

Manage your 15 minutes of fame!

By Bruce A. Love

The investigative staff of 60 Minutes arrives at your store and wants to know why you produce a product that contributes to the physical decline of society. Your crime is baking high-carb cinnamon buns that everyone seems to love a bit too much. You suddenly realize that the same media that once called your buns “the best in town” is now on a campaign to bust your buns. Obviously, some media attention is “a good thing,” but as Martha Stewart learned, bad press can severely impact company value. Handling publicity, both the good and the bad, is a job for public relations.

Public relations (PR) is the marketing function that is responsible for developing programs and messages intended to create public awareness and maintain a positive image for the organization. For those rare instances when bad press happens, the best defense is usually an aggressive approach to release truthful information. Too often, however, businesses, politicians, and individuals attempt to make the mess go away by ignoring or distorting the truth. This tactic usually leads to bigger messes. In the case of our bun crisis, don't be tempted to hide from reporters. Your guilt will be implied if the news media has a chance to report, “calls to the bun maker were not returned.” Instead, hold a news conference and acknowledge, “Yes, it is true that our buns are high in calories and carbohydrates, and can be so incredibly delicious that they can become habit forming. Our studies have shown that our buns are safely enjoyed by anyone wanting to balance an active lifestyle.” Such a response will leave the media with no ammunition to launch against your business, and give you lots of free press.

In addition to crisis management activities, public relations also include issuing press releases, sponsoring events, and holding consumer educational forums. Press releases are business announcements that are covered by the media as news

events. A large percentage of news stories originate as press releases. Believe me, the Krispy Creme “story” about the overhead bins of airlines being filled with doughnut boxes by dedicated customers flying to Krispy Cremeless Hawaii is not the result of investigative reporting, but work of a skillful publicist hired by Krispy Creme. Companies launching new products, contributing to charitable causes, or receiving awards, are all examples of newsworthy events for which I have issued press releases. Many of these were either printed verbatim in newspapers or, better yet, resulted in visits from news crews for comprehensive stories.

While there are no guarantees that press releases will be published or broadcast, you have nothing to lose and potentially lots to gain by engaging in this promotional tactic. Since published press releases are covered as stories, they often receive more attention from the intended audience than do advertisements, which are relatively expensive and often ignored by many intended viewers.

Another form of public relations, which is typically a win-win for everyone, is event sponsorship. Examples of this are the companies that become “official sponsors” of events like the Olympics. Smaller companies can gain similar exposure on a smaller scale by sponsoring the Special Olympics, little league teams, or Community Theater. Other public relations activities include running free seminars and contributing wit and wisdom to a weekly newspaper column on some topic of public interest. It is widely believed that an educated customer is a better, more loyal customer.

In case you were wondering about the “best buns in town,” my wife wins that contest! Do you want to launch her into business? Just send 60 Minutes over and I am sure we can spin them a great story!

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