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Getting publicity for your business on the cheap

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Small-business owners struggle with getting known. It's a pain that causes sleepless nights as people try to figure out how to build awareness and attract new clients without breaking the bank. Whether your business is just getting started, a going concern, or going great guns, favorable stories in the print, internet, and broadcast media about what you do and why it matters can catapult your business from obscurity into the spotlight.

Publicity is among the most powerful, affordable tactics in the marketing tool chest to gain awareness. Editorial coverage lends credibility to your efforts and extends your message to a wide audience of potential customers. Some publicity experts suggest that editorial coverage has three to six times the value of paid advertising, simply by the nature of the credibility associated with being in the news.

Public relations agencies are happy to support your success and charge worthy fees for their expertise. However, hiring a PR firm is a luxury that many small-business owners can ill afford, especially at the start. The good news is that do-it-yourself publicity tactics can deliver powerful results without spending big bucks.

As awareness of your enterprise grows, you can attract new customers to your door, invite new website visits, and lend momentum to the activity in your call center or e-mail inbox. You can also invite speaking engagements and other new business opportunities. And, one good media placement can lead to another. One day your story is featured within the pages of this Business Journal, and the next it could find its way to the pages of USA Today.

This column will provide information, tools, and resources to support your PR

efforts so you can enjoy the rewards that flow from the impact of free publicity.

Over the months to come, this column will:

- Guide you through publicity mistakes to avoid so your efforts to earn media attention will have greater success.
- Share examples to illustrate what does and doesn't work.
- Offer insights from national publicity experts that highlight tried-and-true and new ways to spread the word and build your business.
- Invite and answer your questions.

This month, I'd like to begin the journey by helping you to read and write to succeed.

Read to succeed: Read newspapers, magazines and blog posts that are relevant to your business. Not familiar with blogs yet? These are websites that provide commentary or news on a particular subject such as food, politics, or local news. Some blogs function as personal online diaries. Blogs are part of a wider network of social media with the potential to build buzz in a big way. In May 2007, blog search engine Technorati was tracking more than 71 million blogs. They are not to be ignored.

Watch and listen to other media where your story would be a good fit. Pay attention to the people who write about your industry and your competitors. Armed with that insight, you are in a good position to suggest a story that will be right for the writer's beat and contribute something of value for those who are already paying attention.

This may seem basic, yet many publicity-seeking business owners tell reporters that they never read or watch their work, even though the business owners have an expectation that reporters will write about them. Media relations starts with a relationship, and that means paying attention to the efforts reporters make to educate, inspire, and serve their audiences. If everyone embraced this tip today, editorial decision makers everywhere would breathe a huge sigh of relief.

Write to succeed: The next step is to write to succeed. That means preparing press releases, pitch letters, meeting notices, contributed articles, and other content and sharing it with the right people at the media outlets you've selected to earn the attention you seek.

Business editors, for example, want to know about the numbers and why they matter. What is the magnitude and speed of your growth? What impact will this have on the local marketplace and beyond? How does this rate of growth compare with what others are experiencing in your industry? What trends are emerging that your product or service addresses in a refreshing way? Who are the people behind the story?

These are just a few of the questions to consider as you frame your own story for a reporter's consideration. The more you read to succeed, the more you can share your own story with this information in mind.

Your small business can take flight as a result of the momentum and impact of free publicity, provided you get into action.

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