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## Here are 11 cost-effective ways to build a positive corporate image

By REBECCA HART

An undeniable fact of business life as we enter the 21st Century is this: To survive in an increasingly competitive international marketplace, companies will have to do a far more effective and cost efficient job of marketing themselves than ever before. It is the need to find new ways to get more bang for the marketing buck that keeps many business people awake in the middle of the night.

But while technology may be moving ahead faster than ever before, many of the tools of corporate imaging are time-tested and often require only a commitment of time and energy.

While expensive advertising campaigns can often be counted on to move the awareness needle, there are other tools that can also raise awareness while building credibility and competitive distinction.

Following are 11 ways to build awareness and keep a good corporate image without making a significant financial investment:

- Make sure you have clear customer-focused messages about what your company does, as well as a unique reason why customers should do business with you. Then put those messages everywhere — on your business cards, letterhead, signs in your office, brochures and on your thank you cards.

- Implement a media relations pro-

gram by cultivating relationships with media sources and using carefully written and appropriately distributed press releases that include solid information and are accompanied by a visual. Send local reporters covering your business copies of relevant trade articles not involving your organization as a way to enhance your reputation as a reliable source. Also consider writing letters to the editor when there is an issue that affects your business.

- Organize and promote newsworthy events — and show media people why they're important to their audience. These could include seminars, panel discussions, open houses, health fairs, etc. But think twice before scheduling a media conference — is the information really that newsworthy or can you just send information to the appropriate media.

- Create opportunities for contests, awards and sampling. In addition to positioning you in the marketplace, these also build goodwill and name recognition. Be creative.

- Get involved with community service activities, and where possible, make more than a financial commitment. Look for opportunities where your skills can be used, and also where you can donate premium prizes that may generate some media attention.

- Sponsor or underwrite carefully targeted special-interest shows on radio and TV. If it's appropriate,

appear as a guest on these shows.

- Do as much public speaking as you can to audiences that need what you offer. Be sure that messages are coordinated if there's more than one person making presentations from your organization.

- Use the Internet to promote yourself through e-mail signatures, articles, World Wide Web sites and links, live conferences and discussion groups.

- Cross-promote with others at every opportunity. If you've never done this, make a list of five types of organizations that are trying to reach the same people you are. Think about ways to work together, then contact the groups and see how you can work together.

- Use clear, persuasive testimonials and attribute them so your prospects know these are real people.

Tell everyone what you do and how it helps people achieve their goals.

And always be sure you speak in plain English.

- Actively encourage referrals, among both customers and employees. It has been estimated that more than 90 percent of all business comes as a result of referrals, especially for those businesses that offer a service.

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