

The Power of

PR

Public relations is more than sending out a periodic press release. To grow your business, you must create a true synergy between your marketing and PR strategies.

by Todd Hays

feel like you have something to say, but no one's listening? Two leading design firms, tired of feeling that way, finally did something about their dilemmas. They discovered how to create a synergy between their media relations and their marketing efforts, which has propelled both firms toward better work for bigger clients. While each solved the problem with a slightly different process, both have reaped greater rewards than they expected.

CASE STUDY #1

FROM SMALL COMPANY TO FIRM

When Smullen Design began its public-relations effort almost eight years ago, it was a one-person operation in the old-town area of Pasadena, CA. Limited funds complicated the urge to grow the company, so founder Maureen Smullen started with a modest plan that combined marketing and PR, and enlisted the help of an outside consultant to put the plan together.

Since then, the firm has grown not only in size but, more important, in stature. It has expanded into a much larger office with a full-time staff of five. Sales have doubled every year for the past four years and, most significant, the firm has earned a reputation as a leader in branding, licensing and consumer products. Smullen Design's client list now includes Edison International, Disney, Mattel, Hallmark, Warner Bros. and Universal.

Maureen Smullen is backed by an energetic staff of professionals with varied backgrounds (LEFT TO RIGHT): Ana Mendoza, Betsy Patterson, Jung Hong and Dory Megaro.





Regular internal design meetings keep designers abreast of the firm's wide range of ongoing projects. Smullen, Hong and Mendoza, shown here in the conference room, join forces to brainstorm the creative direction for a new packaging concept.

Smullen and her firm's director of business development, Betsy Patterson, regularly sift through industry journals and publications for new marketing leads. The two get together several times a week to compare notes and determine which leads to pursue.



While having outgrown its original one-room office, Smullen still embraces the benefits of an open working environment. When the company expands—as it has recently by leaps and bounds—it usually means tearing down walls, not putting up new ones.

Maureen Smullen was compelled to consider public relations not only for budgetary reasons, but also because she was perplexed and tired—perplexed by trying to find the best approach to advertise her capabilities and talents, and tired of being called in to fix work other designers had begun. She asked herself over and over why she wasn't being tapped to start the job in the first place. It clearly wasn't a lack of design skill.

Smullen finally asked a client what her competition had that she didn't. The client simply replied, "A reputation." Smullen was just as capable as "big-name" firms, and she'd been around longer, but she'd been labeled a freelancer, not a firm. "This was a big problem," she says. "I needed to get people to stop thinking of me as a freelancer and start thinking of Smullen Design as a full-service, full-fledged design firm."

In the eyes of her clients, the other firms had a cachet that Smullen Design just didn't have—yet. Smullen realized that to succeed she'd have to build a set of credentials rivaling those of her competitors. Or, perhaps more accurate, she'd have to make her credentials better known to her clients.

ACT, DON'T REACT

Public relations was never the sole solution to Smullen's early business-development questions, but to this day it remains the

most enduring. "When I started, I established goals that were aligned with our marketing objectives," Smullen recalls. "Many of those ideas we formulated eight years ago are still in place today."

While Smullen's early foray into public relations may have been a bit reactive, the effort has since evolved into one with a proactive strategy behind it. "It's no longer a matter of going after almost everything and seeing what sticks," she says. "Now we always know who we're going after, what story we're taking to that specific publication, and why."

Today, Smullen's media-relations effort is directed at building specific areas of new business and is more sophisticated in its strategy. She and her consultant spend most of their time cultivating new press contacts and working toward media placements that cite the firm's recent work or new capabilities. They're constantly seeking fresh avenues to new business and investigating untapped markets. "When we finish a project in a discipline in which we want to develop new business, we actively go after getting press for that project," Smullen says. "It helps us build our credentials, and it keeps a growing list of clients abreast of our capabilities."

This media outreach focuses on trade journals, including *Shopping Center Executive*, *Brandweek* and *Playthings*, and



When the West Hollywood Convention & Visitors Bureau needed a marketing campaign to highlight the city's appeal, Smullen Design responded with a comprehensive branding solution that was implemented throughout the Bureau's marketing materials.

Telling a story through graphics is one of the things Smullen Design does best. For Warner Bros. Stage 16 restaurant, Smullen designed the identity and graphic collateral. The imagery was later applied to products now for sale at the Las Vegas restaurant.



often includes placing columns written by Smullen herself. She uses her design work as a credential to write for trade journals; a column in a trade journal gives the firm credentials in that industry (the area of new business she's pursuing); and the combination of the two makes for a powerful pitch to new clients. Smullen says with a grin, "It's a win-win scenario." Smullen makes it sound easy, but she's quick to add that building relationships with reporters and editors isn't unlike cultivating relationships with clients. "In the beginning, no press exposure is too small," she says. "The smaller articles have always led to bigger and better stories."

Because design firms don't usually have the luxury of putting a credit on the work they create, Smullen says it's important to inform clients about the firm's latest work. "Exposure in the media not only gets us credit for the work we create, but it also enables us to tell a little more about the creative process behind the project."

REPRINTS: A COMPANY'S "POWER TOOL"

Reprints are the cornerstone of Smullen's marketing program. Her proactive approach takes advantage of the powerful "endorsement halo" from the publication. "Using reprints as a marketing tool is one of the most effective ways to gain



Making direct mail stand out in an appropriate way can be a challenge. When developing the design criteria and identity for the American Telemarketing Assn.'s "Make the Call!" campaign, Smullen's designers created an illustrative solution that "speaks" for itself.

added value from our public-relations efforts," she says. PR doesn't stop with the article—it's just the beginning.

Smullen continues to brainstorm inventive pass-along techniques to package and distribute the clippings that result from her ongoing media efforts. One such technique, which the firm calls a "fax-O-matic," is a single vellum page wrapped around a reprint of recent press coverage. The vellum is printed with an intriguing, attention-grabbing graphic to entice the recipient to open it. There's also a one-color reply page the recipient can fill out and fax back to request additional information about the firm if the article hits home.

Does it work? Absolutely, Smullen says. The fax-O-matic has prompted prospects to call when just about every other conventional marketing technique has failed. "We're not selling Smullen Design; the publication is," she explains.

THE SMARTER ROAD TO BUSINESS SUCCESS

Working with some of the biggest clients in several industries, Smullen has achieved many of the goals she outlined from the start. But public relations still plays an instrumental role in the firm's continued growth. And while she still works with an outside consultant, Smullen is just as involved in the effort as when she began.

Years of media relations has made it easier for Smullen to be more strategic about plans for growth. While Smullen says the most quantifiable result of her PR efforts has been the new business generated by sending reprints from trade journals, she says other immeasurable results have also made the effort worthwhile.

Smullen says there's a certain confidence that comes from the continued validation of media exposure. "Media exposure helps support our beliefs and reinforces what we're doing," she says. "We've always believed in what we do. This just makes us believe more strongly that what we're doing is also being embraced by everyone else."



Keeping an evergreen property fresh while respecting its branding guidelines is often a challenging assignment. These trade-show bags reflect Smullen's keen ability to "bend the rules, but never break them."