

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS



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Writing a Great Press Release

An Untapped Media Marketing Tool for Your Business

Most small business owners don't really think about the media when it comes to marketing their businesses. In fact, I'd venture to say many have never even thought about using a press release as a marketing tool. That puts you at an advantage, because you're going to learn how to do it effectively and immediately be a step ahead of your competitors. You are in an even more advantageous position if you are located in a small to medium sized town. I have worked in small market radio for a number of years and can tell you with certainty that media outlets in smaller communities are constantly looking for stories to fill their news broadcasts and papers. Press releases are welcome because they provide the news-seekers with information they can use to inform the community. The challenge for you as a small business owner, is to start thinking about branding your business rather than selling your product. A press release is not a vehicle to let people know about your upcoming sale or the fact that you now have your spring line in stock. That's called advertising (which by the way, won't hurt your chances of getting heard; advertising in their publications or on their stations is a good way to get your business known by the people who make the media decisions). The press release is, however, a way to inform about something of interest to the general public, while branding your business in the process. The following tips will help you to determine when and how to use a press release to your advantage.

Your news must have a broad outward appeal.

If you're going to write a press release it must be about something that would be of interest to the general public. What kinds of activities is your business involved in beyond selling a product or service? Are you having a charity event? People may want to know about your connection to that charity so they can support your efforts. Are you changing some company policy that has implications for your community? For example, are you adopting a "green" policy in regards to your business practices that will reduce your carbon footprint and contribute to a greener community? Think creatively about what you're doing that might be interesting to others. If you're not doing anything, it

might be a sign that you need to start! Even that can be a newsworthy story ... "Business ABC Takes Lead Role in New Youth Initiative." When your business is giving back to your community, that's instant branding. And what better way to get that news out than letting your local media know about it? Let's say you want to attract attention to something you're doing business wise - what angle can you give it that will draw attention? Opening another location is old news - lots of businesses do that. But what about if along with your new location launch, you also launch a new approach to customer service - "Company XYZ Adopts Radical Approach to Customer Service Guaranteed to Reduce Wait Times" - and then go on to explain how different your new approach is, why you're taking on this approach and how it will benefit potential customers. A good phrase to remember when trying to think about what might be newsworthy, is that the information is about your business, but is focused on someone other than your business. In each of the examples above, the business is the initiator, but someone else is the beneficiary.

Follow a good press release model.

Most press releases are written in the same format to provide news-seekers with the most information. Start with a strong, dynamic, attention-grabbing headline. That's the first thing they'll see and if it doesn't catch their eye, they may not read any further. The youth initiative headline above is a good example - it names your business, shows action, and describes the purpose. Second, sum up what you're doing or the news you want to deliver in a strong introductory sentence or two that gives a snapshot of what you'll be saying. From there, you can move on to the 5 'W's' - who, what, when, where, why - and answer as many questions as you can. The less digging they have to do, the more interested they'll be. Finally, add a concluding paragraph - again, a couple of sentences will suffice, that sum up what you've said and emphasizes key points. Also, your press release should be no more than one page long.



Illustrate your story.

If at all possible, add a brief illustration of the impact of what you're doing. In the customer service example, add statistics about how much you will reduce the wait time for customers. In the youth initiative example, add a story about how one specific youth was positively impacted by the initiative (protecting their anonymity of course). In the green policy, give an example of how much waste you will be reducing by changing your packaging or stepping up your recycling. While news is interesting, it's the impact of the story that really draws people's attention.

Write carefully and professionally.

Often, if media is interested in your story, they'll print it verbatim, or give you a call to fill in a few details. Make sure your press release has been written well enough that it can be inserted in to a media venue with little effort. Proper sentence structure, good grammar, no typos, and a clear concise message are key. Also, refrain from using hype words (fantastic, extraordinary, stupendous, etc.) and from using exclamation marks (especially the excessive !!!!!). It detracts from your credibility. And whatever you do, avoid using all CAPS to emphasize a point. It's just annoying and bad form and doesn't do anything to increase the validity of your point. Just the facts, and nothing but the facts are all you need for a credible press release.

