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How to Get Attention In a New-Media World

The rules of the publicity game are changing. Here are ways to claim the spotlight for your business.

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS
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Three years ago, fledgling New York shoe and dress designer Holly Dunlap hired a well-known public-relations firm to put her brand name -- Hollywould -- on the map. She paid roughly \$6,500 a month as a retainer, small change in the PR world but a fortune for her small firm.

"For us, it was a lot to pay," the 34-year-old Ms. Dunlap says. "We didn't have a lot of patience for that amount of money. We needed to see results on a daily basis."

Ms. Dunlap, in fact, *was* seeing results -- just not so much from the PR firm. She had begun penning a diary on her Web site, www.ilovehollywould.com⁵, chock-full of juicy details about her personal life, from late-night keg-party revelry in her downtown Manhattan boutique to boozy jet-setting jaunts through Europe. (A sample 2003 entry from London: "When your first words of the morning are 'Where am I and how did I get here?', you know it's been a long, long night.") The attractive, gregarious designer created an appetite for her entries by boldfacing names of acquaintances as well as those of famous faces she encountered. Soon people were checking to see if they'd made a mention, passing the links to friends around the country. As Web-site traffic grew, so too did sales.

"Girls read from all over the country and they see the pictures and they have a connection to the brand and will place orders," says Ms. Dunlap. "It fuels the brand philosophy."

After five months, Ms. Dunlap cut loose her PR firm, betting the Web site could do more to build her company's image. Today, she spends roughly \$700 a month on Web maintenance and commands an average of 20,000 visitors a week, a figure that can triple when her site is mentioned on other Web-site trend leaders such as DailyCandy and

Gawker. She sends weekly email blasts to "VIP" customers who registered online, profiles a customer each month and doles out fashion tips.

"Our best PR," Ms. Dunlap says, "comes from people who are mentioned or featured on our site and forward the link to their friends." Ms. Dunlap estimates sales of \$6 million to \$8 million for 2006 for Hollywood, and her wares are now sold in Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus and Harrods of London, among others.

When it comes to generating goodwill between a company, its customers and prospects -- the very essence of public relations -- it's a buyer's market for small businesses. In the case of Hollywood and many others, the Internet more than anything has altered the dynamic. Much as the Web has enabled entrepreneurs to sell products independent of bricks-and-mortar retailers and their limited shelf space, so too is it letting them engage the public without the mainstream press or the spinners who court it.

Weblogs, or "blogs," a form of frequent online journal postings like Ms. Dunlap's, are just the beginning. Companies including **Google Inc.**, **Yahoo Inc.** and **Microsoft Corp.** are investing tremendous resources into localized search tools that enable vendors to reach customers without ever getting exposure on radio, TV or a newspaper page. What's more, the advent of podcasts and Web sites such as Flickr and YouTube has made it possible to deliver unedited messages in your own voice and image instead of leaving it to journalists to pick the quotes or shots. The trick is learning to use these avenues without offending the online community, which tends to dismiss overt or underhanded commercial pitches in these newer forums.

Recognizing the swing, a new breed of public-relations specialists is emerging to help time-pressed small-business owners navigate the options (for a price, of course). That includes a cottage industry of tech specialists who help make your Web site more visible to PR stalwarts such as Edelman Public Relations. Just this spring, Edelman launched a me2revolution division, and to help lead it, tapped popular blogger Steve Rubel, whose Micropersuasion.com¹¹ discusses how social media is transforming marketing, media and public relations. Mr. Rubel, an Edelman senior vice president, says his group's mandate is to teach the agency's staffers the ins and outs of tapping bloggers and utilizing the Web on behalf of clients. "It's part of the repertoire of the services we need to offer now," he says.

Certainly, a big hit in a major traditional outlet still carries weight. It's hard to top the exposure a mention on "Oprah" or the "Today" show brings, and a profile in a well-read publication can transform a business's image overnight. What's more, there's still a Wild West how-do-you-navigate-all-this-stuff component to online media that's unpalatable to some consumers. As the volume of businesses clamoring for attention online mushrooms, it may cause those singled out in traditional outlets to stand out even more.

