

No-Cost Public Relations Ideas

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If you're like most small business owners, you don't have a marketing plan. Maybe you plan to do some marketing, but that's not a marketing plan, now is it? So here's my challenge to you: as we close out 2006, resolve to start the new year with at least a minimal plan – even if it's written on a beer-soaked bar napkin stained with Buffalo-wing sauce. At least you will have thought about some of the important issues.

Marketing plans include lots of important content regarding strategy, competitive analysis, etc. For the purpose of this exercise, however, we will focus on a Marketing Communications Plan. Simply put, this is the plan to “get the word out” about your business. It should contain ideas from each of the five topic areas that fall under the Marketing Communications Umbrella, as my firm calls it. These topic areas include Public Relations & Promotions, Customer/Client and Referral Source Relations, Collateral, Advertising, and Direct Selling.

In a future article, we will explore each of these areas in detail, with some specific recommendations for the geology or engineering firms. For now, however, let's look at some Public Relations opportunities that are either free or low cost, but can provide a lot of potential exposure for your business. Consider the following questions:

- Is your organization represented on at least one non-profit board of directors? (Involvement in your local AIPG section is a great example). Do your clients and referral sources know of this participation?
- Do you send press releases to tell the world about your charitable work, awards, community events, business expansion, new hires, key accounts, or new contracts?

Each of these milestones is an opportunity to get your name out. Consider trade journals and website, as well as local business newspapers, which are read by the broader business community. I guarantee that you will be the only firm listed under the Geology, Environmental Engineering, etc. categories when you send in a new-hire press release to your local business journal.

- Have you written any educational brochures that can be distributed to the press and schools? Are they also posted on your website? For example, if you are a hydrogeologist in a drought-prone area, create an informative piece on droughts. If you know something about earthquakes, do a piece on the New Madrid or San Andreas faults. Do not assume that documents from your state agency will fill this void – educators and media folks will be happy to have a local business person they can call to learn more about these issues. Just be sure that it is not self-serving; stick to the facts and make it useful to the reader. The exercise will help position you as an expert.
- Have you had at least one educational article or interview in the media in the last six months? If so, have you ordered reprints to hand out to clients and/or mail or email to your list of contacts? Have you placed a pdf of the article on your website? If your firm does litigation support, do you write a recurring article on your area of expertise in a newsletter focused on the lawyers who specialize in that area of law? If you do geotechnical testing, do you contribute to

journals focused on the construction industry?

- Have you been a speaker or panelist at an event in the past 6 months?
- Do you have a mechanized system for staying in touch with clients, prospects, and referral sources on a regular basis?
- Do you quickly respond to referral sources with a hand-written thank-you note and perhaps a gift certificate for their favorite restaurant? Do you then make sure that the referred client is treated like the most important client you have, so that the referral source looks like a hero and is more than happy to refer to you again?
- Are you working on a project that utilizes cutting-edge procedures or methods that are considered friendly to the environment? Or are you cleaning up a contaminated site to turn it into a renewed public use? The media and general public love feel-good environmental stories. Are you informing them of your work?

If you answered no to these questions, it's time to get to work. Most of these cost you some time, but no out-of-pocket costs. Resolve to put on your public relations hat for an hour each month. Consider what you have recently done and the work you will be doing in the coming weeks. If you just think about it for a bit, you will think of plenty of items that are worthy of coverage in some venue. Many of your ideas will get turned down, but if you consistently communicate with the media and outside public, you will expand the universe of people who recognize your name and will pick up the phone when they might need your services.