There are dozens of press release templates or samples online so do a bit of research to find one that you can follow easily. Once you've written your press release, fax or email it to key people in the media locations. Try, as much as possible, to get your story directly to the person who is responsible

for that topic. For example, your youth initiative story might go to the community editor, while the green story or the customer service story might go to the business editor. The more specific you can be, the more likely they'll be interested in your story.

Take a fresh look at your business and see whether there are things that might actually be newsworthy, and try this relatively untapped tool for marketing your business. It may give you a whole new perspective on what you're doing and how you're doing it, and that is good for business.

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Is Training and Development Part of Your Strategic Plan?

Creating a Cost-Effective Plan That Any Small Business Can Manage

If you're like a lot of small business owners, you're probably looking at the title of this article with some skepticism. You may have a plan, but you're not sure it's all that strategic. And training and development? Who has time for that? Your staff are all busy every moment of the day doing what needs to get done to keep business humming along - there's no way you could even think about having them take a day off to do training. And yet, the most successful businesses in the world make training and development (also known as T&D) an important part of their organizational strategy, because they know that T&D is good for business. We appreciate the fact that most small businesses would find it difficult to launch a full scale T&D plan. It does require a financial and human resource investment and that needs to be a budgeted expense, but we would like to suggest that you start thinking about how you could develop a learning environment in your company, and work towards developing a T&D strategy that will be good for your employees and good for business. Here are some things to think about.

T&D Should Line Up with Organizational Priorities

Before you launch any type of training program, you should make sure that it lines up with your strategic business plan - or at least with the priorities you have set for your business. T&D is most effective when it is driven by your goals and the needs of your employees.

T&D Should Be Conducted Only After a Needs Analysis

You wouldn't consider building a house without a blueprint. Neither should you consider building a training program without being sure of what you actually need. There are a lot of methods for needs analysis, and you could research those if you are interested, but one of the simplest is to ask a few additional questions as part of your performance appraisal. Ask each employee if there is any area where they would like to receive additional training; any areas that they think the entire staff would benefit from training, or any things they are interested in learning individually. Compare those results to your business priorities and you should have somewhat of a direction for your training plans.



A T&D Example

Imagine that your biggest business priorities for the next year are to raise the

level of customer service your staff delivers and to increase sales by 15%. Your needs analysis showed some interesting patterns. Your sales executives all expressed that they felt they could improve their closing skills. Sally, your office manager expressed a frustration at the way that customer follow-up procedures are being carried out and an interest in spearheading some changes in this area. She hoped she could take a course to help her learn how to do that. In addition, two of your production personnel (James and David) identify a concern about the amount of waste in your packaging and are interested in investigating a way to package your product in a more "green" manner. Finally, your performance appraisals have shown you that there is a disconnect between departments and the staff might benefit from some teambuilding.

As you compare your needs analysis with your priorities, you see some distinct connections. Since it's your first year and your budget is limited, you decide to take a moderate approach. Your training and development plan might look something like this:

1. Develop an in-house workshop to help sales executives work on their closing skills. Time investment: 1 day of your time for planning; 1/2 day sales execs to attend workshop; Dollar investment: minimal - materials for the workshop and the equivalent of a 1/2 selling day.
2. Send Sally to a one-day customer service seminar; Time investment: 1 day from work for Sally; Dollar investment: \$245 for the course
3. Give James and David permission to form a committee to research ideas on greener packaging. Time investment: James and David 5-10 hours to spend on this project; Dollar investment: none
4. Spend two hours once a month doing teambuilding activities; Time investment: 2 hours down time per month for entire staff; Dollar investment: \$2000 (bring in special speakers, take them out for lunch, bring in pizza, purchase a teambuilding video, etc.)

For under \$2,500 you have just created a T&D plan for your company. Now the hard part is how to make these efforts align with your goals and objectives. In order to do that your staff must be invested in each other, supporting one another, and willing to see the big picture. To facilitate this, you ask Sally to share the results of her customer service seminar at the staff meeting, and ask her to bring forward some recommendations as to how you can all raise your levels of service. Sally's enthusiasm will spur others on to commit to these practices. Similarly, have James and David's committee report their findings to the staff. Brainstorm on whether or not any of these ideas are feasible financially and practically, and implement anything that looks workable. Start tracking the closes your sale staff are making to determine whether they are improving and sales are going up. Share these results with the sales team and possibly the rest of the staff.

