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Small Business / By Kelly K. Spors

Got a Great Business? Spread the Word.

With all the demands of running a business, it's not uncommon for business owners to ignore a potentially lucrative tool: public relations.

Unlike advertising, where you pay for exposure, public relations means raising your profile more organically through interviews with news organizations, speaking engagements and building an online reputation.

There can be an array of benefits: Good publicity adds credibility and exposure to your business and can even lead to direct sales by helping potential customers know you exist.

But it can also be bewildering. Many small-business owners don't feel they have time to chase down reporters to pitch their story, or they're intimidated by the process. And without knowing how to tell their story in an appealing way, the publicity hunt may become a downright waste of time.

There is good news: Getting the word out about your business is becoming easier, and there are a growing number of ways to do it without the help of a professional public-relations firm.

Going Solo

Traditional media like newspapers and television news channels are no longer the gatekeepers of "news." The Internet offers business owners many ways to garner publicity and raise their own profile. Some strategies include adding a blog to a business's Web site, doing search-engine marketing so that your Web site shows up near the top of a Google search, using social media sites like MySpace and Facebook, posting a video on YouTube.com and writing an email newsletter.

"I think a modern, effective PR campaign is where you have a lot of online sites talking about you and linking to you," says Brian Halligan, chief executive of HubSpot.com, a Cambridge, Mass., company that sells online-marketing software to businesses for \$200 a month. A major benefit to online PR efforts, he says, is that they're trackable: While it's difficult to measure the effects of an inter-



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view with a local newspaper, there are Web programs that make it easy to find out how many people linked to your blog posts or visited your Web site.

Adding a blog that's updated regularly can offer several benefits. It may establish you as an expert in your industry, but it's also more likely to generate links to your Web site from other sites. Getting other sites to link to yours in turn will boost your site's ranking on search engines. Using a program like Digg.com with your blog to share information can also attract more attention to your blog, and your business.

Traditional Arenas

It's also become easier for small businesses to grab the attention of traditional media without a professional PR firm. Press-release distribution services like PRWeb.com and MyPRGenie let businesses submit text for a Web site and they distribute the press releases to online news sites like Yahoo News along with predetermined lists of journalists who cover that type of business. PRWeb, for instance, charges \$80 to \$360 per press release. The higher rate includes better search-engine optimization, so your press release is more likely to be found, and you can attach a podcast or a video.

Business owners also can generate their own list of journalists to

pitch stories to by tracking coverage in their industry using Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, feeds, which let users collect news articles and blog posts in one place.

Jim Poss, chief executive of Seahorse Power, which makes solar-powered trash compactors, has become good at self-promotion. Though the current clean-energy movement certainly helps create buzz for his business, he's found there are many ways to generate good press. He gives all of his customers press kits. He also enters local and national small-business contests. "A lot of this stuff, if you just kind of put in the legwork, you can get it yourself," he says.

Going Pro

Such legwork, though, can be a problem for business owners, who are already strapped for time. So hiring a public-relations firm might still be a practical way to handle some, if not most, of the work. And a PR firm may have advantages when dealing with traditional media, such as established relationships with reporters and the know-how to sell your story in an alluring way.

Full-service public-relations firms also handle writing and distributing press releases, researching the coverage areas of journalists, lining up speaking engagements and training their clients on handling interviews with reporters. And many PR firms are

branching into new media areas, helping clients write blogs or build a presence on MySpace.

Research Firms

But be extra diligent when selecting a PR firm. Firms charge clients anywhere from \$2,000 to \$15,000 a month, depending on region, size and expertise, and results sometimes can be disappointing or inconsistent. It's a good idea to talk with at least three firms before selecting one. Get a full price list, along with several samples of how they've boosted clients' media profiles, and request to speak with current and past clients.

And don't be afraid to negotiate prices and require a firm to base its pay on performance metrics. "Tell them you want to tie [the price] as much as you can to performance," says Rich Sloan, co-founder of StartupNation.com.

"The more diligent and demanding you are as a customer, the better they'll be as a vendor," Mr. Sloan adds. He says it's also possible to find niche PR firms that specialize in a certain industry or type of media and charge a fraction of what large full-service PR firms charge—or find a firm that charges only for performance.

Margie Zable Fisher, who owns a PR firm in Boca Raton, Fla., is one of a growing number who work that way. Getting mentioned in a "top tier" media outlet like The Wall Street Journal or ABC's Good Morning America will cost one of her clients \$2,000 to \$6,000, depending on the breadth of the coverage, while mentions in a blog cost \$500 to \$2,000 depending on the blog's monthly traffic.

Keep in mind that hiring a PR firm doesn't mean you won't have to devote time to the process. You'll still need to work with the PR firm to craft the right strategy for your business, talk with reporters, and monitor results to make sure the firm is producing what you desire. So at the end of the day, you have to figure out what's the most cost effective for you.

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