

Don't Be

Your Own

Self-promotion involves more than mailings to potential clients. A focused media campaign can bring increased exposure and new business to your firm.

**BEST
KEPT
SECRET**

By Todd Alan Hays

Learn the keys to a successful public relations program as designers and communications professionals share their experiences.

When Maureen Smullen read her first newspaper interview a few years ago, she felt it was a complete disaster: "I said the wrong things, I used the wrong words. My nerves were driving the interview—not my instinct." Today, on the eve of yet another interview, this West Coast designer exudes a much different aura—less anxious, more confident. Her public relations efforts over the past two years have paid off. Smullen's three-person design firm counts the two largest employers in Southern California as clients, in addition to a host of other prestigious national corporations. "Our press coverage has helped us enormously in getting projects but, perhaps more importantly, it's been a subtle reminder that my business is growing," Smullen says.

If you are like most designers, just the thought of doing anything related to marketing and public relations sends a chill down your spine. With a little research and some focused effort, however, a successful public relations program aimed at the media rather than directly at clients is well within any designer's reach.

Blame It on the Media

An astonishing 60% of the editorial content in this country's top newspapers is the byproduct of somebody's PR effort. Design firms everywhere are joining the media push. **And a well-orchestrated public relations effort can do a lot more than just develop new clients—it can also build self-esteem and confidence.** "One value to any PR

effort that happens automatically is the growth of the individual," cites David Goodman, a marketing consultant who has more than 20 years experience working with designers. "The more confident you are about yourself, the more confidence you project to others," Goodman adds.

Public relations isn't limited to simply having articles written about your work. Ancillary opportunities for exposure among two key groups—your peers and potential clients—include entering design competitions, becoming involved in organizations and clubs, teaching, public speaking, designing pro bono projects and authoring books. Why seek out exposure among your peers? "When somebody asks 'Who are the top designers on the East Coast?', you will automatically gravitate toward the designers who have the most PR or have gotten the most exposure—they automatically become the top designers. It's not necessarily based on their work—it's a result of the recognition they've received," Goodman remarks. "If you do great work, stay in your office your whole life and never get outside, you don't extend your possibilities," he adds. "The work does not speak for itself."

Remember that getting your name in print is important, yet what you do with it after the fact is the true hidden asset of media coverage. Pasadena, Calif.-based environmental graphic designer Wayne Hunt understands the value of a long-term, varied promotional effort. His foray into PR has included press coverage, an active speaking agenda and involvement in several books. "We've had so much success in getting published that our primary



80% of success is showing up every day



Illustration: Lori Siebert, Siebert Design Assoc., Cincinnati (513) 241-4550.

sales tools are reprints—they are much more powerful than anything we could produce in-house,” Hunt says.

Strategize, Strategize, Strategize

No firm is too new or too small to look into some area of public relations. PR programs can be implemented in a variety of ways: You can retain an outside consultant, create a staff position to include communications duties or take it on yourself. “It’s important to keep any PR effort focused. Monitor it. Organize it. And treat it as any other part of the business,” cites design consultant Keith Bright, a PR veteran. “The tendency is to focus on the jobs of our clients, not the jobs of ourselves. If you’re going to do PR, make it a number one priority.”

Begin by asking yourself: Who do I want to reach? Where can they be reached? Why do I want to reach these people and publications? How is my work different from that of other designers? To assure success with any public relations program, determine what is unique about you and your firm when you establish your goals.

Remember to refer to these goals when making a decision on any component of your PR program, including: What is the best angle for a press release? Where is the best placement for a company profile? Who is the best audience to speak to?

Knowing Who To Contact ... and How

The next step is developing a target audience that consists of consumer and business publications as well as local

media contacts. In addition to these entries, trade publications are staples for any design organization’s media list. And just because it’s a trade journal doesn’t mean a potential client won’t see it. “Every few weeks, we get an unsolicited new business inquiry from someone who has read about us or heard about us. That prospect most likely learned about us through our media coverage,” Hunt says.

When developing your media list, be sure to pay special attention to the key issues for a given publication—it can mean the success of a story idea. “I make my decision based on imagery. I need to see if the project is something our readers would want to see and if the photography is good enough to be in the magazine,” says Lynn Baxter, editor of *Identity* magazine, an environmental graphic design publication. “I would prefer the visuals to come with the release,” Baxter adds, but she understands that this can get to be an expensive proposition for many firms. “A photo or two included with the initial contact/pitch would be better than none at all,” she says.

To help define their editorial agendas, most magazines will gladly send out a media kit containing useful background information and often a sample issue. *Identity*, for example, has come up with a very user-friendly one-page “Painless Submission Guidelines” that spells out what *Identity* publishes and how to submit a story idea. From those guidelines, you learn that the publication places a strong emphasis on environmental graphics and is very concerned about the visuals available for a given project.

Timing is also an important factor, taking into account

pr for designers

Bright & Assoc.'s news release on the international trade implications of an identity program it designed for a client gained them coverage in a variety of nondesign publications, including *World Trade* magazine.

a publication's editorial agenda, the "issues of the day" and what's "hot" at the time. All publications have an editorial calendar—a predetermined schedule of subjects or topics to be covered over the course of a year. These calendars are available on request and will help determine the best time and placement for a particular story idea.