Still, new media options can actually help reach and pique the interest of the mainstream press, and the combined push on both fronts can garner a small business unprecedented

levels of attention. From a PR standpoint, here's a look at some basic strategies small businesses can use right now to maximize exposure:

BLOGGING FOR BUZZ

For small-business owners, blogs can serve multiple purposes, from doing damage control when a product is attacked to simply giving the public reason to pay attention to your product and message. The blogosphere works in a kind of you-scratch-my-back fashion, with bloggers linking back and forth among one another with musings, applause and criticism.

The easiest way to start a blog is through one of many online services that host them, either free or for a minimal charge, such as typepad.com¹², blogger.com¹³ and wordpress.com¹⁴. It generally takes about five to 10 minutes to set up, and you can then link back to your company's existing Web site and vice versa. There is other software that allows you to incorporate a blog directly onto your Web site, although that is more costly.

Much as with pitching traditional journalists, the key with blogging is to have something to say beyond just "buy my product." Mark Hughes, author of "Buzzmarketing," calls this "story wrapping." Says Mr. Hughes: "No one is going to talk about the guy who cleans gutters because there is no inherent story value. But they might talk about the guy who cleans gutters who wears a tuxedo."

The key then is to get others to read what you have to say. That's no small feat: The number of blogs is estimated at just over 50 million, according to technorati.com¹⁵, which tracks blogs.

To locate like-minded communities of bloggers, Technorati is a good place to start. Typing in search terms related to your particular business or industry will pull up a list of blogs mentioning that content. It will also tell how many other blogs link to any individual blog, giving a sense of its popularity much the same way subscriber figures do for a print magazine. One way to get into the mix is to post frequent comments at the end of a blog to establish yourself "and then ratchet it up to direct communication with the blogger," says Rich Sloan, co-founder of startupnation.com¹⁶, which provides tools and advice for entrepreneurs.

There's also etiquette involved. For starters, once you find an appropriate blog community, you can't just expect to jump right in and have it instantly hawk your wares or link to you. "It's like going to a dinner party," says Mr. Rubel of Edelman. "You don't just come in and start selling your product. You listen to what other people are saying and find a way into the conversation."

Matt McAlister, who writes the Inside Online Media blog, advises joining discussions around the area of your product, without touting it initially. "If your golf club has a particular scientific edge, there are communities talking about aerodynamics," he says.

"Get involved in that...then bring it down to golf clubs. Then later say, 'look what we've done.' "

It's also important to syndicate your blog's content on the Web, which means making it easy for others to publish content. Most bloggers use a file format called RSS (Really Simple Syndication), a type of code that lets others instantly publish portions of your site on theirs. Most of the big blog-hosting sites make this technology available in a streamlined fashion for those using their services.

Another avenue worth exploring is blog carnivals, which operate a bit like conferences or magazines in that they put together a lot of information on a particular topic in one place -- in this case, someone's blog.

Like magazines, editions of carnivals come out on a regular basis, are hosted by a revolving cast of volunteer editors and contain links to contributions submitted. To find carnivals and make submissions, bloggers often tap blogcarnival.com¹⁷. For small-business owners new to blogging, accessing carnivals can help find a community of people interested in the same topics, says Lena West, founder and CEO of xynoMedia Technology, which sells an online course called the Technology Diet that helps businesses with online PR.

"These are a way to get PR for your blog and for other people to get PR for theirs," Ms. West says.

HELP YOUR PUBLIC FIND YOU

It's hard to engage in any public relations, of course, if the public doesn't know you exist. In early 2004, Kenny Kormendy says he was on welfare and struggling to make ends meet as a taxi driver in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. He had tried to reach the public through typical means, such as ads in the telephone book or handing out cards at the airport, but says there "were so few calls, it was unreal."

