



## Observer

# Does A Publicist Make It Taste Better?

Here's what you should mull over when you consider hiring a p.r. firm for your restaurant.

**W**hether we realize it or not, we are all publicists. We represent and promote ourselves and our businesses every time we interact with other people. The image we project is our brand, and our brand dictates how customers feel about our products and services.

In any industry, but particularly in the restaurant/hospitality market, a powerful brand is the key to long-term success especially in a highly competitive market.

Public relations is not just for large organizations. In the long run it's far less costly and often more effective than print or broadcast advertising. A publicist can help build and/or cement a brand, but you must sustain it. Today, the steak is just as important as the sizzle.

Public relations is often harder than it looks. It is a full-time job to promote a business, develop and run events and garner coverage. Only try this in-house if you have the right staff with the right contacts who can manage the effort while you run your day-to-day business. Otherwise, the following questions should help you navigate the public relations' selection process.

### 1. How do you know if hiring a publicist is right for you?

Every situation, like every restaurant, is different. Public relations combined with marketing and advertising should be an integral, ongoing part of a restaurant's business strategy. If you're looking for a few quick placements, take out an ad; a publicist is not the answer.

Typically, companies engage a publicist to expand their audience and fatten the bottom line. Other reasons include launching a new facility; renewing interest for an existing establishment; promoting a renovation; hyping a new chef; unveiling revamped menus; promoting the owner; attracting and sustaining employees; appealing to investors; and even generating industry buzz before a business is sold.

### 2. Does location matter?

A good publicist does not need to work in your town. He or she could be in Maine and your restaurant in Alaska. They could work alone or for a big

agency. When you hire a publicist, you're paying for the person's ability to understand and project your image to their contacts, as well as someone who fits your budget. Choose someone who has had results in a situation similar to yours.

### 3. Exactly what can a hired gun do for you?

A publicist provides expertise and keeps your information fresh and top of mind. Good ones can present ideas, take those thoughts and parlay them into well-placed coverage that will enhance your operation. Publicists are information brokers and act as your link to the media as well as the public. The pros understand your business and have good relationships with the press. In the event of a crisis, a publicist can advise the owners and make sure a trained spokesperson interacts with the media.

### 4. How do you choose the right fit?

First, decide what you can afford. A sole practitioner will be less costly than an agency. On the flip side, an agency will be more expensive but often works as a team that can address issues more efficiently than a publicist working solo.

Other tips: Select a publicist with proven experience in the industry. Be realistic when outlining your goal. Make sure a campaign will be tailored to your needs.

Like any relationship, chemistry is important. Hire a person or an agency with an approach that makes you feel comfortable. One good way to accomplish this is to ask the prospective agency how they would tackle a specific issue.

### 5. What are the ingredients for success?

The best way to make a splash is to be different. Start with a well-written press kit. Make your information stand out by using a colored rather than a white folder. White disappears in a sea of papers on a journalist's desk—a fate as unpleasant as the circular file.

Photography enhances a press kit, but does more for the national press than local outlets who can easily visit your restaurant. If money is tight, skip the photos initially.

Be flexible. Interview requests and/or photo ops often come with very little notice. Deliver what you promise. If a release touts a certain dish, make sure it's

on the menu. Above all never ever lie to the public or the press.

### 6. How much does it cost?

Rates vary depending upon both the publicist's location and that of the restaurant (rural vs. city); size of agency; level of expertise; amount of time per month dedicated to your restaurant, etc. Expect to spend anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000 per month plus expenses. It is not unusual to pay an upfront retainer of one to two months upon executing a contract. Food and/or restaurant shots will incur additional charges. To avoid any surprises, ask specific questions about "extras" before signing on the dotted line. In order for a campaign to generate results, a minimum commitment of six months to a year is normally required.

In case a separation is necessary, make sure the contract has a cancellation clause.

### 7. Is it worth the investment?

Public relations is sometimes hard to evaluate. Plenty of behind-the-scenes work goes into a campaign before anyone hears about it. Publicists spend time planning strategies, developing events, writing copy, and pitching. These activities take countless hours. Be patient.

Favorable reviews are sure to spike business as are interesting events.

The events, personalities and promotions you can create and own are the most exciting. Some ongoing promotions with guaranteed coverage my agency has invented include; an annual Bastille Day celebration for a French restaurant; a Sephardic seder for a family-style Italian restaurant; sous chef for a day for a four-star hotel dining room; and a riverfront clambake.

It's a slow and steady climb to reach the top and stay there, but it only takes an instant to tumble to the bottom. A good publicist can point out potential problems, avoid pitfalls along the way and expose you to a whole new world filled with tasty opportunities.

—Roberta Hershon

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