

GO OUT AND GET IT: THE SCOOP ON GETTING GREAT PR



BY CYNTHIA WHITNEY-WARD

The late entertainer Will Rogers once said, “*All I know is just what I read in the papers.*” Well, if Will were around today, he might have to amend that a bit to include the flood of information that we absorb from television and electronic media. But regardless, his basic tenant is true for most of us. That’s why good old-fashioned public relations works so well, especially for restaurants. If a restaurant reviewer or food writer raves about your food, thinks your chef is innovative and smart and describes dishes so that you can almost taste the words, you can bet the customers will come.

But terrific PR doesn’t just happen; it takes work, a bit of know-how and lots of follow-through. If you open your restaurant doors, it doesn’t naturally follow that the reviewers will come. If you’re an established restaurant and you get a new chef or are doing something really newsworthy and fun, the media aren’t camped out on your doorstep waiting to write about it. You have to let folks know that you’re doing it. Yes, there’s word of mouth, which is great. And, you can blog and Twitter and Facebook the dickens out of it, but what you really want is a credible, articulate journalist to step through your door, get excited and write with gusto.

So, how do you do it?

It really all begins with **your story**. Before you even think about contacting the media, you need to know who you are and what makes your restaurant unique. There’s a lot of competition out there and if you are clear about what sets you apart, it will be easier to write that press release, pick up the phone and call a journalist and impress them before they even walk through your door.

Is your restaurant in a great location? Is it a destination restaurant; a neighborhood restaurant? Is it upscale; down home? Does the building have history? Is the interior design as key as the food? Do you showcase local farmers, cheeses, wines on your menu? Can you describe your cuisine in one sentence? What about your chef? Is he/she passionate about organic ingredients, innovation? You get the idea? Now put all of that in as few sentences as possible and you have a great restaurant story. In addition to the media, this *knowing* what makes your restaurant unique will help you to create or re-create a terrific website, zero in on a clear marketing plan and help you develop a signature event or fundraiser that really fits who you are.

Photography: We all know the old Chinese proverb: *a picture is worth a thousand words*. When it comes to pitching your restaurant to the media, it’s true. Shooting food and interiors well, however, takes a bit of skill; it’s well worth the expense to hire a professional. Great website (you do have a website, right?) photos of your restaurant and beautifully plated food is the next best thing to being there. And in this age of inexpensive digital cameras, there’s no excuse not to take appealing photos yourself to include on blogs, e-blasts and other social media. Including beautiful photos on press releases adds another layer to the words and gives a journalist a visual preview of your restaurant.

Angles: If you’re going to pitch an idea to the media, make sure that it’s a good one; something with a unique spin. Is your chef putting some amazing side dishes on the menu that are almost as intriguing as the main entrées? Are you hosting a unique event? Is there an important anniversary for your business coming up? Is your sous chef a star? Pitch “Who’s on second!” Do you change your menu quarterly? Offer and



publicize a multi-course tasting menu evening that showcases a delicious sampling of the new menu. Make it a quarterly event. "Tastes of the Season."

Round-ups: While it's great getting an exclusive feature on your restaurant, being included in a fun article with other terrific restaurants is also valuable. And if you're the one pitching the story idea, you'll no doubt get top billing and may even snag the photo that goes with it. The sous chef pitch above would make a good round-up story. So would the side dish angle. If your chef shops the farmer's market every week, a pitch for an article on five chefs and their five favorite vendors would get noticed.

Relationships: You build a relationship with your clientele; you do the same with journalists. Both take time and nurturing. But, if you pitch interesting stories, make your staff available for interviews, are generous with information and sensitive to deadlines, you'll do just fine. A great, well-written story makes everyone look good. And if the media knows that you're informed, available and receptive, they'll start calling you.

Events: Creating a signature event is a great way to carve out a publicity niche. Partnering with a favored non-profit—you and your staff could choose one together—is always a great idea. Most non-profits have a substantial volunteer base and can shoulder a lot of the organization and promotional work. Plus, you get the added benefit of potential customers from their membership. Offer to host an initial get-together social evening so everyone involved can meet each other before the "work" begins. If you're new to the restaurant scene, signing on to a city-wide annual food event gives you and your staff a nice introduction to the food community, and any media that comes along with it.

OK, what's next?

You know who you are. You know your strengths; what sets you apart. You've got some great photos. You've figured out a few good story lines or you have an impending event that is newsworthy and fun. How do you actually pitch the media? Let's begin as if you're starting from scratch. Local press is always good, their deadlines are short, and so you can usually "see" the results almost immediately in the number of new covers.



Cousins Subs knows how to get great PR. Their very fun Moo-la-Palooza Cow Mooing event, for example, has evolved each year and garnered a ton of national press. What's the scoop? Investing in the local community is key says Sr. Marketing Manager, Justin McCoy. "We partnered with the local 4-H for this event and it has been highly successful for both of us. Advice: Identify a non-profit that makes sense for you and grow the partnership and event from there.

John Kavanaugh, owner of Madison's **The Esquire Club**, is opinionated. That, he says, is the key to some of his PR savvy. "I make myself available to journalists, and I'm not afraid to answer tough questions about the food industry." He says that journalists know that he'll return their calls and be candid. Advice: Show a willingness to be interviewed; it will lead to great PR.

