

Advertising Your Business on a Shoestring Budget

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When times are tough, often the first line item hacked is the advertising budget. But don't discontinue your advertising program for the sake of a few dollars. You may just have to work a little harder to keep your business in the limelight until business – and your budget – return to normal.

Advertising is “the activity of attracting public attention to a product or business, as by paid announcements in the print, broadcast, or electronic media.” Take away your ability to pay, and you're left with an activity that can be accomplished through proactive media relations.

The Oath of the Media

Media outlets, including television, print, and radio, pride themselves on the fact that they don't allow the advertising to drive the editorial. In other words, just because you pay to advertise in a particular publication, does not increase your odds of getting a full-fledged article written about you in that newspaper. Talk to any newspaper editor or television reporter, and they will tell you that they report on the news, not on who pays them.

When I visit a news station, there's an invisible moat between the sales and news teams; they never cross paths. The only reason the sales crew knows the news crew is because they see them on television like the rest of us.

Build a Relationship with the Media

You may wonder how you can build a successful relationship with members of the media when you see a fresh face on the local TV station every other week. Turnover is high among journalists. A 2001 study by the Missouri School of Journalism showed that television news reporters in their 40s had changed jobs more than four times in their career. One television reporter surveyed had changed jobs 14 times!

Despite the high turnover rate, there are a few old standbys who aren't going anywhere. These are the few whom it is worthwhile to befriend:

1. **The weather guy.** This person is so familiar in your community, I bet you could name him or her right now. Weathermen get assignments to report on the news too, and they are more interested in reporting a story about your greenhouse, garden center, flower shop, or America in Bloom project than your average general assignment reporter.
2. **The assignment editor.** This is the person who sits at the assignment desk in the newsroom and receives all the incoming news tips. He or she can be found listening religiously to the police scanner. The assignment editor is also the one who gets a round of applause in the newsroom when his or her station is "first-on-the-scene."
3. **The gardening guru.** Your friendly Saturday morning garden show host likes to give advice on everything from choosing a lawn fertilizer to selecting a plant that does well in shade. Make your product well-known to this guy or gal, and you will not believe how many times your product or garden center will receive a free mention. No advertisement is as credible as the one that comes directly from the mouth of the reporter. **Take action:** write a letter introducing yourself as a local expert and position yourself to be a future interview. Include a

sample of your product or photos of your retail shop so the reporter knows what he or she is getting into before coming your way.

Build Brand Recognition without Spending a Dime

Advertising – like good media relations – builds on name recognition and eventually develops a consumer understanding of the product or service you’re peddling. The average consumer needs to hear or see a message 13 times before it becomes familiar. Once the message is familiar, it takes even longer to be understood and appreciated.

But don’t be discouraged; it is possible to speed up the learning curve with media relations.

One element that you cannot add to your message with advertising is credibility. When a consumer sees an advertisement, they know that it’s a paid message and that the company intends to profit from increased sales. It takes a few “hits” before the consumer accepts its validity. On the other hand, when a consumer sees a segment on the 5 o’clock news about a local product or company, their ability to accept it as legitimate is almost instantaneous.

So how do you get that news story written about your company? Here are a few things to try:

1. **Groundbreakings... grand openings... anything new.** These things alone are newsworthy, but only on a slow news day. So, give it more meat by talking about the number of jobs your new retail greenhouse will add to the community, your projected sales, and any charity that might benefit from your existence or event. This is a perfect story to pitch to the business editor of your local paper.

2. **People love free stuff.** Giving away a free packet of seeds won't get the news to cover your story, but they might show up if you plan to donate to the local children's home a flat of pansies for each one purchased.
3. **Show off your great employees.** If you have an employee who has an interesting story to tell, share it with the news media. What about that dedicated seasonal employee who has worked seeding flats every year since Eisenhower was president? Or, the four generations of one family who run the business? The story may not be about all the redeeming qualities of your business, but it will be about the redeeming qualities of your employees – and they are your company's image.
4. **Create excitement through the media themselves.** When you hold your fall fun days, don't forget to invite the reporters from your local station to participate in the seasonal container garden design contest. The local television and radio news media may be the closest to a celebrity that your customers will ever come. (If you don't have these contacts, see the above section on "Building Relationships." It's easier to get friends to agree to this than to cold-call a reporter.) The media will be excited to participate, and it makes a great piece for the end of a newscast when they want to leave their viewers with a warm fuzzy.

The Golden Rule

There are only three letters that stand between "persistence" and "pest." Persistence pays off, but should not come at the expense of your reputation. To avoid crossing the line into the pest category, follow "Mel's Golden Rule of Media Relations:" **Only send news releases when there is news.**

Too many companies get in the habit of sending out weekly or monthly news releases regardless of whether or not there is anything of consequence to say. The assignment editor or the news editor will see your letterhead and file it in the recycling bin without reading it. If you only send news releases when you have something important to say, the editor will value your releases and look forward to directing it to someone who can turn it into a story.

Less important, but still imperative when sending a news release: Always make sure to include the date, contact name, and phone number where you can be reached. If you work in the field or under glass, give them your cell phone number. Opportunities to place a story are fleeting moments that will be dismissed if the reporter can't reach you.

Make the Most of Your Knowledge – Your Budget will be Back in No Time

Now that you know what the media is looking for and you have friends in high places, you can increase brand recognition and influence your profitability without much of a financial commitment. A little sweat equity and careful planning will keep your company in the news until your advertising dollars are once again available. And, even when the dollars return, you can incorporate some fresh, new strategies to make the most of your advertising money.