

Publicity

Spreads the Word of Your Business

BY BOB REISS



Long-time friend of MANA Bob Reiss has graciously allowed *Agency Sales* magazine to serialize his book *Bootstrapping 101: Tips to Build Your Business with Limited Cash and Free Outside Help*, available now on Amazon.com. The book looks at surprisingly effective low-cost and no-cost ways to acquire the resources you need to run your company. Whether your company is an existing enterprise or a start up, a manufacturers' representative company or a manufacturer, this book will introduce you to innovative ways to cut your costs and drive more of your income into bottom line profits.

Last month we covered the use of bartering to get a business off the ground. This month we address using publicity as a means to build your business.

Publicity is the great wild card for small businesses. Certainly, advertising can be effective. However, a story in the media about you, your product, or your company generally carries far more weight and legitimacy than any paid-for ads. Such a story is likely to reach both consumers and any intermediate customers, such as retailers. Because management generally has more time to read than buyers and other mid-level people, a news story or human-interest feature may have a disproportionate impact on decision makers. And finally, the cost to you can range from minimal (an investment of your time) to more substantial. However, it is usually lower than the cost of "equivalent" advertising.

How do you get started? If you have the money, hire a public relations firm. Try to retain a company that has prior experience with your kind of products or services and the kind of media you want to reach. If you are inclined to hire a large PR firm, ask to meet with the person who will be working directly on your account. In all cases, ask to see a proposed plan or approach to the job before you commit. I'd recommend interviewing more than one company, and I would definitely ask for and check references. This may surprise you, but I'd be suspicious of any PR people who "guarantee" results. Unlike



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advertising, there are no guarantees that something will appear in the media or that you'll *like* what appears.

You don't have to make a long-term commitment; you can hire a PR firm on a trial basis — say, 90 days. Once the firm is retained, plan on being an active participant in their activities. In general, reporters like to meet with the person who started the company or who is running it today. If that's you, be available and helpful. Make sure you understand and approve of the “angle” that your PR firm is pitching and to which media their angles are directed.

If you can't afford a PR firm, you can get the ball rolling yourself. One way is to go after your local newspaper. Think of that paper as a giant furnace that needs constant stoking and think of your story as tomorrow's (or next Sunday's) fuel. They may not know it, but they need you. Read the paper thoroughly and decide which department or columnist is the best fit with your product, service, or company. Make a phone call or write a letter to that department or individual, asking for an in-person meeting. This same approach can be employed with your local radio and TV stations.

Gaining Interest

In this initial overture and also in the follow-up meeting, your job is to pique their interest. Give them the kind of material they need. What's interesting about you? Is it the way you came up with the idea for the business? Is there something unusual in your background or the way the company is structured? Are you providing good jobs locally? Is your product indicative of a new trend?

Of course, this is harder to pull off if your local newspaper is *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. However, these media giants, too, need stories every day. Think creatively about the different sections of your targeted newspaper, especially if it's a major circulation daily, and determine which sections could possibly be interested in a story in addition to the business section?

Another valuable but generally more difficult approach is to pitch the wire services (Bloomberg, Reuters, Associated Press, etc.) directly. These companies are also in the “fuel-providing” business but on a large scale — a

story from one of these services can appear in hundreds of newspapers, radio, and TV stations around the country. It is helpful to understand that the wire services and other media need you as much as you need them.

Remember, too, that this pipeline goes both ways. Stories by individual newspapers can get picked up by a wire service and garner national attention.

Don't overlook the other media that are out there either. For example, many consumer magazines run “new product” sections and “gift guides” for certain holidays (Valentine's, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, etc.). Someone in your company should regularly submit pictures and short descriptions of your new products to these kinds of outlets. You may be surprised at how many of these descriptions get picked up verbatim and how that translates into good orders. Similarly, most medium-sized and larger cities have at least one locally oriented magazine (*Boston*, *Philadelphia*, *New York*, *Miami*, and so on) that can be fertile ground for your story idea or new product description. Read the publication and write your ideas in the style the publication uses. The more work they have to do, the less your chances of inclusion. Note deadlines and publication lead times.

