

How to get free PR

How can you promote your business without spending any money? Derek Williams offers a series of tips on how you can get free PR for your business.

Most people focus a tremendous amount of money and energy on their advertising and completely ignore the benefits that can be achieved from good PR.

There are many clever technical definitions of PR, but in essence it is the art of publicising your business at little or no financial cost. How? By harnessing the fact that newspapers and magazines need to fill their column inches with news as well as advertising.

PR has two key advantages compared with conventional advertising: you don't need to spend much money on PR although that does not mean that it's completely free and you will certainly have to spend time on it. Secondly, people are much more likely to read and believe editorial coverage. So a good PR campaign can be one of the best ways of getting your message across. It gets people talking about you and word-of-mouth advertising is, of course, one of the most powerful marketing tools around.

Press releases

Journalists can't write about your business and its stories unless they know about them. How do they find out? It's quite simple: you tell them. The easiest way of telling them is to send out press releases. A press release is simply a written summary of the key elements of your story: who, what, where, when, how and why.

Golden rules

Here are some of the golden rules of successful press releases:

- 1 Get to know your local journalists and send your releases directly to them.
- 2 Check whether they prefer e-mails or hard copy. If the latter, type the release on A4 paper with double spacing and wide margins.
- 3 Use only one side of the paper. If you need more space, continue on a separate sheet and staple them together.
- 4 Whether email or hard copy, don't use capital letters, bold type or underlining since these have special meaning in the publishing business.
- 5 Clearly state that it is a "Press Release" at the top of the first page.
- 6 Give it a simple headline that grabs attention and says what the story is about. But don't be surprised if the journalist writes his own. After all, that's what they are paid for. Sometimes, however, you can get away with extraordinary headlines. For example, headlines that have worked extremely well (ie have generated lots of sales leads) include: "Ten free horror masks up for grabs" and "Do you want to become stinking rich?"

7 Date the press release.

8 Write "Embargoed until XYZ" if there is a very strong reason why a story shouldn't be used before XYZ date. But don't overuse this tactic and don't be surprised if the journalist ignores it. After all, they are in the business of producing news.

9 The first paragraph should capture the imagination and cover all the key points of the story. Newspapers invariably go straight to the heart of the story in their opening sentences. Don't leave any new or important facts or issues to the last paragraph because if the paper is short of space or time they will probably just leave out your last couple of paragraphs.

10 Tailor the wording so that it is relevant to the readers of the particular paper or magazine you are dealing with. For example, say "Local manufacturers PartyCo of Newtown Road...." for local press releases, and "The Newtown office of one of the country's fastest growing manufacturers, PartyCo...." in press releases for a wider audience.

11 Include direct quotes from named employees, or even from satisfied customers. These add interest, colour and credibility to the story. They also make the journalist's life easier because he won't have to ring you up to get a quote.

12 Include a photograph or JPEG wherever possible. Head and shoulder portrait photos will do, but action photos that illustrate the story are much better.

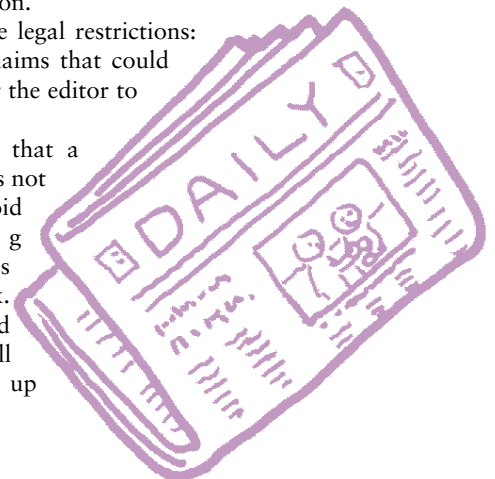
13 At the end of the story type the word "ENDS" in capital letters.

14 Keep it short, simple and snappy. Use short sentences, and keep it on one or two sheets of paper. A release is less likely to get published if it needs lots of work to trim it down to the right length. So make life easier for the journalist and he'll make life more profitable for you.

15 Don't use jargon.

16 Remember the legal restrictions: don't make claims that could expose you or the editor to legal claims.

17 Remembering that a press release is not an advert, avoid g u s h i n g superlatives and sales talk. One cringe and the release will probably end up in the bin.



- 18 If you're not too confident of your writing skills, who could you ask to help you out? Friends and family may be thrilled if you ask them to check, proofread, or even ghost-write your articles for you. Better still, recruit a local journalist to do some freelance writing for you. Journalists are usually underpaid and often welcome the extra income.
- 19 Give the name, address and phone number of the person the journalists should contact if they want further information.
- 20 Carefully check punctuation, grammar and spelling.
- 21 Make sure that your press releases are sent out simultaneously to all the relevant publications.
- 22 If you've got a particularly good story don't just stop at a press release. Expand the material into an article and offer it to local business magazines, but discuss it with a commissioning editor first.
- 23 What ways could you think of to work together with another firm or organisation to further your mutual interests? Could you offer the readership a gift that makes the newspaper seem generous - but gets you coverage and apparent endorsement? The "Ten free horror masks up for grabs" article mentioned above was a good example of this approach. The masks are offered as gifts, making the paper look good and generating lots of leads for you.
- 24 Don't forget regional business magazines and business newsletters. The editors of newsletters are often short of good material and will welcome any contributions. And with a narrowly focused readership you can re-write your press releases and articles so that they really appeal to the audience.
- 25 Prepare and maintain an accurate and up-to-date listing of all the publications in your area that cover business stories. The list should include papers and magazines. It should also include newsletters produced by, for example, Chambers of Commerce, Business Links and business clubs.
- 26 Make sure that you get your material to the journalists well in advance of their deadlines. To do that, of course, you need to find out and make a note of what those deadlines are.
- 27 To maximise the response to your press coverage, it helps if the newspaper prints your telephone number and contact name. One useful way of making sure that they do give these details is to include in your press release a free offer - for example, free samples or an invitation to a free demonstration. Because newspapers see this kind of reader offer as a valuable service they will usually publish your phone number, especially if you make it clear that you would like them to by building it into the body of the press release and not just leaving it as a footnote.

Here is one example of how well the last tactic can work. *Steve Pipe, the founder of Stephens and Co, recently received 41 enquiries in six hours after an article he wrote was published in the trade magazine Accountancy Age. Most advertisers in any magazine would have been delighted with that response rate, but unlike them he did not pay a single penny for his coverage.*

All 41 were responding to an offer that read: Steve Pipe, a Chartered Accountant, is the 1995 Accountancy Age Entrepreneur of the Year and creative director of Leeds-based PRacticePR. The first 50 readers to call him on 0113 2660282 can claim a free copy of his Marketing Toolkit on answerphones courtesy of Accountancy Age. The ready to use Toolkit includes a step-by-step guide to running a Tip of the Week service and ten professionally researched and fully scripted tips. Over the next few days he got a further 75 enquiries making it one of the most cost-effective pieces of marketing he's ever had.



Of course, there are no guarantees that your story will be published. It will depend on what other stories there are. A strong story may be squeezed out one week by the sheer weight of hard news. The following week a poor story may get good coverage because nothing else has happened. And even if your story is printed, you may not like what the journalist actually says. Nevertheless, press releases can be considerably effective in promoting your business.

Why not give them a try?

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