

SPREADING THE NEWS

By Deidra Darsa

Tough economic times often translate into difficult decisions that include downsizing and layoffs.

Many business operators struggling to stay afloat often feel overwhelmed in a down market and, while they wrestle to meet the financial demands of running their businesses, the very thing that could strengthen their businesses is set aside or forgotten: Public Relations.

Public relations is a tool that, if used smartly, can bring customers to your store and increase your sales through newspaper articles, television and radio spots, and community outreach. And, it's a tool that many in the hearth, patio and barbecue industries are using successfully.

"I put together a public relations plan every year that focuses on certain key business periods," said John Frankel, manager of NW Natural Appliance Center in Portland,

OR. "For instance, I have a campaign for barbecue and grilling in the spring and a hearth campaign for the fall that involves radio, print and television."

Having a background in public relations and recognizing that he wouldn't be 100 percent successful in accomplishing every goal, Frankel drew on those experiences when developing his media and community outreach plan which always includes a well-written press release distributed to local monthly and daily papers and magazines, as well as radio and television stations.

"When you're writing a press release, don't bury the lead (or the point of the story), get it down to one page, and understand the publication's deadlines and their need for content," he said. "For instance, we have a local community monthly and I know their deadline, so if I can get them a press release before then, there's a good chance it will be included. If I miss the deadline, it won't be included."

If you don't know how to write a press release, use *continued on pg. 144*



Chairman's MESSAGE

Dennis Smith, *Chairman, Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association*

As I prepare to relinquish my duties as the HPBA Chairman, I find myself reflecting on the tremendous year I've had meeting members and working with the dedicated volunteers who give so generously of their time in support of an amazing association.

I have been encouraged by the folks I met throughout the year who continue to work so diligently in an economic environment that few of us have ever endured before. Yet you remain upbeat and determined to succeed in an industry that offers consumers an enhanced way of life, both indoors and out. I salute you.

To our HPBA Board members and the HPBA staff, thank you for your support and your trust in allowing me to represent our industry. It has been an adventure that I will not forget.

To our affiliate staff who put together some very dynamic programs and meetings, I applaud you. Not only do you provide a positive educational venue, but your social events strengthen the bonds of our members. I, for one, enjoyed energetic conversation and local cuisines as unique and interesting as each affiliate region. Yet, I found that at the same time, that uniqueness, whether found on a river boat cruise in Wisconsin or in the beauty of the high country of Arizona, is what makes us strong.

As this goes to print, most of you have made your plans to attend the 2009 HPBExpo in Reno. This is your show, your products, your industry. Join me in Reno for education, learning, new products, relationships and fun! We all need a break and this is the perfect excuse.

I remain honored and forever grateful. Thank you.

the HPBA press releases. "I've added our name, changed the date and focus and sent them out," said Frankel. "The HPBA press release is a great template. Don't be afraid to use it."

Leslie Wheeler, HPBA director of communications, concurs: "We always encourage our members to take our press releases and fact sheets and make them their own. Just go to www.hpba.org and download the documents that you want to use. If you have questions, please call us."

The worse thing that can happen after sending a press release is that your story won't get picked up. But, you will get your name out there as an expert, noted Frankel. "I know for a fact that I've been called later by someone who saw an earlier press release that they didn't run when it was originally sent."

When a reporter calls, be aware of the story's deadline and its focus. "In some cases, it may mean calling the reporter back after you've had a chance to prepare and come up with the three key messages that you want to appear in that story. I was in a situation where I was asked questions that I wasn't prepared to answer and just explained that I wasn't the appropriate person to answer those questions."

Or, let the reporter know that you will find the answer and get back to them. If you know someone who is better suited to respond, provide that person's name. Either way, you're developing a relationship with that reporter who will then come back to you on later stories.

For Rodger Holland, manager of Archgard Fireplace Products, having the information ready to go when a reporter calls, makes the difference. "I have a media binder with my company information handy, including a page with photos that I can refer to when I talk to reporters. I also have it divided into categories such as products, innovation, safety, better living and the environment and how we fit into the green category. Not only do I use this book when talk-



www.hpba.org.

ing to media, but I also use it when talking to legislators."

Developing relationships with staff outside of the newsroom may also help you get into the news as it did John Frankel. "I've made contacts with the paid advertising people who also work in editorial," he noted. "If you're shooting a television commercial, the people doing the footage are typically the same people shooting news stories. For example, if they need to shoot footage of hearth products in use to keep on file for future stories, they'll remember you and come back to your store to film. That has happened to me."

The same goes for local television and radio home improvement shows. Let them know that you're available. "They're always looking for good content and they'll keep you in mind," he said.

And, notes Rodger Holland, a good public relations plan will stretch marketing dollars. "Because," says Holland, "we're not paying for what the media picks up and runs in its news stories. If I do the things that are free first, I'm going to be a lot better off than paying for advertisements. Plus, news stories are perceived differently than a paid advertisement. The media adds credibility, whereas the public knows that we're pitching a product in a paid ad."

Pulling together a list of media contacts can be as simple as watching your local newspapers and magazines for writers with an interest in your products, staying tuned to the local television and radio stations and providing feedback to aired reports, and don't forget the Internet. There are many Web sites that report on hearth, barbecue and outdoor living, and each is an opportunity to tout your news.

As Holland has found, "It's exciting when you are given the chance to present yourself and what you do, or have done, to the media." 🔥

The *HPBA Journal* is intended to provide in-depth information to the hearth and outdoor products industry. Statements of fact and opinion are the responsibility of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the officers, board, staff or members of the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association.

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