

David F. Ramacitti — 

Do-It-Yourself PUBLICITY



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DAVID F. RAMACITTI

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ramacitti, David F.

Do-it-yourself publicity / David F. Ramacitti.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8144-5982-X

ISBN 0-8144-7773-9 (pbk.)

1. Public relations. 2. Publicity. I. Title.

HD59.R18 1990

659—dc20

89-81026

CIP

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Printed in the United States of America.

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First AMACOM paperback edition 1991.

Printing number

10 9 8 7

Do-It-Yourself Publicity

This book is dedicated to two people:

To Patsy, who is many things to me,
but most important of all,
my wife and friend;

And, to Dr. Reef Waldrop, my former journalism professor at Western Illinois University, who taught me that writing is a most extraordinary adventure.

Do-It-Yourself Publicity

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Introduction

Once upon a time, editors, like characters out of a Jimmy Stewart movie, could spend lots of time with their feet up on the desk, puffing their pipes and chatting with friends and neighbors about the goings-on around town. No event was so small that it did not deserve some space in the news columns.

But those days are long gone! A visit to a modern newspaper or television news operation would be more like a trip into Tomorrowland. Instead of listening to the clatter of typewriters, you'd hear the whir of computer discs receiving a nonstop flow of national and international news via satellite. Instead of seeing an irascible, Lou Grant type shouting at harried reporters, you'd be more likely to find editors and news directors sorting through computer-generated menus of the thousands of news stories and features available to them each day, wondering how they will find the news columns or airtime to run even a tenth of the material.

Competition for the attention of the public is intense and is growing more so by the day. Advertising is on billboards, radio, television, videocassettes, and in movies, newspapers, magazines, shoppers, posters; it even arrives in the mail. All these claim that their products are vitally important, indispensable, newer, better, faster, sexier. . . . Various authorities estimate that the average consumer is bombarded by several hundred to a thousand advertising messages per day! And this doesn't even include the editorial portions of the newspapers and magazines or the news broadcasts and documentaries on television and radio that we *choose* to pay attention to.

So how can your small business, professional or service office, human service or charitable agency, or volunteer club hope to



compete in this media melee for its fair share of the public's attention? You can compete by learning to use the fundamental techniques of generating publicity in the media and adapting them to the special needs of your organization.

This book will:

- Familiarize you with the basic techniques and tools of publicity.
- Teach you to adapt these basic tools and techniques to your specific situation.
- Stimulate ideas for news releases and other publicity projects that do not require large amounts of out-of-pocket cash.
- Familiarize you with the strengths and weaknesses of the various media, so that you can use them effectively to achieve your publicity goals.
- Get you started on developing a complete media list for your community and/or industry.
- Help you to write a basic do-it-yourself publicity plan for your organization, even if the plan is little more than some notes on the back of an envelope.

THE VIEWPOINT

Every book has a viewpoint. Authors make assumptions about who their readers are and what they need and want to know. About this book's readers, I assume that:

- You are a small or growing business: a retail shop, a machine shop, an appliance repair shop, a bed and breakfast operation, a delivery service, a franchise fast food outlet, a woodworking shop, a hobby shop, an independent auto repair shop. . . .
- Or you are part of the explosion of small professional service firms: dentists, attorneys, architects, optometrists, chiropractors, computer software consultants (or, for that matter, consultants in any field you can think of, from waste management to music therapy), temporary services agencies, housecleaning or landscaping services, executive placement firms, insurance offices, real estate brokers, financial services counselors. . . .

• Or you are part of the vast array of nonprofit human service agencies and groups: the United Way or a United Way member agency, the Salvation Army, Goodwill, or an agency dealing with adoptions, family or marriage counseling, drug abuse, youth services, teen pregnancy, outreach, neighborhood advocacy, displaced worker support. . . .

• Or you are part of the extensive network of small, local health support agencies whose activities range from fund-raising to the delivery of client services and family support: Easter Seals, the Association for Retarded Citizens, Muscular Dystrophy, the March of Dimes, the Red Cross. . . .

