

## **Don't Be Afraid to Wield the Power of a Press Release for Your Small Business**

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If I told you there was one communication tool that, in and of itself, could improve your small business' brand recognition, increase sales and generate new business, would you believe me? Even if you believed me, would you utilize this tool? The fact is, large corporations use this tool all the time but not all small businesses do, putting them at a distinct disadvantage but a disadvantage that can be easily overcome. So what is this magical tool? A press release. Yes, a simple yet powerfully written press release can work wonders for any small business. Whether distributed locally, online or both, a press release is an easy, relatively inexpensive tool that promotes your business to as wide an audience as you dare.

### **Why Do Small Businesses Hesitate to Use Press Releases?**

If a press release represents such an easy, magical tool, why do small businesses not use it every chance they get or at all in some cases? It's like a lot of things we know might be good for us but because they are unfamiliar or outside of our comfort zone, we forego because doing so represents the path of least resistance. My guess is that small businesses hesitate to use press releases because either they don't understand the power generated from one or they don't realize what a cost efficient form of advertising they are. There's another possibility too. They've heard, guessed or know those two facts but have no idea how to write an effective release or how to distribute one. These are valid concerns but not valid reasons for avoiding press releases. Let's remove them from your bag of excuses, right here and now, so you can begin to wield press release power for your small business.

### **Getting Motivated**

Getting out of bad habits or long standing ideas can be a challenge for most of us. Motivation is usually the key to changing course. Here are five solid motivators to give you the impetus to generate your first press release and hopefully many after that.

1. **Promotes your business in your local community:** Local newspapers, community magazines and other publications in your area are always looking for story ideas and, now especially, business editors are seeking good news and success stories to balance out the dismal economic storyline. Peak their interest by sending them a press release that highlights your unique story, i.e. the unusual way you got into your business, your background and credentials, etc; and your company's differentiator to potential customers, i.e. your personalized service philosophy, the uniqueness or quality of your product or service, etc. Bottom line, make yourself and your business stand out. Be interesting enough for them to follow up and write an article about your business.
2. **Helps SEO rankings:** SEO, or rather Search Engine Optimization, is the big buzz phrase these days. Regardless of how much we know about SEO, most business owners like you and me agree we'd like to increase our SEO ranking. But even the experts vary somewhat on the best way to achieve the highest rankings because the search engines keep evolving and adjusting the way they work. It may seem like you have two options to make it to the top of your keyword google search – pay an expert a hefty sum to boost your SEO rank or spin your wheels trying to do it yourself. If

you don't have the money or time for either of those options but would still like to up your chances of making a first page google search with your designated keyword, all is not lost. Submitting a press release with your keyword(s) to one or more online PR distribution sites is a relatively easy, inexpensive and focused way to help your SEO rankings.

3. ***Provides dynamic content for your site and for search engines:*** The search is on for new content for business websites all the time. Everyday there are ads on Elance.com for writers to create articles, blog posts, or other forms of content for websites. And that's just one freelancing site. There are many more just like it out on the web. Why is new content so important, especially if you feel you have the right messaging about your business on your Home page, About Us page, Products page, etc? Both the virtual readers, the search engines, and the human readers, your potential customers, want to know that your website content is fresh. Neither wants stale content that they've already seen one too many times. A link to your business' latest press release on your home page provides dynamic content. It tells the search engines and those actually visiting the site that something new has been posted and it gives them the latest information about your business.
4. ***Helps build brand recognition:*** Think Coke, Apple, Microsoft and Snapple, people recognize these brands anywhere. In order to do that, they've spent millions of dollars on advertising. I'm betting my life savings that most small businesses don't have the money to do that but of course, you'd still like to build some recognition around your brand. In addition to blogs, online press releases present an affordable, 21<sup>st</sup> century solution to small business branding. If you generate one press release per month, that's twelve hits about your company being distributed in your local community and/or on the web in one year. Now compare that to what it would cost you for even half that many print, TV or radio ads in a year and you begin to realize a much more realistic way of making your brand more recognizable to your customers and prospects.
5. ***Provides up-to-date information about your company:*** Did your company recently change addresses? Did you sign on a major account that helps build your credibility with other prospects? Did the company reach a milestone, like 25 years in business, which shows its stability? All of these pieces of information can form the basis of a press release which helps you get the message out to a wider audience than just your regular mailing list. By using a press release to help distribute new information, you never know who's going to see it and call you up for an interview for a magazine article highlighting your company, contact you for a major order because they respect the choice of that big account you signed, or decide to do business with someone who's been in the business for a long time.

