



## Successful PR for Small Businesses: A Beginner's Guide to Reputation Management

### Good Public Relations

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## About the Author

Lesley Muir has worked in public relations for over 10 years specialising in working with B2B clients and in particular smaller companies and organisations using PR for the first time. She has held senior positions both in leading agencies and client side, and was most recently Group PR Manager for Wolters Kluwer UK, a leading information provider where she developed a PR strategy for the company's two core brands Croner and CCH. Lesley's experience spans a very diverse range of sectors and includes mobile marketing company Brainstorm (Opera Telecom), online advertising specialists DoubleClick, eBay, regional booksellers Ottakar's, content management software specialists Vignette, industry analysts Forrester Research, London's Waterway Partnership and Pervasive Software.

During her career, Lesley found working with smaller clients and start up companies most inspiring and challenging. To pursue this interest she founded her own PR consultancy, Good Public Relations, in July 2006 to serve an increasing need for services designed specifically to cater for the needs of SMEs and organisations using PR for the first time.

A full member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), Lesley has an MSc in Social and Public Communication from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is also a part time lecturer on the LSE's MSc Corporate Communications course where she specialises in Public Relations Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility, Crisis and Issues Management and Internal Communications. She lives in London with her husband and daughter.

For more information on Good Public Relations, please visit [www.good-pr.co.uk](http://www.good-pr.co.uk).

## Free PR Consultation

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## Introduction

Successful PR for Small Businesses - A Beginner's Guide to Reputation Management is the first in a series of free Good Public Relations Guides. It has been written to help SMEs and companies using PR for the first time to understand the basics of media relations and securing positive publicity. There are many sides to PR but media or press relations are the ones smaller businesses find most relevant and cost effective.

This Good Public Relations guide will cover the following key topics:

- Identifying your target audience – who are your target media? Where do you find out about them?
- How to generate press coverage?
- How to make contact with your key media and develop relationships
- How to manage a crisis or negative publicity
- How to select a PR agency and when to outsource your PR
- How to write an effective press release
- How to get your story into the papers
- Beyond the media – non-media focused PR.

## Defining Public Relations

Public relations is a much misunderstood profession. It means different things to different people and can be far more than simply issuing press releases and generating media coverage. In isolation PR is rarely a selling medium, but it can be very powerful precursor to an advertising campaign.

A lot of businesses confuse PR and advertising, and frequently ask what the differences are. Basically, PR is reputation management. It is the art of managing what other people say about you or your business. This is often in the media, but can also be employees, customers – any audience group which is important for your organisation. Conversely with advertising, you pay to communicate whatever you want, and to project a particular corporate image. The credibility gap between PR and advertising is obvious, hence the importance of using PR as a reputation management tool.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defines PR as *“a strategic management function that adds value to an organisation by helping it to manage its reputation. Reputation is extremely valuable to an organisation and PR practitioners help organisations manage their reputation by communicating with all the different groups who are connected to the organisation.”*



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Public relations works by changing attitudes and influencing behaviours, two key outcomes that can be achieved by:

- Creating a positive and distinguishing identity for your company.
- Building advantageous relationships among key stakeholder groups – those who can impact your organisation’s reputation.
- Promoting mutual understanding between your business and key stakeholders. In other words, making them understand why you are important, and getting them to internalise the benefits you can offer.
- Influencing a favourable operating environment to support the achievement of strategic objectives.
- Engaging employees to become loyal brand advocates.
- Creating wider awareness and third party endorsements through media coverage and publicity.

### **The Relevance of PR for Smaller Businesses**

PR is an excellent way to generate publicity without having to pay for advertising, and this is especially relevant for smaller businesses. Also very importantly, a well thought out PR strategy will enable you to overcome bad publicity and minimise the resulting impact on your company’s reputation. PR is a powerful tool for creating a buzz around your company, getting out there to attract and impress your stakeholders – employees, possible business partners and suppliers, current and future investors, and of course existing and potential customers.

