

[EXPERT TIPS]

MARKETING IS ONE of the areas where small-business owners can control their return on investment, says Elin Raymond, president of the Sage Group in Minneapolis, who served as marketing expert at the Upsize Business Builder Awards & Seminar. She says public relations can have an ROI greater than 260 percent.

While they include press releases, good public relations campaigns dig far deeper and include many more pieces. "If you don't have news you can create news," she says.

On the panel, Raymond pointed to Chocolat Céleste, which was generating media coverage about its work during the political season long after the Republican National Convention ended.

She also cited Office Max, which in years past created a contest around building the biggest rubberband ball "as a unique way and cheap way to gain that coverage and exposure you want."

Creating celebrity endorsements or becoming an expert on a specific topic also help garner coverage for your business. You can develop white papers, create podcasts, record presentations and get permission to publish articles in which you are quoted on your Web site. Along with your press releases, that should include hyperlinks and other live touch points. "They live forever online," Raymond says.

Raymond also discussed Web 2.0 strategies, which involve creating online commu-

nities and environments for information-sharing for people who are seeking answers to their problems.

Several of the finalists used social networking sites for gaining exposure and building reputations. Done well, these online communities can create free publicity through referrals. In essence, Raymond says, you've hired a potentially unlimited group of unpaid salepeople.

"This stuff is generally free," she says. "These are all wonderful tools." She calls finalist Davenport Group's piggybacking on the success of Compellent a "brilliant" example of one direction such sites can take.

"You are small companies and you can leverage the awareness of your partners and their expertise. That makes you both bigger and better," Raymond says.

Raymond encouraged companies to try different things. Even if there are some great ideas that don't work and have to be discarded there are other options available.

"If you are low on funds and you are operating in a bad economy but you don't want to get lost or lose momentum with your marketing these are wonderful ways to keep you generating business," Raymond says.

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But the technology has applications for businesses as a communications tool as well. Many of the finalists for Best Practices in Communications & Marketing have found Web-based tools and other strategies for communications that have dramatically improved performance.

Alliance spurs referrals

Blanski Peter Kronlage & Zoch (BPK&Z) has grown from being a tax and audit-based accounting practice into a business advisory firm that can provide a wide range of expertise to its clients.

When the company decided it needed to seek a higher rate of return on this extra level of service, it developed

the Capstone Alliance, a collaboration between the company and smaller CPA firms.

BPK&Z, Golden Valley, invited several smaller firms that sometimes risk losing business because of certain missing areas of expertise, says John Edson, managing marketing partner.

"We invited 100 firms, about 25 showed up," he says of the first meeting. "Thirteen joined and since then, two additional firms have signed up."

The network meets quarterly. Everyone pays a \$250 fee that is returned to them if they refer business to BPK&Z.

Those companies often don't have specialists in some areas that the larger BPK&Z does. They attend continuing education sessions for reduced prices. One payoff for BPK&Z has been increased business from referrals – more than \$236,000 in new business has come its way since establishing the alliance, Edson says. BPK&Z will also do the same for partner firms.

"We're giving them an opportunity to hear from people they might not otherwise hear from," Edson says. "We have not lost any members except through a merger with our firm so it has been very successful."

Political moves

Before starting her confectionary business Mary Leonard wasn't sitting around making bonbons. She was a senior marketing manager at MCI, hooking up government agencies with telecom services.

She did, however, combine aspects of both roles this fall when her company, Chocolat Céleste, created bonbons bearing Republican logos and hired a political consultant to place those products in media kits at the Republican National Convention.

As the convention approached this fall in St. Paul, the company took its product to the then-unemployed communications director for the Mike Ciresi campaign, who happened to be a regular customer. The duo worked to create a media kit sent to the national press. Everyone at the convention received a box of Republican chocolates, stamped with an elephant.

BEST PRACTICES COMMUNICATIONS & MARKETING

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photograph by John Noltner

To communicate, five finalists take different routes

SOCIAL NETWORKING is seen in some quarters as a way for high school students to keep in touch when they graduate and leave for college.