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Tourism Public Relations and Publicity

Chapter outline

The focus of this chapter is exploring opportunities for small businesses to gain free media publicity. Public relations (PR) is however more than just publicity seeking, which is a common misconception. PR is a strategic process of managing an organisation's relationships with its various publics (stakeholders). This is a planned effort to evaluate public attitudes, and develop two-way communications that foster mutually beneficial understanding and acceptance. Seeking media publicity is one component of PR, but for small tourism businesses will be the main PR activity. The key appealing factors of media editorial coverage, relative to other marketing communications, are greater cost-efficiency and higher public credibility. These make publicity attractive to small businesses with limited resources, and are therefore a key component in the marketing plan. The three main publicity seeking approaches for small tourism businesses discussed in the chapter are: media releases; the DMO's visiting media programme; and public stunts. Is any publicity good publicity? What is critical is developing an interesting story angle that both captures the attention of the target media, as being of appeal to their audience, as well as supporting the business' desired brand image, so that the ensuing editorial content generates the *right message for the right audience*.

Learning aims

To enhance your understanding of:

- The distinction between the roles of *public relations* and *publicity seeking*
- The key advantages of media publicity
- Publicity seeking opportunities for small tourism businesses.

Key terms

Public relations

A strategic two-way communication process to enhance the relationships between an organisation and its various publics (stakeholders).

Publicity

Publicity seeking is one aspect of public relations, involving non-paid communications aimed at achieving positive media editorial for the organisation, in a way that reaches the right people with the right message.

Story angle

Publicity seeking necessitates having an interesting story angle. The story angle is the main idea to be conveyed, which will attract the media's attention as being of interest to their audience.

Public relations (PR)

Public relations (PR) is more than just seeking free publicity in the media, which is a common misconception. However, PR has historically been challenging to define. For example, Tench and Yeomans (2014) cited a study by Harlow (1976) that identified 476 different definitions used between 1900 and 1976. One of the most cited definitions of PR in the academic literature is by Broom (2009: 25):

Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.

The Public Relations Institute of Australia goes further to describe PR as:

The deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation (or individual) and its (or their) publics. The management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

Explicit in this description is relationships with *publics*, in addition to customers, who are important to the organisation. Governments, large tourism brands and industry associations employ PR professionals to manage the communication process with their different publics, which are otherwise referred to as audiences and stakeholders. Just as a marketing plan addresses the needs of different market segments, the strategic PR plan is concerned with developing communications and dialogue tailored to different publics. PR practitioners need to understand both the needs of the organisation and the needs of their publics, who in tourism

typically include: shareholders, media, politicians, government policy advisors, travel intermediaries, developers, conservationists, local businesses, financiers, customers, and the host community.

It is not commonly appreciated that PR is more than simply disseminating information for the purposes of influencing the behaviour of stakeholders or generating free media publicity. Two-way symmetrical PR uses research and open dialogue to improve relationships, where both the stakeholders and the organisation can be convinced of the need to change. For a review of the tourism PR literature see L'Etang et al. (2007).

While small tourism businesses will have fewer publics than larger organisations, clearly there is still a case for maintaining positive and mutually beneficial relationships with staff, customers, and the local community. This is often an informal process involving a common sense approach to fostering positive relationships, to be recognised as, a good employer, good neighbour, and good corporate citizen.

Lean marketing: Networking in the local community

Depending on the skills and experience of the small business owner/manager there are opportunities to engage with the local community for mutual benefit. This might not be seen as a practical option for time-poor managers, and yet there is a cost/benefit consideration; the more effort, the greater the long term benefit. The purpose of networking is to grow a network of relationships, which foster mutual information sharing, advice, support and referrals. Small businesses need to consider the range of contacts in the community with potential for mutual benefit; adopting a long term view rather than seeking short term gain. An owner can join local business groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce or SKAL international (for travel industry professionals), as well as develop their own network. There are many possibilities to engage with the range of potential stakeholders in the local community, including:

- Sponsorship of some aspect of the local school, in a way that fits the business. For example a café could link with the canteen, a hotel could support a travelling sports team, while any business could be one of the school newsletter supporters.
- Asking the local government representative if there is a personal cause that the business could support.
- Set up a monthly networking and brainstorming breakfast or lunch with nearby businesses.
- Develop a monthly newsletter of what's happening in neighbourhood (and of course the business). This can be paper-based, available at the door for passers-by, as well as emailed to the network.