Is it possible that these measures just might contribute to your goals of improving customer service and increasing sales? I'd say chances are good. In addition, by building your team on a regular basis you are encouraging trust and creating synergy - and that can only improve productivity and employee loyalty. T&D doesn't have to be a frightening prospect. In fact, if you do it carefully and wisely - you can move closer toward your business goals, while boosting your staff morale and productivity. It's a win/win situation! Even if you can't afford much in your first year, the important thing is to do something - just get started!

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What's In a Word?

The Whole Impact of Communication on the Selling Process

Often, we are unaware of the subconscious messages that we give to others around us. Truthful communication requires consistency in the words we use, the tone of our speech, and the body language that we use to communicate. Simply put, what you DO speaks louder than what you SAY!! According to experts, communication between parties is only 7% the words we say. A further 38% is your tone of voice, and 55% is your body language. How does that information affect the sales process? Well, have you ever met a salesperson who it appeared could get away with saying almost anything? Even though their words may have seemed offensive, their clients seem to love them anyway. Yet someone else could walk in and say those same words only to irritate their customer. On the other side, there are sales people whose words are kind and empathetic, but ultimately they lose the sale because their tone and posture are unconsciously combative and antagonistic, or worse, unsure or apathetic.

What might this look like when you're sitting in front of a customer? Take this example. You've done your presentation, given all the information, answered all the questions, and are in the process of closing the sale. You may have memorized a sympathetic response for moving the customer through those final objections, but if your cadence is too quick, or you're leaning too far forward, or your tone indicates a slight boredom with your own words, your customer won't feel your empathy. He may even perceive your communication as contradictory, annoying or insincere - and that makes for a sure sales failure.

The trouble is, most of us can't really be objective about our own way of communicating and how we come across to others. We need feedback to make sure we aren't using a tone that indicates boredom, that our body language isn't intimidating, or the opposite - insecure. Most of us have the words down pat - it's the other 93% we need to work on! Here are some ideas to get a handle on how you're doing in the whole process of communication. If you've found yourself in a slump in the sales department - this might be the reason.

Do your sales presentation in front of a brutally honest friend. Ask someone whom you trust to be honest with you to listen and give you feedback about those things you may not notice. What does your body language say? What are you communicating with your tone of voice? Is there an inconsistency between what words you are using and how the rest of you is communicating? Are you too forceful, too timid, too confusing, too talkative, not talkative enough, etc. Do you have physical habits that are distracting (pen tapping, gum chewing, doodling while people are talking). All these things can give the impression that you're not really interested in what's being said. Take the feedback from your friend and work on those things that are a turnoff for customers.

Ask your customers for feedback. This may seem weird at first - and you need to do it right or you may come across as an egocentric attention-seeker. The best way to get their feedback is to ask them right at the beginning of the presentation



whether they'd be willing to fill out a brief evaluation form after you've made the presentation. That way, regardless of whether they buy from you or not, they'll know its coming. Ask them to be honest - tell them you are always looking for ways to improve and you value their feedback. Then, give them a brief (no more than 3 or 4 questions) questionnaire that they can leave with you. Ask them questions like - Did you feel you were listened to and that your needs were important? Did you feel any undue pressure to purchase, and if so, what specifically made you feel pressured? Do you feel you received enough information to make a purchasing decision? Do you feel we were interested in your needs and in finding the right product for you? Is there anything we could have done differently in our sales presentation? Simple questions like this will give you some great information and help you determine whether something is going wrong during your sales visits.

Ask your competitors or your suppliers what they have heard about you. This one is tough - because you may not like what you hear. Granted, you'd have to have a pretty good relationship with these folks and have built trust and integrity with them in order for this to work, but it can be an informative process. Ask them if they've heard customer comments about you or your business. Ask them what other suppliers are saying about you. Ask if they have a general sense of what people think about your business (or you!). This takes a bit of courage, but the information can be very helpful. Think about it this way - the worse the feedback, the greater your opportunity to make things better!