Mr. Kormendy was decent on computers, he says, and so he built a rough Web site for his company, Gopher State Taxi, figuring travelers coming to town might locate him when searching for transportation. But he never popped up front and center in search-engine results until he stumbled upon Google's AdWords service, a cost-per-click advertising program that rotates advertisements on the right side of Google's search page based on the specific keywords a user types. He decided to give it a shot.

It paid off. In recent months, Gopher State Taxi has routinely popped first on Google's sponsored link for core keywords, including: "Minneapolis, airport, taxi." Mr. Kormendy says his business has grown to a network of nearly three dozen cabs and he is off welfare. He estimates his total payout to Google is about \$175 to \$205 monthly, based on how many clicks his ads get. "People with cellphones on planes can find me," he says. "Almost every time I ask someone, they tell me it was on the Internet. And nine times out

of 10 it's from Google. I don't have \$50,000 to compete with [bigger taxi companies]. But with what I create off the Internet, I can blow them away."

Increasingly people turn to the Internet instead of phone books or newspapers to find restaurants, office-supply vendors or any kind of service. In addition to advertising opportunities, companies including Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, Amazon Inc. and **Time Warner** Inc.'s America Online unit are tailoring their search products to include maps, narrowed neighborhood searches and storefront images to court small businesses with local audiences.

At a minimum, small-business owners should register with local search portions of search engines -- it's often free.

Beyond that, it's critical to make your Web site search-friendly, or search-optimal, for certain keywords. In the early days, search optimization was largely a matter of inserting enough important keywords into your Web site that it would become visible to search engines. In some cases, this still works. Mr. Hughes, the author of "Buzzmarketing," also does speaking for a living. He wanted to pit himself as a viable alternative for people looking to book Malcolm Gladwell, the best-selling author of "The Tipping Point" and "Blink." So Mr. Hughes created a Web page within his own site, buzzmarketing.com¹⁸, that compares "Speaker Malcolm Gladwell vs. Business Speaker Mark Hughes." By using the words "Malcolm Gladwell speaker" roughly every 300 words on that page, a link to his comparison is now usually among those that pop up on the first search page of Google when you type the words: "Malcolm Gladwell speaker." Soon after that page went up, Mr. Hughes says, he got a \$17,000 speaking gig from a company that located him that way. (Says Mr. Gladwell of Mr. Hughes's efforts: "How could I not be flattered?")

But the field is so crowded with sites now clamoring for attention, that many businesses may need to hire search-engine marketing and consulting firms to help increase their visibility on the Web through the nonpaid, or "organic," portion of search sites. That includes strategies for your own Web site, and for those of others, says Eric V. Melin, president of SpiderSplat Consulting Inc. in Boston. His firm serves large and small clients, though the bulk of his business is with companies with \$5 million or less in revenue, charging between \$3,000 and \$10,000 a month to help them get noticed on the Web.

Small businesses, Mr. Melin says, "have got to be a little bit scrappy and work a little harder to promote themselves in organic search." Mr. Melin also warns entrepreneurs to heed the growing ranks of people trying to harm other parties' Web sites in terms of their rankings or visibility on search-engine results pages.

That might include creating links to a site using calculated language so that it pops up under unfavorable search terms. (For example, from time to time in recent months, typing the word "failure" would bring up Web sites for the White House or the controversial filmmaker Michael Moore.) Or using what Mr. Melin dubs "black hat" techniques

designed to push down a competitor's rankings in Google and other search engines. One tactic is posting links to a rival's site in locations that the search engines frown upon -- such as so-called link farms, which are essentially groups of unrelated Web pages all hyperlinking to each other with the sole motive of boosting their search rankings. Search engines can penalize the rankings of links posted on link farms.

WRITE YOUR OWN SCRIPT

If you can't beat 'em, become one of them. New online technology lets small-business owners produce the equivalent of their own radio shows, stories and even TV hits with audio- and video-streaming technology. Podcasting, for starters, is a way of posting audio content on the Web that consumers can then download and listen to.

