Public Relations for the Small Business

Public relations are as important, if not more important, to small businesses as they are to large organizations. The challenge for many small businesses is how to plan and implement public relations without spending a lot of money. Below are six steps for building relationships and creating and maintaining a positive image and reputation among important publics, the heart of public relations.

1. **Identify Your Publics**
   Employees, customers, and suppliers are the three most important publics for most small businesses. Each of these publics has a different relationship with the business, depending on what they expect from the business. Create a list of your publics and write out what the publics want from your business. Better yet, ask your publics what they expect from their relationship with the business.

2. **Build Excellent Relationships with Your Publics**
   Building excellent relationships require that you create a dialogue between you and your publics. You listen, they listen, and by doing this, you not only build respect for each other, you build trust and loyalty. If a customer wants a change to a product or service, you listen, evaluate the suggestion, discuss with the customer whether it is practical from both the business's and the customer's perspectives. If you can make the change to satisfy the customer, you do. If not, you explain to the customer why not.

3. **Regularly Check for Satisfaction of Your Publics**
   Sending a newsletter to customers is good public relations, but it doesn't reveal customers' attitudes and what they really think about the business. Send a personal letter from the owner or manager to the most loyal and newer customers asking them to come in and talk to about their experiences with the company? Five to ten people would be appropriate. Set up a time to meet with them to find out about their experiences with the organization and the company's products and services. If the desire to meet you isn't enough incentive, offer them free products or services. This does not have to be a formal focus group. Create a culture and environment in the organization in which employees feel comfortable talking to owners and managers and making suggestions for the organization.

4. **Leverage Unique, Interesting, and Commendable Aspects of Business with Your Publics**
   As noted, many organizations send out newsletters to customers. While customers like "tips" about preparing their houses for the winter or a calendar that shows when to apply what to their lawns and gardens, don't forget to emphasize what sets the company apart. Feature the
unique aspects of your business. Feature what you contribute to your community. Feature a customer, feature an employee (even in a newsletter to customers - this shows you value your employees), and feature a supplier. **One note of caution about putting information about people in newsletters:** privacy laws apply so always get written permission from anyone you feature in a newsletter, and don't include private, personal details about a person.

5. Celebrate Milestones
Don't just celebrate business milestones. Celebrate the milestones of employees, customers, suppliers and other publics. To do this, you will need to capture names, addresses, and permission to contact them and give out milestone information. This is done by providing customers and others with a form to complete that indicate they will be added to your mailing list and you intend to celebrate their milestones. **The same privacy issues apply as with newsletters.** Celebrate milestones through a newsletter or set aside a day for that customer such as "John Jones' Day." Write the customer a personal letter with congratulations on the milestone. Some managers believe to celebrate employees' birthdays takes time away from them doing their jobs. The question to ask is, "Is an employee who is happy, helpful and positive with customers or an employee who does the minimum in customer service better for the business?"

6. Create a Positive Image and Reputation in the Community
Can the business answer a community need? Can it support a charity? What can be done to keep people thinking positively when they hear the company's name? Are employees treated well? Are they cogs in the wheel and easily replaced or are they valuable assets to the success of the business? How do you treat your suppliers? Manage the business by the golden rule.

Many small businesses owners and managers already follow these steps, but may not realize they are doing public relations. Those who do not do these things can begin. These steps build relationships that create a positive image and reputation for the business - excellent public relations.