

Pressing matters; paid advertisement versus earned press

One day you get a phone call, e-mail or letter informing you about the great opportunity to increase your business. Just place an ad in publication “XYZ” and benefit like other from “soaring revenue”. Or you get a question of a reporter asking you to sponsor an article in which you are mentioned.

Sound familiar? It is very easy to spend thousands of dollars in ads in either printed or digital press (websites etc.) Most of the time you have little or no control of the result that such ads may render. It doesn't mean that you should never place an ad or sponsor an article but you want to be critical in selecting the media you use.

Below we will look at paid ads versus earned press, their criteria and options

Paid ads:

Goal:

A paid ad should never be just a spontaneous idea induced by a salesperson. The choice for placing a paid ad should be part of an advertising/communication plan that you should have for your company. Such a plan includes a budget that you want to spend and many other issues that we will not deal with in this article. However if your advertising/communication plan calls for a paid ad then it should be determined what you want to achieve with the ad. This can be awareness for your company, a special offer that you have, drawing people to your website etc. The definition of your goal together with other criteria will determine whether paid ad in a certain publication is efficient.

The main issue of this part is: know what you want to achieve with your ad!

Audience/ target:

One of the most important questions you need to ask yourself is “who will read this?” Ask a publisher for detailed information about the audience / reader base. If you cannot get a clear answer on this it may indicate that this publication does not track their readers and it cannot give a reasonable idea who may read your ad. In the diving business the most obvious choice for advertisement is a dive related magazine since you may want to communicate with divers. However you may also consider water sport related publications since people who do not dive yet may be found in people who already like outdoor activities and have an affinity with water in general. If you have a high end resort your audience could be high end income customers so this may lead you to a different publication

The main issue of this part is: know who you want to target!

Distribution:

Distribution in this context refers to where people may find the publication with your ad. It is one of the most important questions you need to ask yourself together with another one. "if a potential customer reads your ad, has he/she made up his mind yet and/or is it possible to adapt to your offer". For example a brochure in on the ferry or in a visitors office may be fine for a B&B or hotel, but may be less for an outdoor activity. Most visitors to BC have done Internet research and have determined already what to do and where they want to go. In the case of overseas visitors they can be up to a year and a half ahead! So ask "what is the distribution in terms of numbers, and where". There are magazines that have monthly issues to subscribed reader and in addition quarterly or other planned extra additions. This can be a seasonal travel/ lifestyle issue or e.g. Northwest Dive News an edition that goes national to all dive shops in North America.

The main issue of this part is: know where your ad goes!

Media:

The more traditional publication are typically printed media such as magazines, newspapers etc. With a targeted, well defined audience they are still a viable option for a paid ad. The other option is digital media, mostly internet or promotional CDs, DVDs or TV and radio. There are a lot of Internet sites that allow you free links to your site. If you subscribe monitor how many hits you get on your own site from these sites. This way you get an idea how effective they are before considering a paid ad. The advantages of websites are that there is world wide access to the site, no time zone issues, multiple expose (an ad in a printed publication is usually a one time deal), and you can monitor the effectiveness easier. Just make sure that you pay for a plan you understand. Sometimes it is a flat rate for a certain time but other times they have pay per click, per hit etc. Be very careful with these types of schemes. TV programs and radio are fine for special events. Unless you have a well-defined ad on a local radio station it is a relative expensive medium. One of the cheapest and most effective ways to get your name out is car-stickers. The cost is low and the number of potential exposures is enormous.

The main issue of this part is: choose a media that meets your needs!

Repetition versus 1 time:

Consider the need and effectiveness of a ad that is published one time versus and number of times. The choice is partly determined by the type of medium you choose. E.g. a magazine may be read multiple times and the reader may keep it for future reference. TV is typically a medium for multiple ads. It is a very, very costly medium and the success of an ad depends on time of airing, the main program during which your ad is seen etc. For diving TV is generally a too expensive option. Depending on the magazine they may offer discounts if you have you ad in their publication regularly. If you are new in the business multiple ads, combined with other approaches, can help in establishing your name. However realize that ads alone cannot and will not be enough.

