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Section 1: Why Do Public Relations?

How Is PR Different from Marketing and Advertising?

First, let's define public relations (PR):

PR is the practice of creating and managing positive communications between and among various groups of people with the goal of fostering better, more productive relationships and generating associated outcomes that benefit all (like happier, healthier customers and increased pharmacy sales).

The key word here is “public” — using PR, you'll reach members of the public (people in your community), and talk to them not only about your business, but about issues that are important to them — like health and wellness, and medication safety.

Often you are using the media, such as local TV, radio stations, newspapers and websites, to help deliver these messages in the form of news stories. However, social media has become a popular way to deliver news to the public without the participation of traditional media outlets.

Advertising and marketing certainly aid in your PR efforts in that they raise the profile of your pharmacy. Think of marketing as the “umbrella” under which PR and advertising sit. By marketing your pharmacy — via PR, ads, promotions and partnerships — you broaden the audience for your services. PR is a unique part of the marketing mix in that it is usually less promotional, and more of a public-service exercise. For PR to work, you need to think about what customers (current and prospective) need to know.

Why Do PR?

Public relations are a very effective way to reach out to and engage current and future customers, and inform them of the special programs, products and services that your independent pharmacy offers.

PR can:

- Expand relationships with consumers, other healthcare providers and important constituent groups (such as schools, local governments and senior citizen centers)
- Differentiate your pharmacy from competitors (especially national chains and big-box retailers with pharmacy operations)
- Build awareness of special programs offered by your pharmacy, such as health and wellness screenings and flu shots
- Increase your reputation as a local expert on health and wellness

You can improve participation in special events and activities by using PR, as you'll read below.

Grand Openings

If you are opening a new store, or re-introducing your existing store, PR is a great way to generate visibility for and excitement about the event:

- Offer health and wellness screenings on the day/weekend/week of your grand opening.
- Invite the local media to visit your new store and learn about your special services and offerings — or ask them to list the grand opening and events in their community listings or website.
- Invite a local VIP (like the mayor, city council member or area sports star) to make an appearance at your grand opening, and then suggest the local media cover his/her appearance.
- Write a commentary or letter to the editor on an important healthcare subject (like the importance of always taking your medicine as prescribed by your doctor) and then offer it to the local newspaper or news website for publication. (Weekly newspapers and local websites are often willing to print submitted articles if the topic is newsworthy and timely.)
- If you are running any local radio or TV ads, you can ask the station to do a live report from your store opening as part of the media buy.
- As part of your grand opening, work with local senior-citizen centers to sponsor a reception for seniors, including wellness tips, pharmacy-care advice, screenings, and of course, refreshments.

Anniversaries

Anniversaries are also good opportunities for creating visibility for your pharmacy. Whether it's your one-year anniversary of being in business, or your 25-year celebration, an anniversary is a good opportunity to thank the community and remind consumers and other constituents/influencers of the many good things your pharmacy does to promote better health and wellness.

Store Events/Health and Wellness Screenings

You're probably already conducting regular health-screening events and offering wellness tips and advice to your customers. Use the events in your PR efforts: Write a press release about the event and distribute it to the local media and websites. Then, invite local reporters to visit your screening to learn what is really happening on the "front lines" of healthcare in America. The healthcare issue is a major story for the media, and you are in the position to offer valuable and newsworthy insights on this important topic.

Section 2: Getting Started on Your PR Activities

Working with the Media

Working effectively with the media (local newspapers, radio, broadcast/cable TV, and websites and blogs) is a cornerstone of successful public relations. The goal is to get the media to write about and cover your store and the great things you are doing for the local community — or feature you as an expert in news stories about local health and wellness issues.

This publicity can be even more powerful than paid advertising because the message comes from the media — that is, it's not just a commercial message bought and paid for. Here's how to get started.

Create a Media List

You need to create and maintain a list of local media contacts to help you track the individuals who are most likely to be receptive to your news — and it will help you build relationships with them over time. Sending news announcements to “News Desk” or “Editor” is not a very effective way to connect with journalists.

Much like connecting with customers, you need to build one-on-one friendships with the people who create news stories. In addition, as they change jobs, you'll want to track them and update your list — today's junior reporter at a local news website could be a managing editor of a local paper in a few years.

- First, identify the media outlets in your pharmacy's coverage area (typically smaller newspapers, radio stations, broadcast or cable TV outlets, and local websites).
- Contact news desks, or e-mail websites, and ask who covers health and wellness issues and local business news.
- Plan to double-check and update your media list at least once every quarter.