Assembling Press Materials

So what do you send? How do you reach your newly targeted audience? For your press kit, you'll want to include a press release, a cover letter (used to pitch a story), short company background information (called a backgrounder), photos and bios of company principals and/or key employees, a company brochure (if one is available), copies of previous press coverage (called clips), and a business card of the person in your firm who will be your press liaison.

If you are a new or younger firm, begin by sending a steady stream of news releases to your media list. Let everyone know that you hired a new employee, you signed a new client, you won a great award. All of this is news and you're keeping your name in front of the people on your media list. Make sure the information you release is accurate and that your client has seen and approved the content prior to its mailing.

How do you write a news release? Many design offices use copywriters; let these people write the release. Keep it to a proven and accepted format—this isn't a design contest. Submit releases double-spaced, in a Courier or other clean typeface. Be sure to include a contact name and number on the release even if it is already printed on your letterhead.

Never underestimate the visual value of a project or story. Once a promotable project has been selected, keep plenty of visual materials on hand for use in a media kit. Many writers, editors and art directors work under very tight deadlines and may ask that you get something to them overnight, including project shots, résumés, bios, photos of principals, reprints of past media coverage the firm has received, etc.

The Pitch

Now that the goals are established, the media list developed, and the news releases written and sent out, it's time to follow up. This is where the term public relations takes on its title importance. PR is a relationship business and while a consultant is not required, it can be a tremendous advantage. Many publications will resent a call to follow



up on a press release. "I realize it is good to follow up from a designer's point of view," remarks Baxter of *Identity*. "But it is a real pain from my point of view." Publications receive hundreds of releases every week and simply don't have time to answer every unsolicited query.

If you want to pitch a specific story to an editor, expand the idea beyond the release format and send the publication a query letter. Pay close attention to the careful research you've conducted on the editorial content of the magazine. Try to determine if it has ever run a story like yours

before. Then in one page, briefly explain what you feel are the newsworthy components of the story. Include any visuals relevant to the story, as well as a complete press kit on your firm. And unlike a press release, it is appropriate to follow up on a query letter.

The Return

Assessing the value of any public relations effort is extremely challenging. News releases often go out with scant recognition. Most mainstream publications find graphic design a "hard sell" for their readers.

Is all the time, effort and money worth it? Maureen Smullen believes that it is. "Being a smaller firm, people may ask: 'How legitimate am I?'" But most design firms share this concern, not just the small ones. "Press coverage adds a certain amount of professionalism to any presentation or proposal. There is an implied value and respect given to our work because of it," Smullen adds.

Most large design firms have some public relations component built into their marketing efforts. So PR must have some value. Frank Maddocks, principal of the bicoastal design firm Maddocks & Co., has gotten back into the PR game because he knows it gives him an edge over his competition. And although the results can often be difficult to measure, he acknowledges that "PR plays an important role in recruitment and retention of design talent—we get better people working here, and thus we get better work coming out." **HOW**

Todd Alan Hays is a Pasadena, Calif.-based public relations and marketing consultant.

Anatomy of a

News Release

Your **Design Company**

Contact: Judy Smith
(313) 123-4567

News Release

For Immediate Release

Historic "Invisible" Electronic Packaging Program Unveiled at the World Trade Corporation

DETROIT – October 1, 1995 – YOUR DESIGN COMPANY and the World Trade Corporation (WTC) teamed to develop a new marketing concept that will revolutionize the way products are sold to consumers. Beginning this holiday season, people with home computers or television sets can shop and buy products featuring WTC's new "cyber wrap." "Our new Home Shopping Channel will feature products with and without the usual outer packaging. The consumer can then specify if they wish the product shipped with the outer packaging they saw or in simple brown paper," says Roger Jones, CEO of WTC.

"The concept will dramatically reduce the trash and...

— more —

1010 A Street **Detroit** Michigan 45135

(313) 123-4567

1. *Contact Name and Telephone Number*

2. *Embargo*

This line indicates when the information contained in a release can be made public. Always check with your client before releasing any information on his company.

3. *Headline*

Always include a headline that summarizes what your release is about and grabs an editor's attention.

4. *The "Lead" Sentence*

This opening line tells a reader what your release is about. Additionally, include the who, what, when and where in the first paragraph.

5. *Footer*

Indicate if the release is more than one page. A release should rarely exceed two pages.

6. *Body*

The middle paragraphs present further details and facts about the story. Use quotes from other people within your company, industry leaders and other authorities to lend credibility to your release.

7. *Closing Paragraph*

Take this opportunity to summarize the specific details of your story.

8. *"Motherhood" Statement*

This paragraph is a brief historical bio of your firm. Include a short client list and some relevant past projects.

9. Always indicate the end of a press release with hash marks.

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World Trade Corp./YOUR DESIGN COMPANY

"Our new packaging system may dramatically cut down on consumer waste," says Joyce Robinson, art director for YOUR DESIGN COMPANY...

The new "cyber wrap" created by YOUR DESIGN COMPANY for the World Trade Corporation presents one solution to a worldwide waste crisis...

YOUR DESIGN COMPANY was founded just outside the Detroit area in 1985. The firm specializes in unique packaging solutions for a variety of corporate clients including...

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Editor's note: The elements in this diagram are staples for all news releases. You may want to adjust the style slightly to fit with your letterhead format, but remember that this isn't a design contest. Keep the format basic and easy-to-read. The writing is what will sell a story.

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