

TREE CARE INDUSTRY

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Deaths
from
Wind-Related
Tree Failures

**GREEN
WASTE
is now
GREEN
PRODUCT**



Got Visibility?

Using PR to Build Your Green Business

By Christine Esposito

When you think about ramping up sales, what tools do you consider? Expanding your sales force? Starting an advertising campaign?

What about public relations? PR uses a variety of approaches to build awareness and create favorable impressions with customers and prospects – to help drive new business. It isn't the sole solution to generating new business, but it's an important part of the marketing mix.

Why PR? Much of PR's value is in the form of third-party endorsement. When a newspaper writes about your business, readers often view it as acknowledgement that your business is of a certain quality to pass media muster. Not all businesses obtain media coverage. If yours does, it must be noteworthy, so the thinking goes. Not all arborists speak at industry conferences, workshops or even garden club meetings. If you do, you must be of a certain caliber for the organization to have invited you.

Any business, large or small, can embark on a PR campaign. Depending on how much you want to raise your visibility and how much time and in-house resources you can devote to it, you don't necessarily need to hire a consultant to do it.

So why not try PR?

Green PR

These days, PR has been getting attention as something businesses can gain by "going green." It is true that a business' green initiatives can have PR value. But good PR is not the reason you should consider switching to biodiesel, finding innovative uses for downed trees or instituting other measures to make your operations and facilities more eco-friendly. From a public perception and branding



Volunteer projects are one way to boost your firm's visibility. Here arborist Jake Kubisiak, with The Care of Trees, hoists a student-made owl nest up into its new home. The project, organized by the nonprofit Lake Forest Open Lands Association, in Lake Forest, Illinois, was a chance for The Care of Trees to support a conservation effort, which in turn supports the firm's brand. Publicity for The Care of Trees was another benefit. Photo courtesy of Lake Forest Open Lands Association.

standpoint, it is critical that any greening your business does is consistent with and driven by your core values.

Consumers are growing increasingly

aware – and wary – of businesses that seek to improve their image by going green. Sooner or later they realize that the change is superficial, feel manipulated and think

negatively of such firms.

But if greening your business aligns with your core values and mission, by all means pursue it. Tree care companies have the advantage of being green by the very nature of their work. Combine that with a commitment to take steps to make your operations and facilities as environmentally friendly as possible, and you're seen as both a leader and responsible business.

Publicity and media relations

In building your PR toolbox, publicity and media relations are two powerful components. Publicity is not only good for building the visibility of your organization, it's also valuable for building employee morale. When employees see a news feature about their company, they feel like they're on a winning team. It fuels their company pride.

You don't have to appear on the cover of *Time* or be on Oprah to score a media success. Sometimes it's the seemingly low-key publicity that can make significant visibility inroads for your business.

Consider community papers, for instance. These weeklies are full of local news that often inspires a loyal following. They're also usually understaffed and looking for stories. That's an opportunity for you and your business.

News they can use

One way to start a publicity campaign is to strategically share tree care information that homeowners can use. Because they're always looking for content, community papers welcome news releases that provide such do-it-yourself tips for their readers. But other media outlets thrive on them as well. Major dailies, radio and TV stations, Web sites and other news sources are always looking for experts.

And that's how you'll be viewed when you're quoted in a press release explaining the many benefits of mulching, the do's and don'ts of watering during drought, protecting your trees from emerald ash borer or the Asian longhorned beetle, and more.

So how do you begin? You might already have information sheets that you give clients on various tree-care topics or tips on your Web site. Any one of them can probably be the basis for an educational press release. While the mechanics of writ-



Jake Kubisiak, with *The Care of Trees*, and some of the students who created the owl nest, in which a great horned owl family did take up residence. Pro bono projects are often a good way to cultivate new business prospects — many of the students' parents came out to see Jake install the nest. Photo courtesy of Lake Forest Open Lands Association.

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ing a press release would be too much to cover in this article, search the Web. There is plenty of information available to get you started. One helpful site is www.publicityinsider.com.

(TCIA also sends educational press releases each month to its members for use with their local media.)

Consider sending educational press releases at least quarterly, in which case you can make them seasonal in nature.

Helpful expertise

When you conduct an educational publicity campaign, it's important to keep the

sharing of useful information top of mind. While in reality, raising your visibility to generate business may be your first priority, taking an educational approach positions you as being a helpful expert instead of being concerned only with "tooting your own horn." Media people notice that, and it makes them want to work with you. You become a valued resource for them.

You may be wondering, "Who will I send this press release to?" Have you had conversations with any reporters in the course of your work? Put them on your list. Look for home-and-garden articles in your local papers. Note who wrote them and see if the reporters' e-mail addresses are listed. Or check the staff box at the front of the paper. You may be able to glean an editor's name and contact information. It's alright to start with only a handful of contacts; your list will grow over time.

