

D.I.Y. Public Relations: How Show Organizers Can Be Their Own Publicists

By Kenya McCullum

Public relations can be a show organizer's best friend and although there are many talented publicists that can attract attendees to an event, there is no reason that they can not take the reins and become their own PR machines.

In fact, show organizer Eric Udler—who has been involved with both trade and consumer shows throughout the course of his career—swears by generating his own PR and says that the do-it-yourself approach can set you apart from the competition.

“When you hire a PR firm, somebody in the firm—an intern or an account executive—is calling the media on your behalf. But how often do they have the owners of events calling them up? They never do,” says Udler. “These people get calls after calls after calls and they have every intern in every PR firm saying they need to cover this and that. When you do it yourself, you stand out a little bit because you are not a PR professional.”

But just because you are not a professional publicist does not mean that you can not get the results that you want—and it is not as daunting as it may sound.

Getting Started

The first step in generating your own PR is to determine what type of publicity you need to get the word out. Trade shows generally focus on PR within their industry, while consumer shows rely on local press to get people through the door. In order to find the media contacts that you need, Udler suggests going on the Web to find local television and radio stations, as well as print publications.

The Art of the Pitch

When you contact the media about your event, it is not enough to just let them know that the show exists. You have to create a pitch that tells reporters why the show is unique enough to be newsworthy. Do you have an interesting celebrity that will be speaking on the trade show floor? Do your exhibitors or sponsors have exciting new products that you can use as bait to get the media interested in your event? Is there something new about the show that you can promote? Look at your show and pick out some of the features that make your show different, and highlight them.

And when you prepare your materials, Udler believes that to get the best results, you should dare to be different. “The media gets hit with every Tom, Dick and Harry calling them about something that they think is newsworthy, but I think the biggest thing is giving them something different and out of the box that they can not get anywhere else,” he says.

One way that Udler publicizes outside the box is by sending members of the media samples of an unusual product manufactured by a sponsor of his Super Pet Expo. With each media kit, Udler will send cans of POOP-FREEZE™—a product designed for pet owners who are potty training their animals—which he says generates interest in the event right off the bat. “That gets people talking right away. When you look at the Oscars, attendees all get these goody bags with iPods and other products in it just to get people talking about the event. It is the same idea,” adds Udler.

In addition, Udler says that he makes it as easy as possible for the media to cover his shows and will send local television stations a DVD of footage about the event—allowing reporters to quickly put together a news item.

To Pay or Not to Pay?

Is all publicity about being lucky enough to appeal to the whims of the media? Not necessarily, says Udler, who often negotiates an interview or article about his event when he buys advertising from broadcasters and publications.

“When I am advertising my event, I am paying for interviews. I tell them right away that I am not going to advertise with them unless they are going to give me an interview. If they do not want to cross that border, go somewhere else,” Udler says. “I do not think too many people want to admit this, but I have a feeling that most PR is paid PR and if there is an opportunity to pay for it, I will.”

Follow Up, Follow Up, Follow Up

Once you have identified the members of the media that you want to target and sent out your materials, your work as a D.I.Y. publicist has just begun. It is imperative that you follow up. And follow up. And then follow up some more. During this stage of the game, you have to be on the phone with your media contacts, as Udler jokes, “like white on rice” until they either tell you that they are not interested or they agree to cover your show.

Although generating PR for your show can be a lot of work, remember that not even the most talented publicist knows your event better than you do. If you leverage your unique perspective and remain persistent, you can quite successfully be your own PR machine.