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## **SELLING YOURSELF**

by Peter Bartram

*DIY public relations could be a winning formula for small firms as the credit crunch deepens. But what's the best way to send an eye-catching message about your brand without breaking the bank?*

When IT networks support specialist SAS UK started to do its own public relations, rather than using an agency, it increased the coverage it was receiving by 182 per cent within two years – and lopped a hefty £65,000 a year off its PR bill.

Boutique hotel-guide company Mr & Mrs Smith spends £100,000 a year handling its own PR – but reckons it would have to spend three times as much to get the same results from an outside consultant.

And Mamas & Papas, which sells everything that proud parents need for their young children – from maternity wear to baby baths - has reduced the number of people working on its marketing from 12 to seven – but increased its media coverage by at least 50 per cent.

These companies have discovered that it's possible to get great results from public relations without breaking the bank. It's a formula which more firms, especially SMEs, will be seeking as the credit crunch bites deeper and marketing budgets are shredded.

Some will do their own PR while others might seek help from a consultancy – or even adopt a hybrid approach. "Many consultants will work alongside an organisation helping to empower their existing staff and support as appropriate," says Elizabeth Lewis-Jones, president of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.

But, whatever the approach, when cash is short, the emphasis is on value for money.

SAS UK has just two people working on its PR since it took the job in-house two years ago. Sheila Parry, head of corporate communications, says having the PR people inside the company means they know more about what works and what doesn't (see panel Good Publicity?). "We understand far better what we are doing.

"We measure everything very precisely and are able to do that because we have control."

Parry says that it's been easier to make good contacts with the journalists who matter. "I think the fact that journalists can get hold of us quickly and we don't mess them around is important," she says.

She agrees that as well as delivering results, keeping a lid on costs is important. “We have to cost-justify everything we do and we don’t spend unnecessarily,” she adds.

At Mr & Mrs Smith – the main brand name for Spy Publishing Ltd – managing director James Lohan admits that winning press coverage for delightful boutique hotels in charming locations is a lot easier than garnering column inches for, say, light bulbs. “Sometimes you’ll have a product that doesn’t have the legs to get into the papers,” he warns.

However, even when the product and brand is strong, Lohan says that it’s still important to focus on PR basics, such as contacting journalists with relevant information, in order to win that all important media exposure. And as the credit crunch bites, the company’s media activity is becoming more selective. “We’re concentrating on PR strategies that deliver results,” he says.

Gill Kingston-Warren has seen Mamas & Papas ascend from a top 20 to a top five brand in its class in the past three years. Its share of “voice” in the media has also grown and she reckons that every £1 spent on PR now delivers £10 of value for the company.

She says that any company planning to handle its own PR needs to do more than “just provide a phone and computer and expect miracles to happen”. She advises: “Your team needs to see what the media wants and when it wants it.” One of the secrets at Mamas & Papas is efficiently handling the 2,000 media requests it receives every month.

The first step for any company that decides to do its own PR is to clarify the key messages it wants the media to write about, says Lizz Clarke, managing director of Logical Creative Marketing, who has special expertise handling PR for medium-sized companies.

“Next, you should look at your business plan and decide who the key people are that you need to influence with your messages,” she says. “Get to know the newspapers and magazines your audience read and become familiar with them yourself.

“When you know what kind of coverage they carry, you’re in a position to develop ideas for articles which could well appeal to them.”

Clarke says that it’s also important to decide on the best way to send out the idea. A firm might want to issue press releases, offer specially written articles, good quality photographs, or provide access to expert knowledge through documents such as white papers.

“You then need to get on the keyboard and phone and start building relationships with journalists,” she adds. “The best way is to offer them information they’re genuinely interested in rather than thinly disguised sales messages.”

Who should do all this? “Look for someone who is a confident communicator – able to write fluently and concisely and liaise with people from all different parts of the organisation,” advises CIPR’s Lewis-Jones.

“They need to be a person who is passionate about your products, service and organisation - someone who you feel represents you and conveys the messages you want to get across. Above all, I believe that a good person is always slightly nose-bleed – able to hunt down a good news story.”

There is no “magic bullet”, but for people handling their firm’s PR, the credit crunch could be more of an opportunity than a threat. There will be plenty of media looking for good news stories to relieve the gloom.

## GOOD PUBLICITY?

*What works in public relations and what doesn't work so well? Three firms that handle their own PR share the secrets of their triumphs and (not quite) disasters.*

*Who:* SAS. Sheila Parry, head of corporate communications.

*Business:* computer software.

*What worked:* Got a senior manager interviewed on BBC TV in connection with the banking crisis. Was able to move fast, clear the manager's diary, and get him to the studio in time.

*Lesson:* seize the moment.

*What didn't:* Press releases which managers insist on issuing even though there's no story that will interest the press.

*Lesson:* PR can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse.

*Who:* Mamas & Papas. Gill Kingston-Warren, head of public relations.

*Business:* A leading provider of baby goods and nursery furniture.

*What worked:* Placing a limited edition gold pushchair with singer Gwen Stefani. She's a consummate media professional and paparazzi pictures of Stefani pushing it circled the globe.

*Lesson:* great personalities grab headlines.

*What didn't:* Working with Emma Bunton was a "delightful experience" and produced some publicity nuggets, but she announced her pregnancy just as the Spice Girls were reforming - so tabloids were dominated with "salacious gossip" about other group members.

*Lesson:* a big story overshadows a smaller story.

*Who:* Webcredible. Jon White, PR and marketing manager.

*Business:* Web design and development.

*What worked:* Pitched launch of Google T-Mobile G1 phone to relevant journalists and got great coverage, including acres of space in national press.

*Lesson:* move fast to grab headlines before rivals.

*What didn't:* Sent out press releases about new training courses which failed to gain coverage because there was no real story.

*Lesson:* in press releases, no news is... bad news.

- Peter Bartram is one of the presenters at a one day training course in London on 3 February for companies that want to handle their own PR: details from [www.howtodoyourownpr.co.uk](http://www.howtodoyourownpr.co.uk)