Volunteer Projects

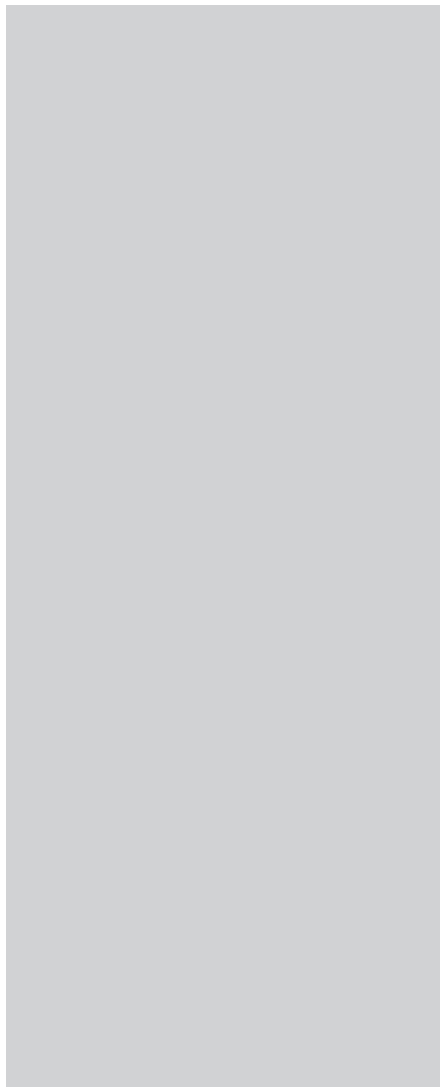
Publicity is just one way to raise your visibility through PR. Donating your services for special projects is another. Nonprofit organizations and public agencies are often looking for a variety of pro bono services and may ask for your help. Or you might learn of a project that you find interesting and decide to volunteer your expertise. Such projects might be any-

thing from pruning a historic tree, to installing holiday lights on a stretch of Main Street, to installing lightning protection in a specimen that is especially prized by a community.

Of course, volunteering your services requires an investment of time and sometimes money. So it's critical to be strategic about which organizations and projects you choose. Does the organization have a mission that's related to your work and values? Does it have a membership or constituency that would be a rich source of new clients for you? Will some of those prospects be involved in the project? Is the project in a high-profile location? Does the organization have a newsletter? Can it do an article about the project and your donation in the newsletter?

Beware Arbor Day

When your business is trees, Arbor Day seems to be the ideal opportunity to volun-



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teer your services for a worthy cause – planting a tree at a local school or library, distributing seedlings to a Scout troop. But if your goal is publicity, think twice before planning to be part of an Arbor Day or Earth Day celebration. If your business is one of many volunteering in a special event, as is often the case with Arbor Day and Earth Day celebrations, it will be harder for your contribution to be visible. With scores of such celebrations taking place at the same time, there's a chance your event will get lost in the shuffle.

If you want to do an Arbor Day-like project, and publicity is a goal, consider planning one for another time of year. The first day of spring is a good option. Then your project can stand out from the crowd – before the Arbor Day rush.

Strategic networking

Volunteer projects and other social settings are an ideal opportunity to use another important PR tool: networking. Every time you talk to peers, associates, prospects and clients in an informal setting, you have an opportunity to build awareness and create favorable impressions of your business.

Just as with volunteer opportunities, you need to be selective about which networking events to target. Will important and influential colleagues be there? How about associates in allied fields – architects, landscape architects, developers? Will you potentially meet new contacts? Or will it be a chance to get in front of key decision-makers you have not seen in a while?

The Elevator Speech

A useful tool as you expand your networking efforts is your “elevator speech,” the brief description you use to explain

what you do, whether in a conversation or when going around a room making introductions.

Have you given careful thought to your elevator speech? Does it spur interest in what you do? Or does it make people's eyes glaze over?

One element that can work against your elevator speech is industry jargon. It might work when talking to peers but is not helpful when talking to clients and people in other fields. Best to avoid it.

Just as with formal speaking engagements, think about your audience and ways you can describe what you do that will resonate with them. If you're talking to a realtor or builder, instead of saying, “I'm involved in all aspects of tree care,” try something like, “I help increase property values by up to 20 percent by keeping trees healthy and beautiful.”

Talking to a village manager or conservation professional? You might try something like, “My business helps offset climate change by caring for and preserving the urban forest.”

Be creative in how you talk about what you do, and focus on describing the impacts of your work. It will help people understand and remember.

Speaking opportunities

Becoming a proficient networker is a good warm-up for taking advantage of another key part of the PR toolbox: speaking opportunities. Nothing conveys that you're an expert like being invited to speak at an association meeting or conference. While it's natural to want to avoid standing up in front of groups and making presentations, when you consider the significant PR value of doing so, the only business-building choice is to seize such opportunities when they arise.

One thing to remember if you have qualms about speaking is that you are an expert in what you do. You have information and experiences that can help your listeners, whether they're peers who want to learn about your company's new safety initiatives or homeowners who want to learn how to prune their shrubs.

There are ways you can prepare for your talk that will enable you to successfully connect with your audience, leave a positive and lasting impression, and maximize

your comfort level. Here are some tips:

▶ **Know your audience.** Find out as much as you can about the people who will attend your talk. How much do they know about your topic? Have they had any experience with it? Do they have opinions about the information you'll be covering?

▶ **Be judicious.** Realize that time will not permit you to share everything you know about the topic. Ask yourself what information will be most useful to your listeners and be vigilant about not including too much detail.

▶ **Be organized.** Make sure your talk flows smoothly and logically. Not only will that help you successfully convey your message, but it will also show that you care enough about your audience to make your information easy to follow.

▶ **Practice.** Prepare your talk far enough in advance to be able to practice it. That will increase your comfort level and confidence. Also be sure to time your talk,

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allowing for questions and answers at the end. By ensuring that your presentation adheres to the timeframe you agreed to, you show that you deliver what you promise and that you respect your listeners' and fellow presenters' time.

▶ **Do some reconnaissance.** If possible, become familiar with your speaking

location beforehand. Adjust the room arrangement if necessary to make yourself more comfortable. If you're doing a hands-on demonstration in the field, make sure that all the equipment you need is available.

Your PR toolbox can be as broad and deep as your time and inclination allow. You can start gradually, trying out one technique and adding to it over time. By taking these low-cost steps and watching for the right opportunities, you can steadily build awareness and create favorable impressions of your business.

That's good PR.

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