stories that show promise as they develop. Newspapers are more likely to select the op-ed pieces of in-the-know people with a connection to a topic over random cranks who have just an opinion, and they'll print your name as well as your company affiliation. As long as you try not to court too much controversy, you can raise your profile considerably.

Now that we've covered some tips for getting into print, let's take a look at the PR opportunities that await you in cyberspace.

Dos and Don't for Generating Good PR Online

Limitless contacts, free distribution, instant updates, virtually no overhead -- the advantages of PR online just keep coming. The Internet is a nimble instrument of communication, and if you play it right, you can use it to make beautiful PR music.

Web Sites

Most customers these days not only expect companies to have Web sites, they may think less of those that don't. A company Web site isn't just a way to keep up with the virtual Joneses, it's a valuable medium that can inform potential customers about your products and services, provide information about your prices, post up-to-date news, and assure customers that you're professional and established.

Treat your Web site as an online brochure, keeping the information accurate, up to date, and free of errors. Bear in mind that professional designers don't cost much and are worth every penny. Even beginning Web users recognize a slapped-together, homemade Web site when they see it and won't find the results very professional. They'll also lose interest quickly if they find out-of-date information or worse, get a File Not Found error.

Many companies have a press area on their Web sites that contains much of the same information found in the press kit, as well as regularly updated press releases. Build a press room into your Web site and you'll find that visitors will appreciate the convenience of knowing where to go for company background papers, articles that have been written about your company, industry information, a roster of company executives, and contact information.

Be sure to lace the Web pages carrying your press releases with several key words to make them easier to find by a search engine. Any Web design tutorial, such as the one on the [WebMonkey](#) Web site, will provide you with instructions on how to perform this simple trick. Other Online Tools

The Web is full of free and/or cheap tools for spreading information to the places you want it to go. You could think of the Internet as a 24-hour, ever-changing press release capable of reaching limitless numbers of people and getting instant feedback. These options include:

E-mail: The Web's interactivity can help you expand your relationship with customers through regular communication. Simply post a form letting customers sign up for e-mail updates to get news and special offers from your company. Hearing from your business regularly can build customer loyalty and maintain the awareness you've already built.

Online press release Web sites: These sites, such as [PRWeb](#) and [WebWire](#), post your press releases for free (or for a small fee), which helps you expose them to editors, TV news producers, and anyone else who may be able to spread your information further.

Online newsletters: Often in need of content, many online newsletters accept for-publication articles business owners write about their company or their area of expertise. Simply Google "online newsletters" and the name of your industry and look into their submission policies. When submitting, be sure to include your bio and contact information at the end of the article so interested readers can get in touch with you.

Internet forums: Posting regular messages on forums, bulletin boards, e-mail listservs, and newsgroups related to your business expands your visibility to a wide circle of people with an

interest in the service you provide. Just be careful not to make the hard sell all the time -- being an active participant in such a forum is enough.

Take Note of When You Need a Professional

Maybe you don't have the time. Maybe you can't write a press release to save your life. Maybe you just haven't hit it off with reporters. A number of reasons may make doing your own PR a difficult task. That's where professionals come in. Plenty of PR professionals offer a variety of services for small businesses. Generally, they fall into these roles:

Publicists are devoted to sending the press releases and press kits, making the phone calls, and arranging the appearances and interviews that will get your business in the media. PR firms focus on creating complete PR campaigns, from press releases to something as elaborate as a promotional party. Booking agents specialize in creating and getting you into speaking engagements at seminars, conferences, and other industry events. Hiring a PR professional doesn't immediately translate into more sales. Chances are your business will do better under the guidance of a PR professional, but it's still no guarantee.

If you can help it, look for PR professionals with experience in your industry or field. They'll have a greater chance of understanding your business and know who to get in touch with to spread the word about it.

For More Information

Plenty of Web sites provide information on hiring PR help, as well as other information about how PR can be a boon to your business. A few helpful resources include:

[The Public Relations Society of America](#) : Numerous articles on PR from the industry organization.

[Powerhomebiz.com](#): This useful Web site has a PR section for small business tips.

[Entrepreneur.com](#): Helpful columns on PR from Entrepreneur magazine. [Fiveoclockclub.com](#):

Useful primer on PR for small business. Moving On

That's it for this short course in PR. Hopefully, you're on your way to creating the PR plan you need to spread the word about your company's unique offerings.