Many smaller companies make the mistake of thinking that PR is an expensive “nice to have”, the preserve of big companies who appear in the national newspapers and television. In reality, PR is in many ways even more relevant for organisations with a smaller marketing budget, because it can be so much more powerful and cost effective. Consider this. An advert in a newspaper can cost you thousands. It gets you out there in the marketplace and gives the impression that you are doing well enough to afford advertising in the first place. These all help to communicate a success story. But an article recommending one of your products, or quoting one of your staff as an industry expert is perceived by readers to be a third party endorsement and a far more powerful way to communicate this same success. And for a fraction of the price.

Even the smallest businesses can benefit from a public relations strategy. Frequently, when thinking about the press relations aspect of pr, being a smaller business can actually be in your favour. The press loves an underdog, an innovative technology, inspiring entrepreneur, or a back garden business success story and, in addition to column inches, can often become a supportive ear giving you a lot of valuable inside information on your industry.

The key is understanding how PR works; how to go about generating media coverage and, if you want to hire some one to do it for you, what to look for in a PR specialist. Even if you decide to outsource your PR, knowing the basics will make you more confident when dealing with a consultancy and the journalists they will introduce you to.



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## A Beginner's Guide to Public Relations

### 1. Identifying your target audience

The starting point for any good pr campaign is to focus on your audience. Who do I want to reach? What do I want to say to them? What do I want them to think and say about me? Then think what kinds of media do they consume?

Remember that when working with the media, they are both an audience and a channel. Your first task is to make them interested in you, so they think you are important enough for their readers to know about. In that sense the media are a rather unique stakeholder grouping. They are an audience in their own right in that your messages need to get through to them, but they also act as the gatekeepers to your real audience, and you need them to interpret your messages effectively and transmit this message outwards to potential buyers, community members, investors, employees etc.

Ask yourself who would be interested in my story and will it reach my desired target audiences?

Possible media outlets include:

- Local and regional newspapers –many regional newspapers are very influential, especially outside of London, but there are also “free sheets” with a huge circulation.
- Local council magazines and community newspapers and publications.
- Local radio and TV. A good story can get syndicated across a number of different radio stations.
- Trade, technical and professional magazines aimed at professionals working in your target industries. These are often a starting point for many PR campaigns, giving a business vital endorsements and industry credibility before targeting consumer facing media like national newspapers.
- National newspapers – dailies and weekend editions. These are often very receptive to feature ideas and hugely influential.
- Consumer and lifestyle magazines including weekend newspaper supplements.
- Online media. There is still a certain snobbery around the weight of print coverage versus online, but this is changing fast as more and more people rely upon the Internet for their news information and opinion. Newspaper circulations are in a downward spiral and for many people the Internet has become their no 1 channel. So, make sure online media are on your target list, and also consider other online news sources such as blogs and e-zines. Most publications have an online equivalent and there are a growing number of online only outlets.
- National radio and TV. Even if your news isn't big enough for the 6 o'clock news, it is worthwhile submitting story ideas to their forward planning desks and this may result in your being asked to comment when an industry story does



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crop up. This is exactly what happened for one of my clients, Brainstorm. I had been pitching press releases and story ideas to them for what seemed like an eternity. Then, suddenly, right out of the blue, a scandal hit their industry and they were invited to comment on developments as an expert. This was featured all day on BBC News, News 24 and the primetime 6pm slot.

To obtain details of your target media, you will need to subscribe to a media directory like Willings, Hollis or BRAD. When working with a PR agency, they will nearly always subscribe to an online data source such as MediaDisk or Gorkhana, and frequently also receive details of upcoming articles, freelancers' interests and other useful information, which they will use to help secure their clients' press coverage opportunities.

Depending on the type of industry your business is in, it might also be relevant for you to target industry analysts with your communications. This is especially true of IT, telecoms and new media sectors, all of which are well served by analyst groups. In addition to researching and commenting on new trends these organisations also produce vendor reports and are often the first point of contact for media doing initial investigations for a story. For these sectors analyst relations is an important part of a public relations campaign.

## 2. How to generate press coverage

There are countless ways to generate press coverage, but one of the most tried and tested methods is to issue a press release. You will need to develop a novel or topical angle for your release and tailor the actual contents to appeal to the interests of each target publication's readership.