One of the biggest and best-known accumulations of podcasts is on Apple's iTunes, which groups podcasts into categories such as business news, shopping, investing, and management and marketing. Other sites, such as digitalpodcast.com¹⁹, podcastalley.com²⁰ and podcastpickle.com²¹, do similar categorizing and provide a forum to post and edit podcasts as well as links to software for making them. Small businesses with limited budgets can create and upload their own podcasts, or pitch content and offer themselves as a guest to other podcasters.

Meanwhile, as with much of the Internet where there's infinite space to fill, some podcasts act like radio stations and seek commercials to air between segments, although this can cost money, says Jennifer Shaheen, president of Technology Therapy Group, a White Plains, N.Y., company that trains businesses to use new technology. "What if you give them a 30-second commercial to air in between?" Ms. Shaheen says. "The benefit is with podcasts, they don't only put you in the audio, they also link to you."

The success of the video-sharing Web sites YouTube, Google Video and Revver, offer yet another potential outlet for entrepreneurial storytelling. While the sites typically say uploads must be noncommercial, clever small-business owners can create their own video content and categorize it so it might, in a roundabout way, pique interest in their product. The trick, as with blogs, is to do it in a way that's subtle, creative and doesn't smell opportunistic, lest it offend viewers who comment on and rate videos online.

For instance, a recent search under the word "surfing" on YouTube pulled up a listing called "Aqua Dulce, surf and girls," a 2½-minute clip of attractive women surfing, complete with slick music. At the very end, the address www.aquadulce.net²² popped up -- the same link that appeared in the video's description -- which led to the home page selling a \$19.99 DVD of female surfers from a film company called Dog House Productions Inc. Recently, the YouTube snippet had more than 74,000 views and a high 4½-star rating (out of five stars).

The photo-sharing Web site flickr.com²³ offers similar opportunities. Colin Roche, creator of an upstart writing instrument PenAgain, used flickr to drum up interest, and Internet chatter, about his product. For a select time, any customers who photographed

themselves with a PenAgain and posted it to flickr using the tag "PenAgain" would receive a free pen.

Another site to check out is del.icio.us²⁴, which lets you bookmark Web pages and store them online to access from any computer. Here, you can find active communities of others who regularly bookmark pages in your area of specialty, and share your bookmarks with them, which could include your links to your company's Web site in addition to commentary favorable to your product. "They may then bookmark your stuff too, which then becomes a wider distribution point to a wider group of people...[who are] probably very influential," says Mr. McAlister.

AND OFFLINE...

Certainly, there are instances where outsourcing PR makes sense. "My expertise is not PR and what is the right way to reach out to editors," says Ashleigh Verrier, a 25-year-old Manhattan designer who pays lifestyle marketing firm Harrison & Shriftman a \$5,000 monthly retainer to promote her brand. Among other things, Harrison & Shriftman houses Ms. Verrier's designs in their office's showroom, where they are on display for visiting editors and celebrities. Within six months, the shop has landed her press in Vogue and the New York Times, among others.

Meanwhile, eliciting customers to do public relations for you is part of a trend called word-of-mouth marketing. "When we talk about word-of-mouth, we think about the Internet, blogs and chat rooms," says Ed Keller, CEO of Keller Fay Group, a New Brunswick, N.J., market-research firm. "But our research shows that 90% of word-of-mouth occurs offline." He suggests creating ambassador programs -- from new-product sampling and discounts to private in-store parties -- among loyal customers to encourage them to talk about a product or business.

"Small businesses are in the position to do this," Mr. Keller says, "and they don't have to hire a high-priced firm to do it for them."

Ramon Ray, who runs the Web site smallbiztechnology.com²⁵, adds that newsletters and partnerships with noncompeting vendors in your neighborhood can help foster such word-of-mouth buzz. Moreover, he thinks establishing a relationship with the online media world helps enhance small businesses' chances of catching the eye of mainstream press as the latter increasingly pays attention to what's hot on blogs.

"Everybody can't afford to be on 'Oprah' or whatever it takes to be there," Mr. Ray says. "Small businesses need to rethink publicity and what it means."

--Ms. Bounds, The Wall Street Journal's small-business news editor in New York, served as contributing editor of this report.

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