

10 ways to do your own PR

High-ticket marketing efforts don't fit your budget? Relax, there are plenty of ways to get good PR without spending a ton of your money. "Good public relations is more than just publicity," says Stephanie Crane Faison, a publicist who developed Restaurant PR, a do-it-yourself public relations program aimed at restaurant operators. "It's about relationship building, shaping the public's perception and conveying a positive image." Here's how to generate some pretty good PR for your restaurants—on a not-so-good budget.

High-ticket marketing efforts don't fit your budget? Relax, there are plenty of ways to get good PR without spending a ton of your money. "Good public relations is more than just publicity," says Stephanie Crane Faison, a publicist who developed Restaurant PR, a do-it-yourself public relations program aimed at restaurant operators. "It's about relationship building, shaping the public's perception and conveying a positive image." Here's how to generate some pretty good PR for your restaurants—on a not-so-good budget.

Build a database

Compile your own customer and media database. There are companies and agencies that charge big bucks for these lists, yet both are fairly easy to do yourself. To get customer e-mail addresses and contact info, distribute comment cards, collect data from Open Table or another online reservation service or simply ask customers to sign a guestbook or hand over their business cards to enroll in a drawing. Flesh out the list with key civic leaders, business people and others in the community.

You also can create your own media list by doing a little homework. Study the newspapers, regional magazines, community newsletters and radio and TV stations to target the reporter, editor, writer or producer who covers restaurants, menu trends, real estate, business or design. Barbara Sibley, partner in La Palapa, a Mexican restaurant in New York City, called the New York Times' city section editor, restaurant reviewer and food writer to introduce herself, then followed up with a fax providing details about her Day of the Dead event. The resulting coverage brought a wave of new customers.

Write a release

Press releases aren't just for opening day; use them to announce a revised menu, updated cocktail list, renovated space or any kind of special event. You can write the things yourself. Just make sure your story angle is newsworthy and the content informative, advises Beth Shepherd of Beth Shepherd Communications in Gill, Massachusetts. The idea is to quickly grab the interest of the reader in the first paragraph and provide contact information for follow-up. Shepherd also suggests using the collective "we" when writing about your operation so you don't come off as too boastful. Sample press releases can be found on Websites such as www.press-release-writing.com and www.electricpressrelease.com. And a new book, *Restaurant & Food Professionals: Write Your Press Release!*, is available for \$40 from www.restaurantpr.com.

In addition to the local media, send your release to in-flight magazines, travel guides and Websites, online city directories, community leaders and regular customers. E-mail is the most cost-effective and efficient if you've already established a relationship with the recipients and they have opted in; otherwise, send the release by snail mail or fax.

Get personal

Instead of a press release, some restaurateurs find it more effective to send out a scheduled newsletter. Sarah Stegner, co-owner of Prairie Grass Caf  outside Chicago, e-mails a monthly e-newsletter to her media and customer base using a template from Constant Contact, a permission-based e-mail marketing program. A publicist helped her develop the first few issues and now Stegner writes it herself. The one-pager is personally addressed to each recipient; it includes menu news, recipes, promotions and staff profiles.

A personalized letter became a powerful tool for one of Faison's clients. Written on the restaurant's letterhead, it recounted what was happening in the owner's and chef's lives—travels, wine tastings, the food served at family get-togethers. The letters became "a badge of honor" for those on the mailing list; it made them feel like "insiders." For a cheaper solution, Faison suggests sending out picture postcards—you can order 5,000 online for about \$300; click on www.modernpostcard.com.

Hold a contest

This past holiday season, Prairie Grass Caf  invited its customers to enter a cookie contest; the entries were voted upon by the customers and the finalists sampled at a family-style lunch. "It created a feeling of community around our steady customers," Stegner says. "As judges, they felt a sense of ownership."

Brulee: The Dessert Experience in Philadelphia held a "Sweetest Mom" essay contest for kids. The winner's mother was treated to a catered dessert party for 20—an event that brought in the local TV news crew and generated lots of goodwill in the community. Other restaurants have held contests over everything from naming a menu item to concocting a cocktail to competitive pizza eating.