For example, you need to publicise winning a big new order for a new production technique your company has pioneered. This story is relevant for both the trade and consumer press. For the trades you'll need to highlight the intricacies of the new technique, why it is innovative and how it will impact the future of your industry sector. This will give you recognition among your peers. In the local consumer press, for e.g. local newspapers and business magazines you should focus on the positive impact to the local area. Is it going to mean more local jobs? Or, a prestigious award for a local company? Can you contrast the incongruence between high tech innovation in an otherwise sleepy country village?

Press coverage can be generated through real news, or by constructing news. Smaller companies often feel that they don't have enough going on to warrant generating regular press coverage, but you would be surprised! One of the primary arts of a good PR specialist is the ability to be creative and create interesting news for their clients.



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Some natural PR opportunities include the following:

- A new product or service launch
- New premises or expansion
- New staff hires
- Securing a big new customer or order
- Becoming involved with a charitable cause
- Significant anniversaries – 25 years in business, 1000<sup>th</sup> customer
- Securing important business partnerships.

Created news and publicity opportunities include:

- Submitting opinion articles for publication
- Publication of industry research – fun or serious, journalists love a good survey
- Competitions and giveaways
- Offer yourself as an industry expert available for comment and quotes
- Letters to the editor responding to relevant articles
- Monitoring blogs and discussion boards and responding with your opinions.

You can also monitor key publications' editorial calendars. This is a great way to secure coverage as it also simultaneously helps you to develop relationships with a broad array of journalists who write about your area. Very often these will be freelancers and through them you can suggest your ideas for articles, which they will in turn pitch to their editors. Freelancers are paid for the articles they publish, so a good article idea means good money for them and they are often very receptive to suggestions from PRs. This approach is rather time consuming however and you will need to feel very comfortable dealing with the media on a daily basis. For this reason, many companies prefer to outsource this aspect of PR to their consultancy.

On the whole editors welcome suggestions for articles from PR specialists. I have secured a number of excellent feature articles for my clients in this way, and have worked closely with the journalist involved to create the story, giving me an unprecedented control of the outcomes for the companies I was representing. For example CCH, a specialist provider of publications and information solutions for the accountancy profession, was keen to develop the profile of their authors and consultants experts in their respective fields. So, I pitched the idea of a round table debate to the editor of Accountancy magazine, the industry's biggest monthly title. We held an initial event just after the 2006 budget and included in the panel were two experts from CCH plus the head of the ICAEW's Tax faculty. It was excellent positioning for CCH to be on a panel with such a highly respected industry figure. The editor loved the format and quickly ran a follow up feature, this time on Women in



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Accountancy, which again featured two speakers from CCH plus very well known industry figures. This is a great example of how to secure press coverage without specific company news.

### 3. How to make contact with your key media and develop relationships

It can be daunting to contact journalists, and many have a reputation for giving short shrift to callers, especially if you happen to ring at a busy time, like press day for instance. Before making contact with the media, spend some time familiarising yourself with their publication. Be able to quote some recent articles, to get into a discussion with them and sound knowledgeable. Too few people take the time to acquaint themselves with their work and surveys of journalists always feature this as their no. 1 pet hate. Journalists are intensely time pressured and your aim is to become known as a good source for them. Once you have earned their respect they will always make time for you. Journalists speak to hundreds of people daily and it's their job to know everything about their beat area. Consequently they can be a mine of useful information. If you develop a good relationship with a few key contacts they can be a source of very candid feedback – about yourself and others in the industry. Remember the rules of reciprocity and such a working relationship can be highly mutually beneficial.

There are many different roles within a newspaper or magazine. The news editor will decide on the news stories written by their reports. If you have a story idea it can often be less daunting to run it past a reporter, who will then pitch it to his editor at their news meeting. He might also be able to develop it further for you.

The features editor is responsible for developing the editorial calendar and commissioning longer articles, which will very often be written by freelancers. Having a working relationship with the features editors of your key target media is a very strategic way to secure good publicity for a small business. It's not likely you'll have regular ground breaking news to fill their news sections, but you can offer comment, customer stories and opinions for feature articles. You can also work with them to shape their editorial calendars.

When making initial contact with the media it is always advisable to send in an email in the first instance. Introduce yourself and your company with a standard "elevator pitch" and quickly come to the point on why you are getting in contact. Always invite them to a face-to-face meeting. It doesn't have to be lunch, regular catch-ups over coffee are less time consuming for all and equally productive. Aim to meet your key press contacts at least every six months. If you have a PR consultant they will often manage these relationships for you, meeting with these journalists on a more frequent basis to identify what they are writing about and source opportunities for clients. They will involve you once they have secured some interest or definite coverage.

