

Harnessing the power of PR

Creating a buzz in the community is easy and inexpensive, if others provide critical third-party endorsements

By Kelly Flory

The subject of publicity can seem overwhelming to smaller companies. They think of high-profile, full-service agencies and wonder how they could ever afford such a large-scale marketing effort, or worse yet, how they could possibly create effective publicity with their limited in-house resources.

Publicity is not just for large companies. Some common misperceptions include, "My company is too small," or "We don't have a brand-new product to announce." Companies who fall victim to this attitude are doomed to obscurity or stagnancy.

Every company has something that sets it apart from others. It doesn't matter if you manufacture products that cost 10 cents or a million dollars — or for dealers, reps and distributors, you sell someone else's product rather than build your own. The trick is to identify the unique aspects of your company and then let others know about them.

This sounds a lot like sales, right? Right! Publicity uses and

things about your company. It's an inexpensive way to trigger widespread exposure, and create an image of a company that aggressively growing.

One basic publicity tool is the press release, an announcement to the media. It can cover any newsworthy subject, such as new products, improvements to products, a new facility or expansion, sales increases, new personnel, new services for consumers or business-to-business contracts.

But also consider announcing milestones, whether for a company's 30th anniversary, producing the millionth widget, or celebrating 10 years of business with a key customer. Other great subjects include donations to local organizations or events, open houses, training sessions and projects that solve an unusual problem. Or how about covering a product that isn't a top seller — maybe sales aren't optimized because no one knows it exists!

Manufacturers, turn to your sales force for ideas and ask about their latest accomplishments. Whether they've solved challenging problems, received positive comments from satisfied customers, or just heard about a unique trip a customer had with their RV, the manufacturer will benefit from the feedback and can identify topics that can be further publicized. Press releases that include news or projects involving reps, distributors or dealers plus double-duty. They publicize your company, plus give a pat on the back to everyone else involved.

Press releases are most successful when they are written to the proper audience and have the resources in place to handle follow-up requests from the media. Read the local papers, as well as print and electronic consumer and trade RV magazines to see how your content fits your announcement. Review the staff page to see if there's a specific technical or business news editor that might be more receptive to your press release.

Initial publicity efforts don't need to be sent to hundreds of outlets. Starting in the smaller, familiar waters of local newspa-

pers, regional magazines and your regular advertising outlets can produce results.

Build relationships with media members

Creating an effective press release isn't difficult if you have basic writing skills. Keep the text short, simple and honest, and use those magazines you researched as a guide for content. The journalism "who, what, where, when and why" on a subject also works. The "why" is most important, as an editor will be asking, "why should I use this information?"

One secret weapon is to include good photography to increase a press release's chance of getting printed, even for trade-oriented announcements. Take a photo of the new warehouse or the top-seller receiving an award. If shooting digital, crank up the settings to at least 300 dpi for a 4- by 5-inch image, as a poor-quality photo delivers no advantage.

Most important is responding to follow-up requests from the media. Many press releases are simply edited and put into print. But if an editor has a clarifying question, make it a top priority to respond. Editors work under deadlines, and nothing will kill your relationship faster than ignoring them. Don't be afraid to talk to the media. They're interested in your company and want to help you, not launch some undercover exposé. By establishing good media relationships, you lay the groundwork to have them look for you when they need to quote a local dealer or manufacturer for a story. You become a reliable source to them, an invaluable asset to a journalist.

Or, go beyond press releases for publicity opportunities by inviting local media to tour your factory or dealership. You have many great business or lifestyle article subjects that can be uncovered by local reporters if you just give them the chance to explore your world. If your local paper is understaffed, offering to write an entire article about the RV lifestyle can be valuable. Dealers or RV manufacturers can even offer use of an RV for a week to local newspaper, radio or TV reporters. Getting a journalist to experience the fun of RVing could pay off for months or years in many different kinds of exposure — and it may create a new RV owner!

Even with all these powerful tools in place, have realistic expectations about your first-time publicity efforts. Most editors are deluged with information daily. I used to sit behind the editorial desk of a sales and marketing magazine, and

got 300 press releases a month. There was no way to use all that material in each issue. You may not always hit a home run, so keep sending new materials to the appropriate editors. Continue to follow up with other story ideas or media invitations I outlined, as well.

Once you've invested in a press release, spread the wealth — the information has a much longer life than with the media. Send releases to your OEMs, reps, distributors or dealers. It's an easy way to share the current company message, and they can use the information in their own sales or publicity activities.

It requires some time and effort, but the rewards of good publicity are vast. It doesn't take a million-dollar budget to put a basic plan in motion, and effective publicity can help illustrate you're a real player in the industry. Remember, every big company in the world started out small. ■

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