

THE COLUMBIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

VOL. 1 NO. 8

The Monthly Business Newspaper of Howard County and Columbia, MD

SEPTEMBER 1993



Marketing Your Business

CAROLYN WEST PRICE

Use That Shoestring Creatively

How often have you felt like a "best kept secret," even in your own community? And, to add insult to injury, how often have you felt that there was nothing you could do to change this state of being because you're a "small business" or on a "shoestring budget?"

Nonsense.

Using public relations and promotions in tandem with any of your other marketing efforts will combat this "best kept secret" syndrome—over time. But first you need to understand the difference between public relations, promotions and advertising.

Public relations is the soft-sell of marketing that creates goodwill and makes people feel good about doing business with you. It specifically encompasses the area of media relations—getting your name in print or on radio or television—which positions you as an authority in your field through the third-party objective endorsement of the media.

Promotions, on the other hand, are activities or events that actually require some level of participation by members of your target market.

For instance, a grand opening or seminar requires them to attend an event; a sweepstakes usually requires them to complete a form and enter a drawing; a refer-a-friend contest requires them to get friends to use your service.

In many cases, a promotion will warrant some sort of public relations to take advantage of media coverage ranging from calendar listings to an actual story about the event or its sponsors.

Advertising is paid-for exposure in the form of print (magazines, newspapers, newsletters, direct mail, flyers, yellow pages), broadcast (radio, cable, television) or outdoor/transit (billboards, parking meters, buses, cabs).

You control the message and the media (unlike public relations, where an editor has the final say.)

Of course, advertising is a complement to public relations and promotions in the sense that if you're having a grand opening, you won't want to rely exclusively on free calendar listings.

OK, enough definitions, here's the scoop: get active in the community to be visible. If you're a restaurant or bar, consider sponsoring a team. The shirts on which your name will appear are "walking billboards" for you, plus most of the players will patronize your establishment, returning your "investment" many times over.

Or, get your staff and family shirts and participate as walkers or bikers in local fundraising events. Offer to sponsor part of a fundraiser's expenses, such as registration forms or flyers on which your logo will appear in return for picking up the cost of printing.

Another possibility is educational seminars and articles designed to help people.

Conduct screenings related to your field through strategic partnerships, such as a local chiropractor's community spinal screenings at a mall—this is also great visibility. So is offering to contribute a column in friends' or clients' newsletters in exchange for allowing them bylines in yours.

Remember to send press releases when you win an award or hire a new manager. And strategically volunteer your time (and announce your involvement) for boards of directors or committees that offer you exposure to the types of people you need to be in front of or groups that, by virtue of the publicity they will garner, will put you in the limelight.

You'll get great networking opportunities, and the organization will benefit tremendously from your volunteered talent.

Take a local computer consultant, for example. He volunteered to coordinate the Presidential Inaugural Committee's network of computers that

took RSVPs for all of the many inaugural events and coordinated all of the functions.

Not only did he expand his network, but the PIC project and subsequently his involvement with it garnered stories or news notes in several business papers and computer trade journals.

This consultant had to tell someone what was going on with his volunteer project, or the media might not have heard about his involvement. That's where the "best kept secret" can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

You say to yourself, "Our company is doing x or y and nobody knows about it." But, if you don't tell anyone, you're the only one to blame.

You know, look for that local "hook" so reporters will want to write about you. When they do, send the reprints to anyone who's anyone—prospects, vendors, current clients—to reinforce "why you."

And last but not least, consider this and stay tuned for a sweet treat: a Baltimore-based candy company is moving to Columbia this fall. Be sure they'll incorporate public relations, promotions and advertising to tell the community they're here.

Even though they, too, will work with a limited budget, they realize you don't stay in business for more than 70 years—and grow that business—without someone knowing about you.

While this list of suggestions is by no means exhaustive, the bottom line is this: Visibility doesn't have to cost a lot, it just has to be planned and well orchestrated using the tools that only creativity can limit—public relations and promotions.

Guess it's time to brainstorm with those employees—remember to involve them.

Carolyn West Price is president of IMPACT Marketing & Public Relations, Inc. in Ellicott City. She is also an adjunct professor of marketing and public relations at Loyola College in Baltimore.

She can be reached at 410-461-9398.