Think about all parts of communication when you enter the sales process. It's not just repeating a memorized speech about how great your products are. It's not even asking all the right questions. Someone once told me that people may forget what you said, but they never forget how you made them feel. Nowhere is this more true than in the sales process. People know when you don't care. They know when you're more anxious to make the sale than to hear what they need. And "feel" is more of the sales decision than information. Do a communication-check and make the changes necessary to line up your words with your tone and body language for a fluid, honest, engaging sales process, and you'll watch your sales begin to climb.

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But I Can Do It Better!

Learning the Vital Art of Delegation

OK, it may very well be true. It's your business, and you CAN do it better than anyone else. And quicker. And with better results. So why do you need to learn to delegate when there are plenty of reasons not to? How about these? Do you take work home on a regular basis? Are you constantly struggling to get things done in time for deadlines? Does your inbox look like a waterfall? Do you skip lunches and never take breaks because you feel you just can't keep up? If you've answered yes to any of these questions, you might need to consider what delegation could do for you! Chances are, people around you could probably benefit from both the experience of taking on a big project and the trust you place in them to do it. Sure there's a risk. They may not do it exactly how you would. In fact, they may not even do it as well as you could. But would they do it well enough? Would they help you get to that deadline? Would it free you up to get some other things done that can't be delegated? If the answer to any of those questions is yes, you might want to consider how delegation can change the way you do business. Here are some keys to doing it successfully.

1. ***Assign duties to the person best suited for the project.*** Your super outgoing, social sales executive may not be the best person to delegate your detailed spreadsheet project to; on the other hand, your shy, detail-oriented office manager may not be the person to put in charge of entertainment for your customer-service event. Select someone who has the skills and disposition to do the kind of job you are delegating.
2. ***Make your instructions as clear as possible and provide all the needed resources and information.*** When you take on a project you have a copious amount of information and details in your head. You draw on these details when you're working, but someone who is taking on a project for the first time won't have all that information at their fingertips. So in order to give them the best chance for success, be very clear with your directions. Write them down - step by step. If additional information will be required, provide it to them, or at least let them know where they can find it quickly.
3. ***Measure the project from afar, but give your subordinate full authority over it.*** In order for them to feel confident to do the task - they need to have authority to do what you've asked them to do. Once you've delegated a project, resist the urge to micromanage it back on to your desk. The person doing the work for you may not do it the same way, but what if they come up with a better way? They may not do it as quickly, but what if the things they learn by taking their time contribute to a greater skill set down the road? They may even make mistakes, but what if by learning from those mistakes they become even more valuable to you? This doesn't mean you can't intervene if you see them heading towards a cliff, but gentle guidance will go farther than grabbing the controls. Also, let them know you are open to hearing from them if they need help. An open-door policy and genuine interest in their progress will ensure that you're kept abreast of developments, as well as being given the opportunity to coach and guide along the way.
4. ***Coach your staff to great performance.*** This is your opportunity to really contribute to someone else's success AND get some work off your plate in the process. A good coach knows when to challenge and when to encourage. When to offer words of advice and when to stand back and let them figure it out themselves. The goal of delegation is two-fold. The obvious one is to help you manage your workload, but the second is to create more capable people in your company whom you can count on to continually take more responsibility. The better you are at coaching your staff through those delegated tasks; the better performers they become - the better off your business will be!



The next time your papers topple out of your inbox - or you're stuffing work into your briefcase to take home with you, stop and step back. Look at whether any of those projects really can be given to someone else who might learn a great deal from the experience, while you enjoy dinner with your family! You'll both benefit. They will thrive in knowing you have trusted them with this task and will work hard to do a good job. And you'll be able to let go of some stress. As Steven Covey says, that's thinking WIN/WIN!