Industry magazines, newsletters, and newspapers are almost always excellent prospects for free publicity. In many cases they will run your releases about new products. Most have reporters on staff who are on the lookout for good stories for the next issues. Get to know them. There's a common misperception that you only get coverage in trade publications if you also buy advertising space, but in my experience that's not true. If you want to buy advertising, fine. It can't hurt your chances. But your immediate goal should be to sell them on your bright prospects. This is the news story they're looking for. And incidentally, the brighter your prospects look, the more likely it is that these media will look at you as a potential advertiser.

In many ways, TV is the most powerful medium of all. It's visual, visceral, and far better at evoking and implying things. However, the economic stakes are much higher, which makes it much harder to get attention from TV programs. So send those story ideas and new product

descriptions to your local TV stations and follow up — but don't do so at the expense of other, more accessible media, including radio.

Amy Love, an entrepreneur, was very effective in promoting her start-up by soliciting local TV stations to appear as a guest to discuss her venture. Her success was predicated on her willingness to do what most people would not. . .namely get up at 4-5 a.m. to go to the TV studio.

Press Releases

The best way to initially approach the media is by sending one-page press releases to targeted media people. The release can be about you, your company, your product, your philosophy, the company's or your accomplishment, or any interesting fact of the above. Including relevant humor is a plus. This release via e-mail or snail mail is the least expensive initial approach. If you use e-mail, work hard to make the subject line compelling. Never include attachments unless a reporter specifically requests it. Cut and paste the press release in the body of the e-mail.

If your target list is extensive, I would try sending a small amount initially (25). See how that works. If it

doesn't alter your message, you could initially test different approaches to determine the most effective. I would simultaneously test e-mail and regular mail. E-mail, of course, is less expensive, especially if your list is a large one.


After your initial foray, the key to the game is follow-up. Your goal is to get a personal meeting or a phone interview.

When you are successful in getting your story printed or broadcast, promote it. Send it to your sales force, employees, investors, buyers, other stakeholders, and other media. The other media can be in different cities, different media, or national media. Your first story will give you credibility with other media.

Most of the time, I would not send unsolicited samples to the media. It is wasteful and more important will not be seen by your target. Also, in some peoples' minds, it cheapens your product. I would do everything to encourage the media person you are contacting to ask for a free sample.

Events and Promotions

Events and promotions are part of public relations.



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Done well, a promotional event can be an affordable and highly effective way of generating major sales of your product. I believe that money well spent in this arena gives you much more bang for your buck than traditional advertising. And because events call for more creativity than money, they are doubly suited for new and growing companies.

The best events and promotions are those that are designed specifically for your product or service. The tie-ins between the event and your product's benefits should be clear and memorable — not only to help sell the product but also to discourage competitors from trying similar stunts. If possible, hook up with an appropriate partner who can bring a major contribution to the table. (This could be money, a brand name, or marketing savvy.) If you use third-party individuals or organizations to help stage the event, you should make sure that everyone gets sufficient benefit from the event to give it their all.

Let me give an example from my own experience. Our company, Reiss Games, developed and introduced a line of magic. We designed full-color packaging to contain a collection of tried-and-true magic tricks that could be learned in a very short time. Fifteen minutes was our targeted learning curve. We purposely stayed away from tricks that required sleight-of-hand dexterity and also from tricks that professional magicians use to make their living.

To develop the line, I signed up for an evening course on magic that was taught by the celebrated magician, George Schindler. The course was geared to beginners like me, and it was a great deal of fun. Eventually, we signed Schindler to help us develop the line, and for a period of about two months, our office was a fun factory. George would come and demonstrate tricks that met our

easy-to-learn requirement. We'd select a trick, cost out and fabricate its components, and develop a suitable line of patter that our customers could use. (Patter is a magician's word to connote what you say as you perform a trick. It helps to fool your audience, and we referred to it as "sleight of mouth.") All told, we prepared a line of 24 kits and introduced them to the marketplace.

One of our customers was J.C. Penney, which sold our line through their catalog and retail stores. It was very successful for us and for them. As a result, we sat down with Penney to figure out a strategy for increasing sales of the magic kits.

Penney's buyer for the magic line was very bright and ambitious. He came up with the idea that we demonstrate the magic in his retail stores, which he projected would drive up sales dramatically. We suspected he was right, but demonstrations are personnel-intensive and, therefore, very expensive. We declined this opportunity to become poor.

However, the Penney buyer loved our line, thought it had great upside potential, and kept after us. We knew we had to do something to satisfy this important customer, yet we couldn't figure out what we could do that would be both effective and affordable. Then I remembered one of the many conversations I had had with George Schindler.

