



Improving your corporate image and position through influence and philanthropy

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In the minds of your customers, your business and corporate image is already positioned. But what about those potential customers that might not know about your business and what you have to offer? One way to develop or enhance your corporate image is by designing a successful public relations program that incorporates several communications components. This article, which is a follow-up to my last three columns addressing this topic, will describe some additional components that businesses and corporations might consider in selecting a public relations and communications program that's right for you. In this article, I'm specifically focusing on a plan to identify key decision makers or influencers, and the potential benefits of developing a philanthropic image for your corporation.

Get to know the decision makers and influencers among your potential markets. Because of the importance of "influencers" to the success of an organization, another element of an effective public relations program is to identify and nurture a meaningful dialogue with those individuals at major corporations that are responsible for recommending referrals and hiring for your type of products or services. In this context, I'm defining the "influencer" as any person who is in charge of managing change. One characteristic that all "influencers" share is their connection and access to the top decision-making level, for their particular organization and/clients. An effective public relations program will include some amount of research in order to identify the key "influencers" within your targeted industry or potential client base. As a fundamental part of this research you will need to determine the interests and needs in order to define how your company or product can help the influencer and their clients. As part of this element of the program, you should also consider joining specific business and trade organizations, such as your local Chamber of Commerce that, will provide you with networking opportunities and increase your visibility in the marketplace.

You've heard the saying that, "It's better to give than to receive." This is quite true in business, because it has the potential benefit of increasing your visibility and branding your corporation with charitable causes. Developing a charity campaign within your business/corporation is a good opportunity to do something special on a local ongoing basis or during a specific holiday season. Charity campaigns can often result in gaining media exposure, heightening public awareness, and building a philanthropic image for your business. These types of campaigns might include matching an employee's contribution to a United Way appeal, donating household supplies or clothing to economically disadvantaged families, providing volunteers to construct affordable housing or organizing a team to take part in a charity walk.

If conducted properly, you could expect to receive exposure at the start when you announce your corporation's charity campaign. If you're going to conduct an event associated with the campaign, you can gain valuable exposure by submitting calendar alerts to the local media highlighting the

date of your event and enlisting volunteers and participants. In addition, you can invite the press to the event for photo opportunities. When the charity campaign is completed, there may also be newspaper photo and television opportunities for additional exposure. The important task with charity campaigns is to be able to provide a meaningful program that benefits a specific charity or cause, while at the same time promotes your corporation's philanthropic policies that result in a win-win situation for both parties.

A meaningful public relations campaign is cost effective and can prove to be very successful in building your business and its reputation. A public and media relations campaign should be seen as a vital management function to improve your business and position.

Alyssa Nightingale is the president of Nightingale & Nightingale, Inc., Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.

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