• Or you are a member of one of the millions of volunteer clubs and organizations spread across the country: from service clubs to garden clubs, from bridge clubs to bicycle clubs, from bowling leagues to Little Leagues, from chambers of commerce to chamber music lovers, from wilderness backpackers to urban architecture buffs. . . .

And that all of you need, want, and deserve more positive media exposure for your business, agency, or group than you are now receiving.

About your needs, I assume:

- You do not have the funds to hire a public relations agency, nor do you have a professional public relations person on your staff.
- All of your publicity activities will be arranged on a do-it-yourself basis by someone in your business or organization.
- That person does not have a background in journalism or communications.
- Most of the time you will be dealing with *local media* or your own trade publications and will have only limited contact, if any, with the national networks or big-time newspapers or magazines.

Certainly the practice of public relations, especially at the national or international level, has become very sophisticated and complex. In this book, I've chosen to oversimplify and to stress the fundamentals. The approach is very how-to-oriented. I've tried to give a good many practical, action-oriented suggestions: specific



things you can do tomorrow morning when you get to your office, shop, or plant. I've provided lots of basic rules and checklists that are designed to get you started as quickly as possible generating positive public exposure for your group, agency, or business.

Some of the topics covered are:

- What a news release is and how to write one that will get the attention of the media—and no, you don't have to be able to write like Ernest Hemingway to produce a news release.
- How to put together a successful news conference—and no, you don't need the President of the United States or even Robert Redford as the star attraction to get the media to come.
- Enough ideas for generating news releases so that even the smallest business could send one out on a weekly basis if it really wanted to.
- Why the local newspaper's centuries-old roots in the printing and news business definitely work *for* you in your quest for more media exposure and, conversely, why the electronic media's roots in the entertainment industry tend to work against you.
- Why you will be making a serious mistake if you focus all your media planning on the traditional major media in your community (the daily newspaper, TV and radio stations) and ignore the "little" media: the neighborhood "throw-aways," the retiree newsletters, the community weekly, the high school or college papers, the specialized radio stations and cable channels, the public broadcasting channel. . . .
- How to survive—and perhaps even turn the tables in your favor—when some sort of controversy does erupt and the media are after your hide.
- Why you should appear as a guest on every local talk show that'll book you, as often as they'll book you, and what to do to be at your most articulate and relaxed best when they do.
- Why a comprehensive media file can be worth its weight in gold and how to get one started.
- How to write and implement a publicity or media plan for your business, agency, or group, even if it's little more than three goals jotted down on the back of an envelope.

PUBLIC RELATIONS VS. PUBLICITY VS. PAID ADS

It's also important for you to understand that this book focuses almost entirely on one specific aspect of public relations, that is, on generating free publicity for your small business or group in the various kinds of media that are available to you. This is as opposed to paid advertising, which is probably what comes to mind first when the topic of promoting your business or group comes up.

Certainly paid advertising plays an important role in the promotional plans of many kinds of businesses, especially retail businesses, where the competition is intense. Yet one of the recurring themes of this book is that most businesses and groups are hardly scratching the surface when it comes to exploiting the opportunities for, and the benefits of, a positive publicity program on behalf of their organization.

Don't confuse public relations with publicity. You will often hear these terms used as if they were synonymous. They're not.

Publicity is news coverage by the media of the products, services, activities, events, positions, people, contributions, history, or goals and dreams of your business, agency, or group. This can include traditional news stories in the newspapers or on radio or television as well as articles in magazines and other publications and appearances on talk and public service shows.

Public relations is an umbrella term that includes not only the programs designed to generate free publicity but also many different projects and activities that have little or nothing to do with the media—like developing brochures and fliers, publishing a customer newsletter, hosting seminars and workshops, sponsoring an open house or annual meeting, developing exhibitions and shows and staging all sorts of special events, such as golf tournaments or parades and, yes, even those lavish cocktail parties or sit-down dinners for VIPs!

YOUR LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

Finally, there is a strange, almost paradoxical, love/hate relationship between the media and public relations practitioners for which you should have some appreciation.