Market yourself as an expert

Local TV and radio stations, and even food manufacturers at trade shows, are constantly looking for chefs to do demos. Put together a video, DVD or webcast of your chef in action and send it out: it could land your restaurant a regular gig. Chefs and operators are also in demand as spokespeople for food products and appliances, newspaper or magazine

columnists, even teachers in cooking schools and adult ed programs. All these outlets provide exposure for your restaurant.

Be a joiner

Join a culinary association or community group. The La Palapa partners joined the New York Women's Culinary Alliance to network with other "foodies" who could spread the word about their two restaurants. The group has held events at the restaurant. Larger groups such as Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, DiRoNA and the International Association of Culinary Professionals are also beneficial—especially if you get involved on the board or a committee to make yourself more visible.

Joining the local chamber of commerce is a no-brainer, but also join a "problem-solving" group, such as the United Way or a literacy program. A restaurant can prove invaluable in sponsoring a fundraising walk, providing meals to volunteers and donating space for events. "Every successful publicity program has a good citizenship component," says Faison.

Be out there

Your restaurant can get a lot of notice in a short amount of time by taking a table at a chefs' tasting event like those sponsored by Share Our Strength. To make the most of these walk-around food samplings—which bring in hordes of potential customers—prepare something that is uncomplicated and portable, then hand out business cards, matchbooks, pens, recipes or another branded freebie that will jog a guest's memory long after the party is over. "The most worthwhile taste-arounds are the high-ticket fundraisers with a limited number of chefs participating," says Yee. "You're more likely to get attention from real foodies who can turn into steady customers."

If your city holds a prix-fixe "restaurant week," it pays to participate if you have the real estate to spare. You don't want to fill up tables with guests paying \$30 for a three-course meal that can net you \$50, especially if these customers are the bargain-hunting type who probably won't return for a full-priced dinner. On the other hand, participating restaurants are usually given free publicity in newspaper ads, online dining sites and other marketing materials. Test out the waters and weigh the benefits.

Hire a publicist

There are periods in a restaurant's life when outsourcing PR is the most cost-effective solution. Your own time might be scarce or your expertise just too limited. And it might not be as expensive as you think to pay a publicist on an "as needed" basis. Monthly retainers start at \$1,500 for a one-person shop but can go as high as \$10,000 or more for a full-service agency. Smaller restaurants often find that smaller firms offer more personalized service. Rohini Dey, owner of Vermilion in Chicago, turned to a publicist for her new menu introduction "to capitalize on her relationships with the media. It was just more expedient at the time." Yee's advice: it's cheaper in the long run to hire on a monthly retainer rather than an hourly rate.

Faison's Restaurant PR also offers a "Virtual Publicist" service through its Website. For \$1 a minute operators can get advice from a PR pro 24/7; an initial \$50 for 50 minutes gets you plugged in with a user name and password.

Be a matchmaker

Katherine Rothman partners with restaurants to launch clothing, beauty products or jewelry lines. The guest list for these events includes the media and other prospective patrons, who not only become acquainted with the restaurant, but will then talk it up. When photos and video clips are taken to showcase the event, the restaurant gets automatic publicity. "Restaurant owners who wish to gain visibility should offer their venue free or at a discounted rate to a PR firm that regularly stages events," Rothman advises. She also advocates linking with social groups, such as wine-tasting clubs and dating services like Match.com or Eharmony.com; they regularly hold events at restaurants and can provide a steady stream of new business.

Laura Yee, principal of LY Media in Chicago, teamed up with the Windy City Knitting Guild for an event at client Brasserie Jo. "I thought the media would be more apt to write about the restaurant if we tied into knitting—it's so hot right now," she says.

Get with the bloggers

Professional publicists consider getting mentioned in a food or travel blog a valuable media placement. Not only do diners rely on them for leads, the mainstream media discovers many restaurants through blogs. Bloggers can be approached just like other reporters, but they also like to cultivate more personal relationships, says Andrea Strong, creator of The Strong Buzz. For her blog, she prefers that a chef or restaurateur e-mail her through her site rather than send a "boilerplate press release."

There are thousands of blogs on the Web, and the best way to get a sense of what they're about is to read them. Start with www.chefsblogs.com, a compilation from around the country. You might even want to launch a blog of your own; it can generate name recognition and good buzz.