

Hospitality Matters



A flood of complaints: Good PR can be the key to minimising the adverse effects of a disaster occurring within your organisation

Harnessing The **Power of PR**



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Hotels, restaurants and caterers have differing and varied business set-ups, with an infinite mix of target clientele. From independent enterprises to group-owned conglomerates, the Scottish hospitality industry is a diverse beast, comprising a fascinating combination of strategies, aims and objectives. Some operators will have the same outlook and philosophies as others, but they are all different in the way they go about implementing these strategies and communicating them to their customers. Likewise, matching the right PR representative to the right firm or brand is not always as easy as one would hope, and it can sometimes turn into a PR disaster, the very opposite of what you originally wished for.

With that in mind, we wanted to examine the best ways of promoting businesses through the journalist-friendly PR route, and asked **Scott Thornton** to unlock some of the secrets of helping your hospitality or catering business stay one step ahead of the competition...



An innovative, targeted promotional PR campaign can help you capitalise on your company's products, offerings and unique selling points, while playing down, disguising or even eradicating any weak areas you may wish to improve upon. So, before you launch headlong into the maelstrom of public relations companies, or give in to the first cold call you receive, here's a checklist of the most important considerations when forming or updating your PR strategy and, for that matter, your business model. After all, the ultimate aim of any promotional campaign is to attract many more happy customers, clients and repeat business contacts...

WHAT TO DO

1. Have a PR plan in line with your business objectives

Set priorities - no client has an unlimited budget for promotions, so spend money on activities most likely to generate greatest extra revenue.

2. Don't think short-term

One-off hits don't work well. Your campaign should be sustained over at least six months and ideally a year or longer.

3. Be nice to journalists!

Treated well, journalists should be among your best allies, so invite them to stay over and sample your business - it's the best way of showing them and their readers, listeners or viewers what you do and why you're good at it. However, be aware that some journalists might expect more than others. To avoid misunderstandings, state clearly from the start what you'll provide and what they'll need to pay for. Even more importantly, spell out what you expect in return. Your PR consultant should monitor this process to ensure you're getting out what you wanted to in the first place.



Damage limitation: If a member of staff is having a bad day, all it takes is for one customer to complain to the press, and who's going to clean up the resulting mess?

4. Compile a target media list

Newspapers, magazines, broadcasters and websites are not created equal. Prioritise the ones followed by your current and prospective guests.

Your PR consultant (if you have one) should know the media inside out, so ask them to help you to identify key journalists, and those who are better avoided. You will enjoy a big competitive advantage if your consultant has previously worked in the media.

Whatever size of business you are, always have a PR crisis-management plan in place; a good reputation can take decades to build and mere minutes to destroy

Use a mix of specialist and mainstream media. Consumers are increasingly accessing websites to influence decisions on where to stay and eat, and who to entrust with their catering: find the internet sites which could win you more business.

5. Send interesting press releases

Don't create news where none exists; journalists will see through it.

Even small, regional newspapers get hundreds of press releases a week, and research has shown that it takes a journalist less than 30 seconds to decide whether to use one or bin it. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the press releases which tend to win most coverage are those written by experts with solid journalistic experience.

6. Set up reader or listener competitions

These can not only raise your profile but also provide you with a database of entrants' details (subject to certain legal conditions and requirements) to follow up after the activity has ended.

7. Have a stock of good quality, up-to-date photographs on hand

A picture can indeed be worth 1,000 words. Ask yourself if it's worth investing in professional photography services to update your photographic library. Good photos can substantially increase the amount of space devoted to your story. Food photography is a specialised art, so use someone with a track record.



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8. Develop third party relationships

Hook into the promotional outlets of your associates. They can give you publicity, often at no additional cost. Retailers are often looking for relationships with hotels and restaurants which can offer prizes to their own customers in return for a certain minimum spend. Although charity events can seem like expensive gestures, hosting them can attract new guests who may be interested in seeing what your establishment has to offer for future reference.

9. Go local

Generate more business from your surrounding area. Get to know your local journalists, become active in the Chamber of Commerce, sponsor a sports team or consider holding an open day.

10. Cover your backside!

Always have a PR crisis-management plan in place. You're in a particularly vulnerable sector, and if your business should suffer from a food poisoning outbreak, a fire, serious accident, unexplained death, customer complaint or even a police investigation, you'll need to have a strategy in place to minimise the impact any of these potential disasters could have. After all, a good reputation can take decades to build and mere minutes to destroy.

11. Target guide books

Encourage guests to contribute positive reviews to the main hotel and restaurant guides, and TripAdvisor.

12. Make the most of New Social Media (NSM)

If you're not already on Facebook or Twitter, try it. If you're already using NSM, make sure you're doing it properly; many hotels' and restaurants' profile pages are nothing more than advertising hoardings featuring cheap offers or the petty



Caveat emptor: Not all PR firms are as competent or as effective as they might claim, so be careful who you enlist to assist with your PR strategy

ramblings of managers with too much spare time on their hands.

13. Be wary of who you appoint to handle your PR

Many hotels, restaurants and caterers have effective in-house PR people who should know the business well and have easy access to top management staff. The downside is they may not be able to see the wood for the trees. Likewise, it's inadvisable to appoint someone to handle your company's PR merely on the basis that they're good with words or people – they need to be effective all-rounders with a proven track record and excellent contacts in the media. Larger agencies will probably send their senior managers to pitch for a contract but if you then sign them up that could be the last you ever see of the top brass, and you may find your account is henceforth handled by junior staff.

14. Make the most of your PR consultancy

If you've used a public relations agency and not had much success, the fault was probably theirs. However, it's worth remembering that such a relationship is a two-way

street, and your consultant will need to be briefed thoroughly on the type, requirements and direction of your business before they commence promoting it. With that in mind, you should make a point of meeting your consultant regularly, preferably at least once a month, to update them on any changes or activities you have planned.

15. Be creative

Think laterally; have brainstorming sessions; innovate! Yours is an exciting business. If you combine planning, professionalism and passion in your promotions, you'll reap the benefits in time. As with all such things – you get out what you put in.

In addition to restaurants, bars, and catering companies, Hotel PR has worked for small, medium and large-size hotels, ranging from small, independent properties to large, multinational establishments. Visit www.hotelpr.co.uk to view examples of the kind of coverage available, or call 0131 473 2388 and to find out how Hotel PR can help drive your business strategy. ★

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