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Sweat the Right Small Stuff

Richard Carlson made famous the "small stuff" series, starting with his first mega-top-seller, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff". Carlson went on to write a number of related books - Don't Sweat the Small Stuff in your Finances, Don't Sweat the Small Stuff for Dads, Don't Sweat the Small Stuff for Couples, etc. Carlson's premise was obviously very timely because millions of people have bought his books. In a world where stress is at an all time high, people were looking for reasons to let go; to stop worrying; to relieve the pressures they were feeling about life. And in its essence, it is good advice. We all need to find a way to focus on the things that really matter to us - things that line up with our values - and to worry less about the things that don't. However, there is a danger of the pendulum swinging too far over, and we start letting go of things we shouldn't. I am currently reading an inspiring book called "The Other 90%" by Robert K. Cooper (subtitle - How to Unlock Your Vast Untapped Potential for Leadership and Life). In it, Cooper writes a chapter titled "Sweat the Right Small Stuff", in which he challenges the small stuff notion by saying that sometimes the small stuff does matter - you just have to be able to discern which ones do and which ones don't. How much small stuff are you sweating with your business? Have you found a way to determine which ones matter and deserve your attention, and which ones are just wasting your energy?

Begin to notice which 'little things' really matter.

While underscoring Carlson's principle of getting rid of things that don't matter, Cooper says this: *"An enjoyable and healthy life depends far more on the frequency of happiness, than on the magnitude of happiness. That means we're usually better off having many small positive moments than waiting to be happy all at once when we win the lottery, receive the next promotion or raise, or can afford that special vacation or car."* In other words, are there things that rob you of those frequent moments of happiness? And if they do, whether they are big or small, they need to be evaluated. Take Jason for example. As a successful small business owner, his company runs like a well-oiled machine - for the most part. He has clearly been able to focus on the important things in his business, and to let go of the stuff that doesn't matter. Except for Jim, one of his key sales executives. Something about Jim continues to irritate Jason and he can't seem to shake the feeling he gets whenever Jim is around. After some evaluation, Jason realizes that what's bugging him about Jim is that while he's an exceptional sales person, he is often disrespectful to those he works with (mostly in 'small' ways like off-hand comments or ignoring others). Because respect is one of Jason's highest values, Jim's disrespectful attitude - although it may look like a small thing in light of the big picture and Jim's success - was something that really mattered. Jason chatted with Jim about this, and after several meetings with no change in attitude, let him go. The initial revenue losses (which seemed like a big thing) didn't matter to Jason nearly as much as bringing on a less experienced sales person with a better attitude. Small and big things are all in context, and knowing how to discern between them will determine how many small positive moments you will have.



Know what small things bug you and which ones boost you.

Cooper suggests making a checklist. In one column, write down all the things that make you grit your teeth or get you fuming. In the other column, write down the things that instantly bring a smile

to your face, make you laugh or give you a warm fuzzy feeling inside. Now determine whether there is anything you can do to decrease the teeth gritting and fuming, and increase the smiling and laughing? One drains our energy, the other boosts our energy. If your 'drain' column is significantly longer than your 'boost' column, you've got a problem, and chances are you're not experiencing very many positive moments! So much of life is what we choose. How many of those energy draining things do you have direct control over, and are you willing to do something about them? Conversely, how many 'boost' things can you consciously add to your life to create a greater balance, and are you willing to do what it takes to do that? Talk about this with people close to you. It could be your business associates or your family, and be accountable for making these positive changes in your business and in your life.

Get a bit of inspiration here and there.

Cooper suggests that several small bursts of inspiration here and there throughout the day have more value to keep us going than one huge burst once a year. We need to be inspired in order to be inspiring! How often do you stop to take a walk and appreciate the beauty of the world around you? How often do you make a deliberate effort to read or watch something inspiring? When was the last time you took in a beautiful view and just stopped to breathe it in and say "WOW"! When was the last time you thought about how fortunate you are to have the relationships you do? When have you last thought about a person who really inspired you in business or in life? We all need it - and small daily doses are better than waiting for months or years for a big one. Cooper says, "Now and then throughout every day, we need little glimpses of pure inspiration. Such moments change how we see things and keep calling us to savor life and give more of our best to it."

Whether you want to change the way you look at your business or life, "When it comes to removing barriers to hidden capacity, it turns out that some small stuff is well worth sweating after all" (Cooper, 2001, Three Rivers Press).

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