Start to develop a mailing list of key media for press releases and other background information they would find interesting such as company newsletters. Journalists are happy to get emails from companies because it keeps them informed and whilst



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they don't always respond, they will frequently file the information sent for when they do write a relevant article. If you have a company event – a party, customer seminar, open day for instance, always take the time to invite some key media along. They will value the chance to meet with you and other industry people and it's a great way to cement a working relationship.

When dealing with journalists you should always be mindful that they are working to extremely tight deadlines, especially if their publication is online, or daily. Take the time to acquaint yourself with the best times of day to call them and never ring on press day. Find out the times of the month when features editors are going to be most receptive to you contacting them with your ideas.

Conversely, if a journalist contacts you for a story or quote, always find out their deadline and make sure you can respond well within the required timescales.

Journalists can be great fun to work with; you just have to put yourself in their shoes. They are under pressure to write column inches that differentiate their publication from near rivals. Always be mindful that they might not be interested in the same things as you. They are the gatekeepers to your audience and so constantly on the look out for stories that are interesting and relevant for their readers. When considering these time pressures, it is also wise to remember that journalists can and do make mistakes. For this reason it is important to supply as much information as possible in writing – email is excellent for cutting and pasting – to minimise the chances for error. If they do make a mistake, it's normally not serious, and they will almost always print a retraction if it is that important for your business.

Finally, if you do decide to handle your media relations internally, it might be worth investing in a media training course at the onset to develop your knowledge of key techniques like the use of key messages, bridging, sign-posting and creating word pictures.

#### **4. How to deal with negative publicity**

Crisis management is a specialist discipline within public relations, and, with the rise in activism and general levels of media savvy among consumers, also a very fast growing area of practice. This is a huge subject, and not one that can be covered in the scope of this Guide. However there are some key tips smaller businesses can take on board in order to minimise the impacts of bad publicity on their reputations.

Firstly, recognise that negative media coverage can originate from a very wide range of sources - product failures, accidents in the workplace, disgruntled employees and customers, competitor scare mongering, even a genuine misunderstanding.



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If you receive negative press, for e.g. because of a customer related issue, it is always vital to follow some golden PR rules to avert a full blown crisis developing. To quote two very well known writers in the crisis management arena, Register and Larkin, “an issue ignored is a crisis ensured”. With the ability for news to spread as quickly as in today’s Internet age, companies should always act very proactively to minimise the potential impacts.

### Golden Rules for Dealing with a Crisis

- Always respond as quickly as possible with any negativity. Be seen to be taking the situation very seriously and responding quickly.
- Remember the 3 C’s of crisis management: concern, commitment and control.
  - Look concerned
  - Be committed to resolving the problem quickly
  - Be in control of the situation.
- When talking about the situation always put the impacts on people and the environment first, give details of what you are doing to resolve the problem and then address the financial implications last.
- Have a detailed communications plan in place for dealing with the situation and follow it precisely. Try to brainstorm different scenarios and what the outcomes and comments might be. Develop this into a Q&A to have on hand should it be needed.
- Nominate a spokesperson (usually the CEO) and make sure everyone in your company knows who this is and that all journalist enquiries should be referred to this person.
- Keep your staff informed of the developments at all times. This is both to ensure they are both reassured, and able to divert questions properly with confidence.
- If a journalist does contact you, ask questions to find out what they want to write about, who else they have spoken to, their deadlines and any other information about their possible plans. Then construct a written statement giving as much information to them as possible and submit it well within the required timeframes. In any communication it is important to show you have done all that is possible to resolve the problems quickly.
- Never say “no comment”. Apart from being very rude, it gives the impression you have something to hide and are being un-cooperative. If a journalist has called you it is because he thinks there is something his readers ought to know about. Your “no comment” could exacerbate the situation and the journalist will simply go elsewhere to get the required comment. If he goes elsewhere you have no control over what gets said and it is unlikely the journalist will view you favourably as one of the protagonists. If you really can’t say anything because it’s very early days and you are unsure of the exact situation, then just say that. Reiterate the situation and tell them you are working hard to investigate and will be in touch with further details ASAP, but that in the meantime, if they have any questions, you will be only too happy to help them with their enquiries.



