

Is free PR really free?

How Free is “Free Press”?

Besides its power to influence, one of the biggest lures of public relations (PR) is the potential to get premium media exposure for free. This can be an invaluable asset, especially to a start up business. So how does a company get the word out and earn free media? What are the risks?

Recently three entrepreneurs, Colette Courtion of Calidora, Kevin Leneway of Giant Thinkwell, and Charles Walsh of ValueAppeal, discussed their PR experiences at a Northwest Entrepreneur Network meeting. Each was forthright about the lessons they learned while achieving significant exposure in top national and regional media.

Avoiding Media Blunders

Perhaps the biggest fear anyone has in dealing with the media is of looking foolish on a large, visible stage. With little experience and no professional help, media gaffes are a real risk.

That’s partly why Charlie Walsh chose not to take any chances. Walsh explained, “Like working with legal advisors earned media is a specialty, so it’s worth spending money to get the right expertise.” Although Walsh had outside help in securing coverage for ValueAppeal in USA Today, Kiplinger’s, Smart Money, Forbes and regional papers, he admits that his biggest PR blunder was hiring the wrong type of agency.

Walsh’s first PR agency was a 4-5 person team. The founder pitch sounded great, but things deteriorated when his small account was delegated to an intern. Three months in he was frustrated about the wasted money and time. Walsh modified his approach the second time around and found success working with a boutique, one person agency. He credits becoming far more media savvy because of

working directly with the founder/principal.

Colette Courtion was lucky enough to learn what not to do while working with the media before she started Calidora.

Executive Insights



Cheryl Isen

While employed by a large, public company she experienced a media “gotcha”. During an interview she was caught off guard and told a reporter “we don’t know our customers like that, what we do know is...”, however only the first part of her statement “we don’t know our customers” made the article. The partial statement was misleading and embarrassed the customer-focused company; however it created an eye-catching headline for the reporter.

This tough lesson helped Colette avoid future mistakes. Knowing that any statement can be potentially misinterpreted and used, Colette religiously prepares talking points in advance of media interviews and sticks to her script regardless of the question. This has led to successful interviews with Women’s Wear Daily, the NY Times, Seattle Magazine and others.

Kevin Leneway of Giant Thinkwell had a similar reckoning with the media. An open, honest character who admits to not knowing much about PR, Kevin did have blogging experience and was comfortable with social media. He used Twitter and other social channels to launch Giant Thinkwell. With a war room-style approach he and about 30 others talked up their social gaming platform and quickly racked up more than 250,000 users.

Their successful launch quickly attracted mainstream media attention. Kevin’s social media bravado helped earn his company a five page magazine spread. Although the article was generally positive, Kevin’s open nature coupled with a lack of PR experience left him open prey with the media. Ultimately he regretted key quotes in the article and agreeing to pose for silly and unprofessional photos that he now deems unbecoming of a co-founder. Both didn’t resonate well with customers. Kevin’s big lesson: when working with the media “think before you act”. Consider how staff, customers, suppliers, analysts, advisors and financial backers will react to statements and photos.

The Cost of Free PR

Odds are if you have a highly unique and timely story with a creative spin, or if you’re willing to say or do something controversial, the media will take notice. In that respect, PR is free for the taking. However, most businesses are saddled with trying to turn a modestly novel idea (from the media’s point of view) into news coverage, which is far more difficult. However, if you’re determined to try PR on your own remember that free press doesn’t always mean you’re getting the best exposure possible. Emblazoned novices, take time to learn how the media game works and keep these tips in mind:

- Avoid being a one pop wonder: AKA telling the media everything you know in the first interview; instead tease the reporter with future tidbits so they will want to write follow up stories.
- Take time to give reporters a KISS (keep it simple stupid): ditch the jargon, talk in sound bites and sum up complex points; remember most reporters are generalists and won’t write

about what they can't understand.

- Have a media plan: pitching fresh, creative story ideas to the media takes time so narrow down your media list and story angles to those that will really help your business achieve its objectives.

This column is written by Cheryl Isen, founder of Isen & Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm that helps companies increase visibility and brand awareness. Contact Cheryl at (425) 222-0779, Cheryl@IsenandCo.com. Visit IsenandCo.com to learn more.