

PR 'Pro Bono Drive Bys' Provide A Business Boost...Down The Road

By Matt Baron

Making connections—that's at the heart of public relations.

PR practitioners who truly have a heart for the profession thrive on being the bridge between prospective sources and journalists. And, at least in my experience, here's an especially enriching part of it: providing that link for people who have never been—and may never become—clients.

I call this practice my PR Pro Bono Drive By. I pull up to the scene of a PR opportunity, fire off a phone call and a few e-mails, and then move on in my merry, hourly-billable way.

At first blush, this may seem to be a strange business principle. Why interrupt work for loyal paying clients to provide a freebie that has no guarantee of panning out in the first place?

First, as anyone in business more than a few seconds can attest, loyal paying clients, even if you continually provide a terrific ROI for them, have this tendency to become *former* loyal paying clients. Sure, shift happens. And all you have is that Pyrrhic PR Victory: a glowing testimonial—you didn't even have to ghost-write it for them!—about the fantastic job you did way back when.

Second, even if the PR-PB-DB fails to result in a front-page New York Times article, or even a blurb in the local community weekly, you will have shown both the journalist and the would-be source that you are an industriously helpful go-to guy (or gal).

Now get out your calculator: have you figured out the formula to gauge the worth of a great reputation like that?

It should be clear, then, that this is hardly a naïve 'save-the-world' practice. In fact, providing regular PR-PB-DBs has been an integral part of my firm's strong growth the past few years. Of the 40 clients who have retained my firm's services over the past 18 months, roughly half began as "drive-bys."

708.860.1380

www.EdgePR.com

1515 N. Harlem Avenue Oak Park, IL 60302

Before meeting me, most never retained, or even entertained the idea of retaining, a PR firm. And that's largely because they never had enough of an experience to know its workings, or its value. Nary a PR pro had ever invested a few minutes in them.

Here are some tips on how the PR-PB-DB has worked for my practice:

Do It Quickly

You need not carve out huge chunks of time to make this happen. We're not talking about investing hours of your time, or even an hour. Typically, in less than 10 minutes, I can broker an introduction between a journalist on the prowl for sources and someone who seems to fit the profile they are seeking.

Do It Frequently

Rarely does a business day conclude without my attempting to be an impromptu matchmaker at least once. Often, I try to broker multiple connections on the same day. This is not something that I do so much as an inescapable part of who I am.

At first, if this is unfamiliar terrain to you, it's like developing any muscle that has atrophied from neglect. If your heart truly is in making connections not only for yourself, but others, you will soon begin spotting PR-PB-DB opportunities that until now never occurred to you.

Do It With A Word of Caution

Manage the expectations of people who often have had little or no experience in dealing with the media. An excerpt from an e-mail that I have crafted for first-time "drive-by" beneficiaries:

"Be forewarned-----simply speaking to the media, sharing wonderful insights, and taking up some of your valuable time can sometimes result in ZERO inclusion in a story. Sometimes the story itself never appears, though that's rare.

Bottom line: if you are ever interested in pursuing a given media opportunity, it will mean some time out of your life. It varies, but can range from 5 or 10 minutes by email or phone, or an in-person interview, to an hour (or even more, at times), depending on the reporter and on the extent to which they need to interview you.

This is an art form, not a science. And the quality of reporters, as in any field, can vary significantly. I've seen a broad gamut in my 20-plus years in journalism and public relations. Don't let one experience, especially good or especially bad, color your overall perception of the process. Each one has a life, and sometimes death, of its own."

Do It For "The Love of the Game"

This must be genuine, with no strings attached. It should be akin to giving someone a gift with no expectation of receiving anything in return.

Inwardly you should be percolating with ambition and optimism, full of visions of depositing that retainer check in the bank. But outwardly, exert no pressure on the drive-by recipient to hire you. It's a good approach because many times, they won't.

Of course, I have learned that for many, it's simply a matter of time. Weeks, months, even years after I've planted the PR-PB-DB seed with various parties, the e-mail bounds into my "in" box or the phone rings and a long-ago beneficiary tells me, "We should talk."

Those moments reinforce a truth that is increasingly obvious in my business journey: these pro-bono drive-bys have a remarkable, rewarding way of coming back around.

*For more than 20 years, Matt Baron, founder of Chicago-based **Inside Edge: Public Relations & Media Services**, was a staff and freelance reporter for small-town weeklies, big-city dailies and national magazines. Through workshops, webinars and columns, Baron has trained thousands of reporters and PR professionals how to tell stories more effectively. You can reach him at Matt@InsideEdgePR.com or 708.860.1380.*