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Wish List

Act Now If You Want Your Products Featured In Holiday Gift Guides

By *Mindy Charski*

Hoping to land a product in a 2010 holiday gift guide? Then now's the time to make your sales pitch.

Editors at many national magazines start looking for gift items as early as May. Their peers at smaller publications may begin hunting a few months later. Reviewers at newspapers, television and radio stations, Web sites and blogs often seek pitches in the fall.

If you want your hottest selling product to make consumers' holiday wish lists, start promoting your products to the media now.

Pitch Far And Near

Many small retailers and manufacturers share the aspiration of winning a free mention in revered publications like *O*, *The Oprah Magazine* or on respected programs like the *Today Show*.

If that includes you, why not aim high? But be realistic, too. The more popular the outlet, the more competition you'll face.

Woman's Day, for instance, typically receives hundreds of pitches for its holiday gift guides, according to Melissa Matthews, the magazine's beauty editor. Only about 80 total products nabbed spots in 2009's main gift features, which included a November showcase of presents under \$50; a December roundup of gifts under \$5; and an online piece about gifts for the home.

Better your odds by also pitching niche-oriented markets.

For example, Olive, a wholesaler and online retailer of eco-friendly dog products, has reached out to the green community and scored holiday mentions on Web sites like Greenopia, Grist and TreeHugger.

"We've niched ourselves more to green than to dogs," says Barbara Savidge, a co-owner of Olive, which is based in Cedar Park, Texas. "Dogs is such a huge market. It would be hard to shout loud enough to be heard."

It's also smart to target your own local media. Such outlets are usually seeking a local connection and likely reach many of your local customers.

On the flip side, pitching locally-focused media can be risky if there's not an association with the area. Just ask Ashley Primis, food and lifestyle editor at Philadelphia Magazine. She worked on her publication's 2009 guide.

"I would say 90 percent of the pitches that I got had nothing to do with Philadelphia," Primis says. "It's like [businesses] had never picked up [the] magazine and read it at all, so automatically they were discredited."

Pitch The Right Product

Wherever you pitch, rather than sending a broad e-mail blast, tailor your message and product selection.

"You have to know the magazine and the sections," says Jennifer Cattai, who owns Babesta, a baby boutique that sells online and has two New York locations. "You have to be very familiar with who the audience of the magazine is so you're not pitching a Run-DMC onesie to Family Circle, because it won't run, no matter how cute it is."

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Also research the theme of each guide. Don't assume last year's feature will look like this year's.

Philadelphia Magazine, for instance, focused on "Our 40 favorite gifts from our 40 favorite stores" in 2009, but has spotlighted locally-made gifts in the past.

In addition to focusing on media outlets that match your products, pitch items that are new and colorful.

"You may think some white earrings are really beautiful, but they're not going to show up on a page or on TV," says Margie Zable Fisher, president of Zable Fisher Public Relations in Boca Raton, Fla.

Also, unless a guide focuses on wares within a specific price range, don't be afraid to pitch high-priced items.

Many reviewers also like to spotlight goods that do good.

"Anything that has a charitable connection or something that's environmentally or socially responsible, those always get my attention first and foremost," says Erika Pitera, editor-in-chief of MyShoppingConnection.com, which offers holiday gift ideas and is based in Orlando, Fla.

How To Pitch

Use e-mail to reach out to print editors or to producers at radio and television stations. Briefly describe your product and its gift potential.

Be sure to include the price, your contact information and a link to an online press kit if you have one. If you're a manufacturer who doesn't sell directly to customers, share names of retailers that can be included in the story.

Send a picture of the product with the pitch, too. It's nice to link to an online photo or electronic catalog.

Alternatively, you can attach low-resolution images, but sending too many might clog a recipient's e-mail system.

Don't discount the value of quality product shots.

"First priority always goes to those [whose photos] have a really nice, professional look," editor Pitera says. "If somebody sends me a blurry photo of something where I can barely tell what it is, that's not so appealing."

Pitera tries to respond to every pitch, but not every editor does. You may feel inclined to follow up, although as with the entire process, there's no formula.

"If it's a publication you really want, give them a call," says Los Angeles-based public relations pro Jeremy Pepper. "Don't call them that day and don't call repeatedly. Two calls, and if it doesn't work out, you have to write it off."

Some reviewers prefer one or two e-mail follow-ups. Others frown on follow-ups altogether and figure they'll get in touch with you if they're interested in your product.

If you do reach an editor during a follow-up, ask if you can send a sample of your product.

"We offer to send them doggie boxes, and who doesn't say yes to free stuff for their dog?" Savidge says.

Never send a sample until the reviewer has agreed to take a look. Otherwise, the product could be viewed as a gift to the recipient, and many newsrooms don't want staffers receiving items valued over a designated dollar amount.

"If your product costs more than \$25, it could put them in a weird place," Pepper says.

And since editors are not likely to spend the time or money mailing it back, a product sent is a sale lost. (However, editors are generally open to returning expensive, high-end products, Zable Fisher says.)

If you get the opportunity to send a sample, do it right. Editors care about the presentation as well as the product, so wrap it nicely and carefully.

"If it's broken, it doesn't bode well," Zable Fisher says. She recommends shipping the package through a service that offers tracking.

Pitch Potential

Of course, editorial coverage doesn't always translate into sales.

Babesta baby products have been featured in the media since 2004, including in the holiday guides of publications like Newsweek and New York magazine.

“Sometimes, even if you think it’s going to be a great placement, it’s like a tree fell in the woods and nobody heard it,” says Babesta owner Cattai.

But, at other times, media recommendations have led to a slew of orders. Mentions in the press have also boosted Babesta’s brand recognition, Cattai says.

Though Cattai still sends plenty of pitches to the media, some editors now check in with her, she says.

“You can develop that level of trust and level of a relationship where they know they could count on you and sometimes then reach out to you and say, ‘Hey, I’m doing a holiday gift guide, we’re going for this vibe, do you have anything?’”

*Dallas-based freelancer **Mindy Charski** enjoys reading *Outside* magazine’s holiday gift guide.*

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