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- Be approachable and open to receiving questions from journalists and always put any communication in writing. If you are unsure about the wording of statements or comments, get them checked both by your legal team and a PR specialist. Just answer the questions put to you as honestly as you can, but remember there is a big distinction between honesty and openness. You can always be honest but you might not be able to be as open as you might wish to be in such situations. Answer questions truthfully, but don't volunteer every detail.
- Never go "off the record". You should never do this in any circumstance anyway, unless you're really confident about dealing with the media and know the individuals well. But even then this is always very risky strategy.
- Crisis and negativity require specialist skills and knowledge. It is always wise to get legal advice prior to any communications, written or verbal, and you may also benefit greatly from working with a PR specialist, even if just to handle a one-off project.

## 5. How to select a PR agency and when to outsource your PR

This guide is designed to provide small businesses with some basic information for managing your own public relations. However you may decide you wish to recruit an expert to help you. When considering whether to go DIY or to outsource to a specialist it is worthwhile asking yourself the following questions:

- How confident to you feel about managing your own pr and dealing effectively with journalists?
- How good are your writing and creative skills? A good PR will be excellent in this area, and their ideas will provide an edge to your campaigns that might otherwise be lacking.
- Is there a big product launch or expansion planned for the coming months? This event could be a huge opportunity for you to get onto your target audience's radar. Working with a PR specialist will enable you to maximise the potential of this for your business, even if just for a designated time period of, for example, 6 months.
- How much time will it take for you to manage your own pr and take advantage of all the media opportunities out there?
- What is the opportunity cost to your business of handling the pr yourself? Would you get a better return if that time were spent elsewhere?

If you are outsourcing pr for the first time, you might feel more comfortable working with a freelance specialist or a smaller consultancy specialising in SMEs and those new to PR. Their rates will be tailored for this audience group and work out much more competitive than larger more corporate agencies. A freelance PR consultant usually starts at around £300 per day, compared with an agency service corporate clients that typically charges £100 plus an hour.



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For smaller companies and those with a limited budget, remember it's always better to be a big fish in someone's small pond, than a minnow among a sea of other bigger clients. The freelancer or smaller consultancy might not wine and dine you at fancy restaurants, but they'll know their stuff, be far more flexible and accommodating to your needs and could eventually become a valuable part of your management team. If you do decide to outsource your pr it is worthwhile following these key tips when selecting a supplier.

Make some enquiries within your industry to find out who is good and develop a shortlist of candidates. Speak with them all informally to see how interested they are and whether you think you might like to work with them. Then arrange a face-to-face meeting. If you wish to take things further ask them to develop a proposal for you based upon a specific brief. See how creative and thoughtful their work is.

When working with a pr agency remember it is a two-way partnership and take the time to meet regularly with them to review the activity and plan ahead. You should work together to specify what your business objectives and any communications strategy should work towards achieving these. At the end of the campaign, return to these original objectives and assess the extent to which you feel these are achieved. Ask your PR what evaluation techniques they can apply for you to measure the ROI of any activity.

## 6. How to write an effective press release

When writing a press release always bear in mind that what's important to you might not be of interest to journalists. They are unlikely to be interested in your new product per se unless it really is truly ground breaking. What they will be interested in are the ramifications of the new launch, are there any environmental benefits, cost savings, who is using it already?

In the 70s Galtung and Ruge undertook an extensive study of the criteria for newsworthiness and my experience shows this to be as valid three decades on. To be classed as "news" a story needs to be:

- Directly relevant to the audience concerned
- Controversial or negative, a new concept or surprising idea
- Linked with celebrities, well known organisations or places
- Amusing or funny
- Unknown, confidential or a secret (until it breaks)
- Associated with conflict, romance or mystery.



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Writing an effective press release is something of an art and the key is to grab the reader's attention in the first few lines, then continue to supply all the information required to create a story in a succinct manner. The headline needs to be active, understandable, convey the main point of the story and make people want to read on. It is often a good idea to include one or two bullet points under the headline to summarise key facts you want to highlight early on.

