

Media savvy for sale

Personalized public relations firms provide a push businesses can't always give themselves

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Susan Mikolic is a registered nurse and president of Stepping Stones Mental Health, an educational consulting service for children with emotional disturbances. She is considered an expert in her field.

A well-known advocate for the mentally ill, she has spoken to national groups in several states, helped establish legislation and served on the National Alliance of Mental Illness Ohio board of directors.

At a recent speaking engagement in Stark County, the hostess of the event introduced Mikolic to the audience as someone who has had several newspaper stories written about her.

"There's all this stuff in my bio, and that's how she introduced me," Mikolic said with a laugh, seeming still a bit amazed at how media coverage of her and her business affects people's views of her. "There is this public perception that if you're big enough to have somebody write about you, then you must be somebody."

Mikolic has had several stories written about her — some in publications larger than this one — and has appeared on television. When she started her business, she didn't expect the media coverage.

It was, however, precisely the plan of someone else.

Vision of PR

Stepping Stones is a client of Marketing with Vision, a one-woman marketing and public relations show owned by Dianne Myers. It is run out of a small-but-tidy home office in Mentor.

Hired by Mikolic on a monthly retainer, Myers put together a comprehensive marketing plan for Mikolic. Part of that "marketing machine," as Myers calls it, was the public relations aspect that Myers considers her specialty.

It was that specialty, the press kits and news releases that helped land Mikolic in the media.

Public relations — PR for short — is something owners of smaller businesses might not always think of, Myers said. That does not make it less critical to their success.

"Public relations, by itself, can be crisis management," Myers said. "That's what it means to large corporations — they've got a crisis, and they've got to manage that with the media, with their customers, with their shareholders."

"But the other side of public relations, which is what I deal with, is publicity, which I consider a marketing tactic. It's a way to get your name out there and build that credibility."

Myers' business and others of its type provide an



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Dianne Myers is the owner of Marketing with Vision, an independent marketing and public relations firm in Mentor.

outsourced alternative for companies that don't necessarily have the need for such full-time PR or the means to hire a large agency.

It's an alternative in an area of business that appears to be gaining significance.

Perception of PR

The third annual Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices Study, sponsored by the Council of Public Relations Firms and published in May by an independent research agency, indicated strong growth in many key indicators of health in the industry in 2004.

According to the study, PR budgets and staffs grew, and management support for PR increased.

"According to hundreds of senior-level PR people, their CEOs now believe that PR is the No. 1 contributor to organizational success, ahead of such functions as marketing, finance, legal, sales and others," said Jerry Swerling, director of the University of Southern California Annenberg Strategic Public Relations Center and principal investigator on the GAP report.

"By comparison, PR was ranked No. 6 out of eight functions in both 2003 and 2002."

The Council of Public Relations Firms is calling 2004 a "bounce back" year for the profession, in terms of growth and attitudes.

Some businesses, however, have long understood the relationship between public perception and financial success.

In 1923, Edward Bernays — considered by many the "father" of public relations — was hired by a growing Cincinnati-based company, Procter & Gamble, to find a way to promote a brand new product: Ivory soap. He did a great deal of his work outside the scope of an advertising campaign.

Bernays planted stories with reporters and editors, first showing them a survey that indicated consumers preferred white, non-perfume soap. At the time, there was only one on the market: Ivory.

Bernays had the company sponsor soap-sculpture

contests, and the winning entries were submitted to museums and art shows around the world. Ivory soap gained international notoriety.

Procter & Gamble, of course, became hugely successful.

But one needn't own a huge company or be established for decades to use PR as a vehicle for growth.

The Concord Township-based Cruise Co. posted a 28 percent gain in sales the year it brought Myers aboard to be its marketing "department." Advertising and sales tactics were a big part of that marketing, but so were PR efforts such as applications for business awards and media communications that led to stories in print and an appearance on a television talk show.

The company has gained brand identity with Myers' aid, President Dick Drotleff said.

"She was very easy to contact and bounce off marketing ideas," Drotleff said. "All new marketing ideas were discussed with her, and we proceeded with her advice."

Filling the gap

The GAP study was responded to by 347 senior-level PR practitioners from companies, government agencies and nonprofit agencies.

The small to midsize companies that are Marketing with Vision's niche wouldn't have similar personnel.

That's why those companies are Myers' niche.

She researches a client's industry, company and target audience, then comes up with plans for advertising, marketing materials — such as brochures and mailings — and ways to generate the free publicity the media can provide.

Her efforts have led to clients' stories being told in newspapers and magazines and on radio and television — and there isn't a Procter & Gamble among her clients.

"Generally, larger companies are going to be familiar with the advantages of publicity," Myers said. "But companies don't realize, for the most part, how you can do that. They don't believe that

can be done. And smaller companies and entrepreneurs don't even think about it. 'Me, in the newspaper? I'm just a little Joe Blow, how am I going to get in the newspaper?' They don't even know the opportunities that are out there."

The opportunities presented today in the form of television and the Internet are ones Bernays never had.

Often, it takes an outside source to fully take advantage of those ever-increasing opportunities, said Pat Perry, who runs Promark Enterprises, a marketing and PR firm in Mentor.

"Many companies get tied down to the day-to-day operations and don't take the opportunity to focus on public relations," Perry said. "This is where it is beneficial to outsource the service and have a public relations firm take care of working with the media."

Perry said companies can be so focused on what they're doing that they don't always recognize they might have a story that might interest the media. An outsider looking in can provide that perspective, and selling the media on the story can help a business a great deal when combined with other marketing tools.

"Public relations can complement your marketing efforts so that your potential client not only sees you in one medium but in many," Perry said. "Once your name and product are seen over and over by the same potential client, the chance of your company name coming to mind for services to be provided are dramatically increased."

That was exactly the situation Myers envisioned providing when she began her venture in 1999.

She prefers to work with growing "seasoned" businesses, or with entrepreneurial types such as Mikolic, who have a great product or service but need help letting the world know about it.

"I think they're just focused on what that product or service is so much — it's really sensational and everybody's going to love this — 'Oops, I haven't told anybody about it yet,'" Myers said. "I fill that gap."