Develop Press Releases

- The press release is the standard communications “vehicle” of PR. It helps you deliver the basics about your news, in the form of a news story you're written yourself. Based on your press release, media outlets can then develop a story, or, as is usually the case, contact you for additional information.
- As you can imagine, reporters get many press releases each day, so don't expect them to immediately develop a story based on your release. But, over time, if you provide interesting and informative releases on your activities (especially those that benefit the community), the local media will take notice and will talk with you about your pharmacy and health/wellness programs.

Write a Compelling Media Pitch

Journalists and their media outlets receive a lot of press releases every day — more than they can possibly cover. To break through that clutter and get a reporter interested in your pharmacy's news, you need to offer a compelling story idea.

This is where the “pitch” comes in. It should be short (ideally no longer than three paragraphs) and sent via e-mail. Paste your pitch in the body of the e-mail, rather than sending it as an attachment.

The pitch should compellingly communicate what you are trying to publicize and why the reporter/media outlet should cover it. A good media pitch should clearly answer the following questions:

- What is new, different and/or special about my pharmacy's announcement?
- What is my new program/offering/service doing for the community overall (something that benefits the community, rather than merely benefiting your business)?
- Why should the reporter care about it?
- How does my pharmacy's announcement fit into broader issues (like healthcare reform)?
- What are some local human-interest angles that will be of interest to the local media?
- Who else can the media talk to about this story, like customers or other local healthcare experts? Journalists like to know there are other sources available.

Reach Out to the Media

Once you have a media list, some press releases, and a newsworthy pitch, you're ready to get started on your media outreach program.

It's usually better to paste information into e-mail messages, rather than send attachments. Journalists are often too busy to open attachments or are reading messages on their mobile devices and smart phones. By pasting content into the e-mail, you make it easier for the media contact to scan your pitch for news.

- E-mail the pitch first. Paste it into the body of the email — don't send it as an attachment.
- Follow up with a phone call to provide more information and discuss interview opportunities.
- If you want to forward a press release to the journalist, paste it into the e-mail at the bottom of your pitch.

Here are some other tips to help you catch the attention of local media:

- As much as possible, tie in what your Independent pharmacy is doing to benefit the local community (e.g., health and wellness screenings, educational programs, and discounts for seniors).
- Offer customer interviews so reporters can interview real people who are positively impacted by your programs and offerings (the more you can get other people to speak for you, the better).
- Learn about the deadlines of the reporters you are reaching out to; they will greatly appreciate that you are contacting them when they are not on a tight deadline.
- Treat the reporters like the professionals they are; they have a job to do, just like you.
- Whenever you can, provide the reporters with supporting facts and statistics; these “proof points” provide substance for your story.
- Don’t get discouraged if the journalist does not “bite” on your first pitch. If you continually provide interesting and useful news and information to the media (especially things that have a strong local angle and that tie to newsworthy issues), you will eventually break through.

Section #3: Conducting Media Interviews

Telling Your Story, Your Way

Following are some useful tips to help you prepare for and participate in media interviews:

Preparing for the Interview

- Before each interview, create three messages detailing what you want to communicate to the journalist and the media outlet. For each message, develop supporting statistics, data and examples that prove your point. Prepare for the interview by memorizing your three messages.
- Keep in mind that interviews are opportunities to tell your story and promote how your pharmacy is special, different and better; interviews are NOT just a casual conversation. Stick to your key points.
- Establish interview ground rules — where the interview will be held, how long, and what you plan to discuss.

During the Interview

- Don't just agree to anything and everything the reporter wants. He has his agenda and you have yours, which is to tell your pharmacy story and support your health/wellness and business objectives.
- Refute untrue statements immediately. If the reporter "paraphrases" your comments, make sure the comments are accurate. If not, correct them on the spot or you will be misquoted.
- Don't repeat a negative comment made by a journalist — always stay positive.
- During the interview, get your three messages in early, and frequently. Reinforce them throughout the interview.
- Keep your answers short and to the point; stop talking when you've finished answering a question (important but hard to do!).
- Never go "off the record" if the journalist asks you to do so. Assume everything you say could end up in the news story.

Interview Follow-Up

Some of the most important work in media relations is done in the interview follow-up, where you can:

- Provide additional information and supporting "proof points" that make the story stronger and more compelling
- Allow the reporter to fill in holes in the story, or fact-check information
- Clarify important points
- Correct misstatements or inaccurate conclusions (on the reporter's part)
- Suggest other people to consult/interview for the story (like customers and health experts)
- Learn when the story is running
- Thank the journalist for her time and interest (journalists are people, too, and will always appreciate your thoughtfulness)
- Offer supporting research and information
- Ask the reporter what stories he/she is working on in the near future in which you might participate

The journalist may contact you first for follow-up, giving you the chance to offer additional information. Alternately, you can e-mail or phone the reporter a day or two after the interview, and offer your assistance.