The first paragraph should convey the whole story in a nutshell; outline its interest and relevance to the readership. It should be strong enough to stand on its own, should the rest of the press release be deleted. This introductory paragraph is the section of the release that would need to be tailored for different publications – serving trade or consumer audiences for instance. A trade journal will be interested in what a new product can do for its business audience whereas a local paper is interested in local jobs, prestige or human angles of a news story.

Subsequent paragraphs should provide the how, why, when and who of the story. The who is explained with a quote either from the CEO or MD and perhaps also a third party acting as an endorsement. For example a new product release could include a quote from the technical director and also a customer quote. If there are no customers yet, you could think about asking someone to become a “beta tester” or get an industry expert to relate the launch to an industry issue.

Press releases should be succinct and clear with short punchy sentences. But remember you are telling a story and explaining something, so it shouldn't read like advertising copy. Journalists also hate it when press releases try to be clever with puns and gimmicks. They will do this in their article if they feel it is appropriate for the audience – your role is to convey the facts clearly to grab their attention. Write the release as though it were a newspaper report and always refer to your business in the third person - as an “it” rather than “we”.

Finish the release with your contact details and a “Notes to editors” section containing company background and other relevant information. Always make sure that when you send out a release you are available for calls and questions. This sounds obvious but it's amazing how many people don't consider this - and it's another pet hate of journalists.

## 7. How to get your story into print

Once you have written a compelling press release the next stage is to work at getting it covered by your key media. Go to the database of target publications you have developed and contact the key people to establish

their copy deadlines and news days. Whilst on the phone try to find out what they are writing about currently, what they are most interested in and you can pitch your story to them directly. Then, follow this up with a personal email enclosing the release. From experience this personalised, proactive approach works far better than sending a blanket email. You can also send out a blanket email but your key contacts will have received a personal email from you already and then seen the mass



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distribution of the release as a follow up. This way they know you value them as contacts and that you have taken trouble to contact them in advance. Depending

on the situation you might wish to offer certain contacts an exclusive to secure some definite coverage. It is always a good approach to submit imagery with a press release and this does increase your chances of coverage.

If you feel confident in dealing with the media you can consider offering story exclusives – for e.g. within your industry press and then target consumer publications with a slight variation of the story. Negotiating exclusives can be tricky however and if your target media are slow in responding to your offers, this can backfire, resulting in no coverage at all!

Some PR specialists will actually create a story with images and let the picture communicate their message directly, in a very creative manner. Depending on the client and target media this can be a very powerful strategy.

## **8. Beyond the media – non-media focused PR**

Although media relations has always been a very big part of what PR practitioners do for clients, there are many other ways a business can influence its stakeholders and build a positive reputation. It is worth considering some of the following ideas, all of which will help to raise awareness of your company among the local community, industry sector peers and other stakeholder groups.

- You could offer to give talks about your profession or business to local colleges, university students or other organisations. Apart from being good networking this helps to position you and your company as experts.
- Seek speaking opportunities at key industry events, and if possible team with partners and suppliers to present interesting case studies rather than giving product pitches.
- Does your sector have its own industry group? If it does, join it and take an active role. You will be asked to comment on many issues and can promote your dual commercial and industry focused roles, bringing you a lot of extra publicity.
- If there is no industry group for your sector, how about assembling a committee and launching your own one?
- Sponsor local events – exhibitions, sports challenges.
- Organising competitions, charitable initiatives, research surveys – possibly in conjunction with a third party or media partner.
- Meeting and talking to opinion formers, analysts, journalists, other business leaders and opinion formers. Be seen at all the key industry events for your sector.
- Develop a partnership with a local charity and develop a CSR strategy, preferably in a manner that simultaneously improves the competitive context for your business.
- Become a commentator on industry issues – perhaps in the capacity of a tandem role in an industry group. Give constructive criticism but don't develop a reputation for being a whinger.



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## Free PR Consultation with Good Public Relations

I hope you find this guide to small business PR useful and inspiring. If after reading it you have further questions, please contact me, Lesley Muir, founder of Good Public Relations for a free 30 minute PR consultation. I will be delighted to discuss any aspect of public relations practice and answer any questions you might have. To arrange your free PR consultation, please email [consultations@good-pr.co.uk](mailto:consultations@good-pr.co.uk).

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