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Current Issue **How to Get Free Media Coverage** by Carol Arnold

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It's official; we have entered a new era. Remember you heard it here first! Gone are the days of advertising your product, whether in print media, Internet or television, to generate sales. As new forms of reaching targets markets, such as the Internet have emerged, along with them has come advertising, from those annoying pop-up ads to spam email. Increasingly bombarded with advertising, consumers and businesses alike are finding ways to tune out advertising.

However, one fact remains; people continue to need and want to read publications or newspapers that interest them and watch or hear the news to keep up on current events. As a result, getting editorial coverage in media that your target markets read and trust has emerged as a more effective means of increasing your business, but media coverage can be hard to come by unless you present yourself and/or your business in the right way, get in front of the right people and put your best foot forward.

Following is a five-step process you can follow to go from out of the news to in the news.

STEP 1: CREATE A PRESS KIT

A press kit is a set of documents that should describe your business in a newsworthy way and provide background information and tools for the media to quickly and easily generate coverage for you. Such components typically include documents for background information (i.e. when you started, what you do, how your customers benefit, who your customers are, etc.), biographies of each company executive, and statistics or research from third party and/or internal sources.

Of critical importance is keeping your press kit newsworthy! Every day reporters, editors and producers are bombarded with companies touting how great they are. Honestly, they don't care how great you are; they are looking only for newsworthy stories that their audience will find of interest so keep your press kit newsworthy. Otherwise, it could end up in the trash.

STEP 2: DECIDE WHOM TO TARGET

Start with local media, then work your way to national, if and only if your business has national appeal. For example, if you own a business in Portsmouth, New

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Hampshire, start with publications like the *Portsmouth Herald* or *Foster's Daily Democrat*. It is always a good idea to target media that you advertise with. Because you are contributing money to those media, they are more likely to generate editorial coverage about you.

Ensuring that you are talking to the right people at each media outlet is of vital importance because, if you contact the wrong person, more than likely your information will end up in the trash. Most media outlets have reporters who cover specific areas. For example, the majority of local newspapers have a business editor and reporters, reporters who cover certain towns, those who cover events, etc. To find out whom you should contact, the outlets web site is usually of great help. In addition, there are physical or online lists you can purchase such as PR Newswire's online Media Atlas or Gebbie Press's All-In-One Media Directory. Often, local libraries will have such resources available and if in doubt, call the media outlet directly.

STEP 3: INTRODUCE YOUR COMPANY

More than likely, if you have never had a proactive media strategy, the media has no idea who you are so a nice way to get your information in front of your contacts initially is to send them an introduction email or letter (with your press kit) about your business, borrowing from your press kit. Tell them why what you do is important and how you are making a difference. Keep it friendly and low key.

STEP 4: DELIVER A PRESS RELEASE

A press release is a specially formatted document that is used to announce an item of news to the media. Most reporters like press releases because it gives them all the information they need in the form of an article so that they don't have to do any or minimal work. The majority of articles you read in the news are a result of press releases. Poorly written press releases are a plague that should be avoided at all costs. For the specific press release format, refer to press releases that other reputable companies have written for examples or excellent books such as *Guerrilla P.R.* by Michael Levine. If you are not a good writer, consider hiring a freelancer writer or soliciting the services of a friend or family writer who is.

Often, businesses struggle with what subjects to write a press release about. Again, you want to select topics that are newsworthy but also interesting and different, topics that you can envision appearing in the media outlet you are targeting. The specific topic will vary greatly by the type of business you are in, but some examples include partnerships with other businesses, unique customer uses of your product or services, new product or service offerings and events that you are putting on or involved in.

In addition, sending pictures that correlate with the release subject increases your chances of having it published. Consult the specific contact to understand if they prefer to receive faxes by email, mail or fax.

STEP 5: EXPLORE ARTICLES & SPECIAL FEATURES

Most media outlets have regular features or times of the year where they focus on a specific subject, and by contacting the person who is responsible for these stories, you can get some great, targeted media exposure. For example, in September *Foster's Daily Democrat* usually does a special supplement on seniors; if you own or operate a business that targets seniors, consider contacting them with information on your expertise.

In addition to getting reporters to write about you, many print publications will allow you to write and submit articles for publication. For example, most newspapers have an opinion editorial section consisting of articles that are contributed by members of the community. Find out who handles contributed articles and contact them with specific article ideas.

The overall key to any successful media campaign is constantly staying in front of the media (and thus the public) so frequency is key. If you contact a newspaper and six months go by before they hear from you again, you are forgotten. If you do not have time to dedicate to this function, consider consulting or hiring a professional PR agency. By following these steps you can benefit from the most cost-effective form of business generation today. Good luck!