### **Getting in on the Publicity Act**

If I've done my job effectively, then you're interested in getting in on the PR act. But how, you might ask? You basically need two things – a decent writing ability and a working knowledge of your subject. As the owner of your business, I know you have the second necessity. You're probably more worried about the writing aspect. Don't be. Press releases use a standard format that you can follow. That, in addition to adhering to a few simple rules about content, and you're just a few keyboard taps away from completing your first press release.

- **Standard Press Release Format:** The following step-by-step guide will help you format your press release into the standard template accepted by publications and online distribution sites:
  - **Company Logo:** It should appear at the top of the page so that receivers immediately know who has distributed this release.
  - **IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** These words should appear underneath your logo as an indication that this news is ready to be published.
  - **Contact Information:** This can either be provided underneath the words IMMEDIATE RELEASE or it can be provided at the end of the release. Either way, make sure it includes an appropriate company representative, their title, phone number and email address.
  - **Headline:** This is the title of your release. Keep it short and to the point, no more than 80 characters, and capitalize the first letter of each word except prepositions, articles (the, a, an) and those less than three characters long. Make sure to include your company's name and, if possible, a designated keyword.
  - **Summary Paragraph:** This is optional, although some online distribution sites request them. It is a slightly longer description of your article than the headline. This is the paragraph that some distribution points receive in addition to your headline and a link to the actual press release, so you want to make sure it persuades people to click on the link to read the full release.
  - **Dateline Paragraph:** This paragraph starts with the appropriate words filled in for "City, State, Month, Date and Year." After that it is a 2-3 sentence paragraph highlighting the main point of your release. Make sure your company's name is included as well as your designated keyword.
  - **Body of the Press Release:** This consists of a few more paragraphs that elaborate on the main point made in your headline and dateline paragraph. Resist the urge to be too lengthy or to give away everything in your release. Leave your audience wanting more so that they either contact you for additional information or visit your website. By the way, make sure you include your website address and it's always helpful to have one or two more links to pages other than your home page. This is especially helpful for the search engines.
  
- **Appropriate Content for a Press Release:** The most important thing to remember about the actual content is to balance factual information with an interesting storyline. Opinions should be reserved as quotes from a representative within your business, preferably the owner or someone else in authority. Quotes or testimonials from independent parties, such as customers, are a great way to provide additional credibility. Make sure you use correct grammar, spelling and word usage. Always proofread it before you submit it. Finally, the same rule that applied to the length of the press release applies to the content – be concise, compelling and above all, leave them wanting more.
  
- **Distributing Your Press Release:**
  - **Individual Publications:** Call or check the publication's website to find out the appropriate contact for small business stories and then fax and/or email your press release to that contact. It never hurts to follow up with a phone call to make sure they got your release and to try to further

persuade them that you and your business would make an interesting story for their publication.

- **Online Distribution:** There are many online press release distribution sites on the web today. Some are even free, such as [www.free-press-release.com](http://www.free-press-release.com), [www.pr.com](http://www.pr.com), [www.prlog.org](http://www.prlog.org), etc. And then there are other sites, such as [www.prweb.com](http://www.prweb.com) and [www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com), that charge fees based on the depth and breadth of the distribution you desire. Spend some time researching these sites to determine which offers you the most bang for your buck and for your business.

Writing about your business is a good and necessary part of being a small business owner. Getting someone else interested enough to write about your small business is an even better thing, a luxury that broadens your reach and expands your customer and prospect base. That's what an effective press release can do for your business. Don't waste such a golden opportunity to sell your business to an almost unlimited audience.