



Exposure – and why it's important!

As everyone is only too well aware, the current economic climate has forced businesses to cut back on many items of expenditure and to axe completely things that are seen as non-essential costs. Typical measures include freezing pay increases and bonuses, not replacing staff as they leave and putting a block on all new equipment and software development.

But, almost universally, among the first things to go are advertising, marketing and PR. Creative budgets get slashed, events and promotional events are cancelled and routine promotional activity is severely reduced.

But is that really the right thing to do?

There is an argument that businesses should maintain their current levels of promotion and, possibly, invest more not less when things are difficult. Continuous and proactive promotion enables businesses to be ready to step into new markets vacated by companies that have gone to the wall. It also ensures that they are prepared for the upturn when it comes and the return of customers from traditional sectors.

Of course, it's all very well to say that companies should keep up their promotional spend, come what may, but if the reality is that orders are scarce, banks are being unhelpful, customers are taking longer to pay or, worse still, have gone bust, the resulting strain on cashflow means businesses have no choice but to prioritise their spending and be very careful indeed. Sacrifices have to be made.

Investment in promotion does not necessarily mean spending money but could be time and effort in creative thinking and a willingness to knock on doors. Many businesses are being positive about this current downturn by seeing it as an opportunity for a re-appraisal. They are looking at their products and services, structures, policies, goals and achievements and seeing where they can fine-tune particular aspects of their systems to attract new business and to be more efficient and profitable in the future.

It is a time to reconsider the options for promotion and to look at new ways of doing things, perhaps to investigate the possibilities for e-marketing and using social networking sites to expand business. It is also an opportunity for many to reconsider their traditional markets, perhaps to diversify into new ones or examine ways to adapt existing products and services to make them suitable for different industries and commercial sectors.

Take the example of the sign company whose orders for health and safety signs dried up with the collapse of the construction industry. Its owner took the initiative to tender for a range of recycling signs required by new legislation. Now the business is working round the clock again and they need bigger premises to keep up with demand. Of course, the only way we know about this success story is because the business owner contacted BBC TV – or his PR did – to ‘sell in’ this good news story.

It’s a time to let others know you’re still in business and doing well. If your business can’t afford to advertise at the moment, then write about your successes and achievements and let everyone know when you have good, positive and interesting news.

At the very least, post news on your website. Contact your local radio, TV, papers and magazines to tell them your news, then send them some written information about it. If your story is really newsworthy, get in touch with your trade press as well. Don’t forget to tell your staff, customers and suppliers too.

Speaking of staff, if you have bad news – for example short time working or redundancy – make sure you inform them properly, face-to-face and before the news is broadcast to the world. Consider the plight of car workers given an hour’s notice of redundancy or a phone company’s employees who were informed by e-mail that they were about to lose their jobs. This is bad practice that creates animosity and ensures the business gets publicity – but the wrong sort!

With a little application, good and positive publicity can cost very little, depending on the available resource in-house. It’s worth thinking about seriously and even deploying an imaginative and creative existing staff member to take responsibility for news gathering and despatch.

While you're doing that, think about other ways to keep business alive without spending extra money:

- Make sure that everyone who uses the telephone is making the best of an opportunity to create a good impression by being friendly, efficient and polite
- Check that every aspect of your branding is consistent across all materials
- Train staff to understand the value and importance of keeping promises and meeting deadlines – a sure way to generate repeat business
- Make life easy for the customer – the easier you make it for them, the more they will want to deal with you
- Take a close and critical look at your customer service, particularly how complaints are handled and correct any faults
- But, however bad things are, never let customers know – they will start to lose confidence in your ability to meet their needs.

It is well known that editorial is much more widely read than advertising and therefore much more valuable, so you may decide, in the end, that the return on investment justifies devoting some time to PR or even paying a specialist to help you. Consider also the value of your own time, as a business owner – wouldn't it be better used creating business and more profit? Help from PR professionals doesn't have to be expensive and it can help spread your message.