On the one hand, journalists in all fields place a great deal of value on maintaining their objectivity and independence. So, to keep from compromising that independence, they work hard at keeping an arm's-length relationship with those who seek coverage in their respective media. This applies especially to those who are trying to obtain this coverage as paid professionals, for instance, public relations firms or the PR staff members of a business or government agency.

On the other hand, as every working editor and news director knows, there is never a sufficiently large staff to cover every news event, to dig out and write every feature story, to provide the necessary background on every issue or topic of importance, let alone stay on top of the myriad of activities that occur daily in every community, big or small. The fact is, today's daily or weekly newspaper, today's evening TV newscast, today's hourly radio news roundup would not, indeed could not, exist as we know them without a regular and significant influx of information from non-staff sources!

The irony of it is that they—the media—need you—the seeker of publicity—as much as you need them! Of course they are the gatekeepers of your access to the audiences they provide. At the same time, you are a major source of the information they must provide to keep that audience's attention.

In other words, in your relationships with media people you should never allow yourself to be cast in the role of the beggar who seeks some sort of special dispensation for your business, agency, or group. As I will point out particularly in the following chapter and will stress again and again throughout this book, you have a perfectly legitimate right to far more coverage than you've probably ever gotten or, for that matter, ever imagined you could get. If there is a single driving theme of this book, it is "Go for it!"

Twelve Good Reasons Why You Should Think About Publicity

It's unfortunate but true that many small businesses still have the attitude "Just leave me alone and let me do my thing." They do not seek or welcome attention from any outsiders, especially if the outsiders are the media, the government, or some kind of consumer or advocacy group. It's the classic head-in-the-sand approach: "Maybe if I ignore them, they'll go away." Perhaps there was a time when the marketplace tolerated this kind of fiercely independent attitude. But that time is past.

Today's marketplace is no longer merely competitive; it is hypercompetitive! The shelves and racks of our stores and malls are loaded with dozens of "me too" products. Bankers now sell insurance and insurance salespeople now offer CDs. Did you ever expect to see the day when hospitals would advertise on billboards and television, like Coca-Cola or McDonald's?

Why should your small business, agency, or group worry about getting good publicity? Is it really worth all the time and hassle? There are at least a dozen very good reasons why you should generate as much favorable publicity for your business, agency, or group as you possibly can:

1. *It is simply a smart dollars and cents investment in promoting your organization.* Whether you measure your "profit" in terms of dollars left over after expenses are paid or in terms of more contributions, more members, or more clients served, promoting your organization's name and activities is no longer an optional "it would be nice if" task; it's critical to your survival!



Every positive article or photo published in the daily newspaper, every favorable one-minute clip on the early evening news, every complimentary mention in some specialty newsletter or magazine is FREE! Sure, it may cost a little bit of staff time, some duplicating and postage expense. But it did not cost you anywhere near the big bucks that the same number of column inches in the newspaper or the same amount of airtime on the TV news would have cost if you'd paid for it as advertising!

For example, a half-page ad—which is about what a good-sized feature story will run in a local daily newspaper—will cost at least \$500 to \$600 in a small-town daily, perhaps \$1,500 in a newspaper in a medium-size market, and as much as \$3,000 or \$5,000 in a large metropolitan newspaper. A one-minute story on the TV late evening news will run you \$200 to \$250 in a small market, \$500 to \$1,000 or more in a medium market, and \$2,500 to \$4,000 in a large urban market.

There is a major state tourism promotion bureau that spends most of its budget on writing and sending out its own news releases and on bringing in travel writers and editors for “familiarization” tours to generate articles and feature stories about the state’s attractions. Over the years, this bureau has kept records of the articles and TV features that have appeared and it estimates that there has been about a 4 to 1 benefit to cost ratio. In other words, if the tourism bureau had paid for the editorial space and airtime it has received, like advertising, it would have cost four times as much as it has spent on the news releases, media kits, and “fam” tours. That’s not a bad return on investment.

