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Today's Business: Compete with effective public relations

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It can be daunting to market a business with a limited budget and still stand out from the crowd. NBC reportedly sold a record \$1.2 billion in advertising for the Olympics where the cost of a single TV ad approached about \$1 million.

You don't have to spend \$1 million to give your business a boost. Consider developing a cost-effective public relations campaign. It can build trust as well as increase awareness of your product or brand.

Start with clearly defining your audience. Who do you want to reach — geographically, socio-economically, by age group, and any of dozens of other factors. Once the audience is defined, only then can you consider ways to reach them.

It may be through any number of different ways: social media, at a trade show, through daily newspapers, specialty trade publications, radio, television or even highway signage.

Look at what your competition is doing. That does not mean you should copy their efforts but it will help identify ways your message can stand out. In today's world, a strong internet presence is critical — both to get your message out and to hear what others are saying about you.

The key to effective internet marketing is the content. It must be compelling and of interest to your target audience. It must have some emotional appeal and address specific needs. Consider using local media for such content that then can be leveraged on the internet.

Here is an example.

A regional law firm, with a focus on helping people following car accidents, recently persuaded a newspaper editor to publish an article on the importance of uninsured motorist insurance. After the article was published in several regional newspapers, the law firm posted the article on its social media sites and its website. It also was emailed to selected existing and potential clients.

Because they were sending an item from a newspaper, it did not look like an ad but it did have the same ability to raise awareness of this particular law firm. After publication, the article also can be used to interest the producer of a local radio talk show. Tell the show producer that you can address the same topic during a brief, perhaps live, interview — that can be recorded and distributed on your social media accounts.

Another effective public relations strategy is to create a partnership with a nonprofit organization.

Here is what happened at a large national financial company.

They created a partnership with a nonprofit that builds playgrounds in underprivileged neighborhoods. With dozens of company volunteers, they built a playground in just a day. It attracted local television and newspaper reporters. The company created good will in the community and generated positive publicity — all without sounding self-promotional.

Public relations really is about influencing, engaging and building a relationship with your key stakeholders (customers, suppliers, investors and employees), using across multiple platforms to shape public perception of your business.

Of course, this should not suggest abandonment of paid ad campaigns. Both can be used effectively — especially if they are in concert and clearly reflect the company's values, brand and product benefits.

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