Over lunch one day, Schindler had told me about the Society of American Magicians. This group had some 10,000 members at that time — mostly amateurs who had to demonstrate a certain skill level to gain acceptance into the society. Schindler had explained that one of the society's missions was to perpetuate the art of magic. One way they did this was to declare a "National Magic Week" every October. The goal of National Magic Week was to commemorate the death of escape artist, Harry Houdi-

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ni, and to perpetuate the art of magic. During National Magic Week, magicians around the country performed in hospitals, nursing homes, and a variety of other venues where they could get an audience.

I remembered this conversation well. I also thought about the magicians I knew, including Schindler. They came from all different walks of life, but almost without exception, they loved magic. They loved performing a good trick well. They craved the spotlight and, in many cases, didn't get enough of it.

After thinking through the rough details of a plan, I asked Schindler to set up a meeting between the president of the Society of American Magicians and me. At that meeting I said that we could help the society in its goal of promoting magic and that we could put large numbers of magicians in front of appreciative crowds — in J.C. Penney stores. We couldn't pay these performers, but we could probably persuade Penney to run local ads featuring the event and the magician, including a promotional picture of the performer. The president was intrigued and suggested that I broach the idea at the society's upcoming national convention.

I immediately accepted this invitation. I then called a quick meeting with my Penney buyer and laid out my scheme. "I'm pretty sure I can get top magicians to perform in your stores at no charge," I told him, "if you can advertise the events and put the performer's name and picture in each ad." He said he was interested but would have to go up the ladder to find the necessary ad dollars. Together we went down the hall to Penney's head of Public Relations who controlled a healthy discretionary budget. The PR head liked the idea — so much so that he suggested that he accompany me to the society's convention. I assume that the fact that this meant three days in Miami Beach during the winter had some bearing on his decision.

The day came, and I proposed my deal to the assembled magicians. I emphasized that there would be no pay involved — only good publicity and most likely a good crowd. I ended my pitch by saying that when the meeting was over, Penney's PR director and I would be at a desk in the lobby, ready to sign up anybody who wanted to participate. We had no idea what kind of response we'd get. To our amazement, by the time we got to the lobby, we had scores of magicians standing in line, eager for the chance to sign up and perform.

Penney delivered on its part of the bargain magnificently. They produced an ad with a banner headline reading: "J.C. Penney and the Society of American Magicians Celebrate National Magic Week." Below the

headline, the ad included the date and time of the demonstrations and a picture of the local performing magician. For our part, we hired (on a contract basis) a PR specialist who worked out of her house in California to coordinate the effort.

In my view, this was a win-win-win: Penney got their demonstrations at no cost to them, sold tons of merchandise, and earned excellent publicity and goodwill through their affiliation with the magicians. The society got far more publicity than it had ever received. Individual magicians got their names and pictures in their hometown newspaper with the Penney "seal of approval" implicitly associated with them. We sold goods and greatly enhanced our relationship with a key customer — at hardly any cost to us.

The lessons I took away from this and similar experiences include the following:

- **Everything is possible.**
- **Understand people's emotional buttons** (e.g., many magicians crave recognition more than money).
- **Don't be embarrassed to state your intentions clearly and bluntly.** In this case we needed to get magicians to perform for us for no pay. Our frankness seemed to be appreciated.
- **Persistence can pay off in both directions.** In this case, the persistence of the Penney buyer set the stage for a very successful promotion. In other cases, it's been my persistence that made the difference.
- **Think outside the box.** Yes, this is becoming a tiresome cliché, but it captures the essence of a great promotion: how can we do something so fresh and different that the customer and consumer will find us irresistible?

The Internet can be the most impactful tool for your low-cost Public Relations effort. In our next article, on the Internet, we will offer tips and more food for thought. 📖

Bob Reiss was a national manufacturers' representative for 14 years before changing his business model and becoming a manufacturer who sold through manufacturers' reps. He has been involved in 16 start-ups and one of his companies was named to the *Inc.* 500 list of America's fastest-growing companies for three years in a row. A native of Brooklyn, New York, he is a graduate of Columbia University and Harvard Business School. An army veteran, he is the author of *Bootstrapping 101 — Tips to Build Your Business With Limited Cash and Free Outside Help*, available now on Amazon.com.