2. *You get more “bang for the buck” in terms of audience attention with editorial coverage.* This is a kind of corollary to number 1, the opposite side of the same coin; only here the focus is on audience attention rather than on dollars spent. What I’m suggesting is that on an inch-for-inch basis (using print media) or a minute-for-minute basis (using electronic media), you’ll get far more reader or viewer attention from free editorial space or time than you will from an equal amount of paid ad space or time.

Just think for a moment about how you read newspapers and magazines or watch television or listen to the radio. If you’re like most people, you read most of the articles (or at least the headlines) in the newspaper but at the same time, skip over the ads.

That is, unless you're specifically looking for something: You need tires and someone is having a tire sale; you've been thinking you need a new sportcoat and your favorite shop has announced its new spring arrivals; only then do you notice the ads. Or you watch the TV news stories with interest but pick up the paper and read a few paragraphs or carry on a conversation with your spouse or go to the kitchen (or bathroom) during the commercials! Sound familiar?

I know of a small manufacturer of a specialty garden tool who has tried display ads in various gardening magazines, but finds he gets two, three or more times the results—in terms of inquiries or actual orders—from just one mention in one of those same magazines' new products columns!

3. *It's just good sense to build your "bank account of goodwill" with the media and the community.* If it's true we've moved into a new era of competitiveness in the marketplace, perhaps it's only slightly less true to say that we're also entering a new era of contentiousness in our organizational and personal relationships. Individuals and organizations seem willing to sue one another at the drop of a hat. Advocacy and special interest groups, with their confrontational approach to everything, sprout with the ease of dandelions. Legislators promulgate laws that run to 1,000 and more pages. And regulatory agencies issue voluminous and highly technical manuals of rules and regulations on practically a daily basis.

What seems to be emerging is a new expectation of corporate and institutional accountability on the part of the public. Perhaps it's the long-term fallout from Watergate, Bhopal, Three Mile Island, and other disasters in which there was a perception that the politicians or corporations involved were less than open and honest in their dealings with the public and the media. This perception contrasts especially with the public's highly favorable attitude toward Johnson & Johnson after that company's enlightened handling of the Tylenol tampering case in 1982.

It seems clear that if it hasn't happened already, we are certainly nearing the end of the time when even small local businesses or organizations can get away with the attitude "Just leave me alone to do my thing." Sooner or later, every business or organization is going to need something from the community: a zon-



ing change to put up a new building, a variance on a sign ordinance, a city (or county or state) economic development grant (or loan guarantee) to create more jobs, a long-term lease to use city property for storage purposes, permission for a new curb cut, or an extension to a street or alley to improve access to its property.

All these “needs” involve an approval process that almost invariably includes a public hearing, with the opportunity for interested or affected parties to have their say. Very often that “say” takes the form of virulent and totally unexpected opposition. I’m not suggesting that a regular publicity program for your business or agency or group will guarantee that you’ll never be faced with neighborhood opposition to your request to rezone a piece of property so that you can build an addition to your building or that some local advocacy group will never issue a critical statement to the media finding fault with one of your policies or procedures.

What I do suggest very strongly is that a diligently conducted publicity program that regularly generates favorable coverage in the media is like building a bank account of goodwill. Even if it can’t altogether head off any given controversy—and, anyway, how would you ever know if it did?—it may well mean that you’ll at least get less hostile, and perhaps even favorable, treatment in the media, which in turn means less harsh treatment in the court of public opinion.

4. *You simply have a right to more media coverage.* As a legitimate organization that involves people and interacts with the community, you simply have a right to more space or airtime than you are probably now receiving. It’s part of the fundamental openness of the democratic process. The fact is, most businesses or organizations do not get their fair share of media exposure; usually because they haven’t bothered to tell the media about the interesting things they’re doing.

When I was a newspaper reporter, I always looked forward to doing feature articles on local businesses for the traditional year-end special section—we called ours the “progress edition.” I was constantly amazed at the many fascinating and previously untold story ideas I discovered in virtually every business or organization I visited. When I would tell the folks at the business, “This is a