The main issue of this part is: know what is appropriate for the number of ads!

Stand alone versus context:

Try to ensure that your ad has the most effect and try to assess if there is an article that features your area or an editorial about diving. If so see if your ad can be placed next to the article. Your ad will always make more sense in a proper context.

The main issue of this part is: Ensure maximum effectiveness of your ad!

Additional services:

Many magazines have websites and digital directories that feature names of and links to advertisers. Make sure that you negotiate these services if they exist. You may want to ask a digital copy of an ad for your own website although some publishers don't do this in order to prevent you taking the ad elsewhere.

The main issue of this part is: always ask for potential additional services!

Cost versus benefit:

This is probably the hardest part of your decision. Salesmen of ads always tell you that it makes sense to give a couple of hundred dollars. Unless you have done proper research in to what the publication may do for you, you have no way of telling what you get for the money. There are various criteria you can use to find out the success of your ad. Increase number of sales, inquiries are a few. Always compare the same period so you are not fooled by seasonal influences. Nowadays website hosting companies can give you very detailed information about who goes to your site, where they come from, what they look at etc. You can also place a "code" in your ad that the readers must mention if they want to use e.g. a special offer. That way you have a direct measurement of the ad's impact. Make sure you get the most out of that. It will help you decide for any future placements.

The main issue of this part is: ensure you measure the success of the ad!

Earned press:

As the name indicates this is press that you have "earned" either by sponsoring a writer / photographer or by what the media picked up on your business. There are obvious advantages to this type of exposure. The writer (rightly or wrongly) usually has a perceived image of being unbiased and that increases the credibility of the article. An article can cover more information and aspects of your business.

However you must be selective in whom you sponsor. Let's look at some aspects you may want to consider when approached to sponsor an article.

The publication:

When a writer/ journalist or photographer asks for you to sponsor an article, you want to make sure what they want and whether the article they are writing is sure to be published. Ask for whom they write and make sure you are happy with the publication the article will appear in. Freelance writers sometimes write articles because they happen to be in an area for another article and then try to sell the article afterwards. In this case you are not even sure that the article is published. If the article is published ask for a "pdf" file copy so you can reprint it and use it for your business promotion. Usually you have a better exposure if the article appears on the Internet. However an article in a dive magazine has a very targeted audience.

The main issue of this part is: make sure that you know that you get published and where / how!

The writer / photographer:

If a certain writer photographer or journalist approaches you it is a good idea to ask for or to read up on a number of articles that this person has had published. This way you can better assess the style of writing. You can also ask sponsors of previous articles if they were happy with the deal and if there was a measurable success. See if all the articles seem the same of if there is a fresh approach. Are there obvious errors? Does the writer understand the matter that he/she writes about? etc. If photos are use make sure that you understand what your possibilities are to use them for your company. In many cases you can negotiate that you have free use of the photos for your business.

The main issue of this part is: know who the writer/photographer!

The article:

Make sure you understand very well what the article is about and how you appear in it. If you are to give away free diving/ charters/ stay etc. you want to understand exactly to what extend you will be in the article. Realize that an editor may sometimes change the article of a writer slightly. However you there have been examples of businesses paying for stay, services for writers that ended up with a small line between all other colleagues that were mentioned. There is nothing wrong with an article mentioning various businesses but if you carry the burden alone and get no worth out of it you may want to reconsider

The main issue of this part is: know what the deal is going to be!

Cost versus benefit:

The very obvious benefit of earned press is you know and influence the cost upfront. You could get a lot of exposure for the cost compared to a paid ad. Depending in what publication / media it will appear earned press can took you a long way.

The main issue of this part is: ensure you measure the success of the ad!