Food Fight Restaurant Group is a PR magnet. They recently co-sponsored Celebrity Chef, Rick Bayless's appearance at Isthmus Green Day, and hosted a fundraising luncheon at their Eldorado Grill. The event got great press and raised funds for REAP Food Group's Farm to School Program. But getting really good press, says President Monty Schiro, is pretty fundamental. Advice: "It all begins with giving guests a great experience; it's all in the execution."

Beth O'Reilly, Sr. Communications Specialist with **Kohler Co.** has some great tips.

- Perfect Pairings. Pair a newsworthy topic such as a new menu, culinary event or restaurant renovation with a recipe suggestions that can be demonstrated for the morning news programs or highlighted in the food section of the newspaper.
- Tis' The Season. Pay attention to food trends that are based on the season. Pitch the media recipe items that can kick off the season—such as Summer Grilling or Winter Warm-up Kettle Soups.

Be personal and be direct. If you've never met the writer before, send an e-mail or if you have met, give them a call. If you have a great idea, they'll welcome your contact. Really. Be friendly, concise and to the point. Write your pitch out before hand, especially if you're going to e-mail it. Think of it as an e-pitch. Come up with a clever subject line so there's a bit of intrigue before the e-mail's even opened. **Who's on Second...? Five on Five...Sides are the Star Attraction...** (Remember the pitch ideas above). A paragraph or two to make the pitch

is enough, and be sure that you have your restaurant signature at the bottom with your web page. Let them know that you'll follow up with a call to see if they're interested. And do. Wait a few days and then call them. Remember. They need your ideas as much as you need the publicity.

Let's say that it works. **You get a great article. Now what do you do?** First be sure and send a thank you note. Then you work the article. Share it with your employees; they should be given credit for helping to get great publicity. Be sure and post it in your

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kitchen. If there's a great quote, use it in pending advertising. Be sure and give credit to the writer by name and publication, it adds credibility and is usually required by the newspaper or magazine. Put the quote at the top of your menu page. Put the whole article on your website. If you do an e-blast or e-newsletter, do a link to the article on your web page. If menu items are touted in the article, have your waitstaff mention this discretely when people are ordering. Frame the article and hang it where guests can see it. And, if there's something that the writer mentions that can be improved, think about it, and if it's valid, fix it. Let the journalist know that you did and invite them back to experience the "fix."

Also, great contacts include **The Convention and Visitor's Bureau**. They often sponsor press trips and you can offer to host some dinners. Always



have someone from your restaurant to greet the press and share the meal with them. Have the chef come out to meet them. Dinner is better than lunch; the group is usually not rushing off for another appointment and is more relaxed. If it's a large group, it's fine to host only part of the group. Ask to see the list and choose the journalists that would be a better fit for your restaurant.

Find out which local **PR firm** represents travel for the state and contact them with the same offer. **Concierges** are a terrific resource as well. They are always recommending restaurants to guests. Contact them

and let them know what's happening in your restaurant. Host one of their monthly meetings and set up a bi-monthly goodie drop to keep them in the loop of delicious happenings coming from your kitchen. If you're doing an event, be sure and get them flyers the week before so that they can have them on display at the concierge desk. Send a pitch to the **photo desk editor** of your local newspaper, or if you know the **photographer** send it to them directly. If it's an appealing photo op they'll pitch it to their editor and just add a caption to the photo themselves. As we said earlier, a picture is worth a thousand words.

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Media Interview Tips



Some helpful interview advice whether it's over-the-phone, in-person or on-camera

- Whenever possible, think your communication through before you talk to a reporter.
- Think like a reporter: who, what, when, where, why and how.
- Try to relax. Interviews are nothing to be afraid of.
- State the simple facts of what you are trying to communicate. Keep statements simple.
- Avoid limiting your answers to just yes or no.
- Think of the reporter as just someone who is interested in the subject matter.
- Try to find out ahead of time what areas the reporter is interested in talking to you about so you can be prepared.
- Have general information and any relevant statistics at your fingertips if appropriate. Reporters like numbers.
- Before the interview, think about the questions a reporter might ask and come up with answers to these questions. Try to think of the most positive way to phrase your answers

to reporter questions.

- Answers need to be as short and succinct as possible. Try not to get lost in your answer.
- For in-person and television interviews, write the 5 main points you want to get across on index cards so even if you panic, you have something to fall back on. When the interview is ending, you can glance at your cards and add anything that you haven't covered.
- If possible, practice ahead of time so you feel comfortable with what you want to say. Be careful, however that you don't appear too rehearsed and too formal.
- When asked a question, don't be afraid to take a brief moment to formulate your answer.
- Be careful of leading questions. You have the power to recast a question in how you answer it.
- If you don't know the answer to a factual question don't panic and don't speculate. You can admit that you don't know the answer off the top of your head, but you would be happy to get that information for them.
- Don't say anything "off the record" and expect that they won't use that

information. Basically, just don't say anything you don't want printed or put on the air.

- Be prepared for your statements to be taken out of context. While you hope this doesn't happen, it is always a possibility so keep this in mind when putting together your thoughts.

Special tips for television interviews.

- Make sure to dress for the camera: don't wear loud patterns.
- Usually, you only have a few minutes, so make sure you hit the most important points first.
- Try to relax, but sit up straight. Try not to fidget.
- Focus on the interviewer, ignore the camera.
- Try to be pleasant. Don't forget to smile.
- For taped interviews, you can always ask to take a second stab at answering a question if you are not satisfied with the way you answered it.
- If doing a cooking demonstration for a television show, make sure you have all the details worked out ahead of time such as what equipment you need to bring, how the interview will proceed, etc.