



How to Build a Stronger Brand Image through Public Relations

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Inside, You'll Learn How To:

- Establish a Brand Your Customers Will Identify With
- Use Public Relations to Build Brand Loyalty
- Brand Without Breaking the Bank
- Choose a Branding Team That's Right for You

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What Is A Brand Anyway?

The term “branding” is a pretty common word in business circles these days, but if you’re not involved in advertising, marketing or public relations, I wouldn’t be surprised if you find its meaning to be a bit hazy.

One person might claim that a company’s logo is its brand. Another might insist that you can’t have a real brand without a slogan. Still another might assert that branding is about communicating the company’s mission.

These are all components of a brand, but they don’t capture the whole package. Not by a long shot.

In reality, a brand is much more than a single image or string of words. A brand is not tangible. A successful brand lives in the minds and hearts of your customers. It is all of the things they think of when they think of your company or your product.

Almost anything can be branded – manufactured goods, a service, a location, even a person. Elvis. Paris Hilton. Amsterdam. Las Vegas. iPod. Rolex. Fed-Ex. Kleenex. And one which I’ve been working on for years - - Maine. These are all established brands. For most people, they bring very specific images to mind.

The most successful brands hold a powerfully positive position within our psyche.

Case Study #1: The Walt Disney Company

Think Disney. What immediately comes to mind? For me, it is family values, happiness, quality, a place where fantasies come to life.

Disney is one of the world’s most recognizable brands. The company started with a good product that had strong appeal: Wholesome entertainment that enables the young and young at heart to enter a world of fantasy.

The company built, and continues to build, its brand through an integrated approach utilizing advertising, marketing and public relations.

Do you remember the “We’re Going to Disneyland” TV ads featuring Superbowl MVPs and other sports stars? This long-running ad campaign created a lot of excitement for the Disney brand. Or how about the 10-year exclusive marketing partnership Disney forged with McDonald’s in 1995, enabling Disney to promote its brand and the products associated with it in 30,000-plus McDonald’s restaurants?

The company has also been very successful in utilizing public relations to generate coverage for the Disney brand. Since the opening of its first theme park in the early ‘70s, it has treated reporters to a VIP preview of new parks, rides and other offerings through a special media day. These events attract hundreds of journalists from around the world and generate lots of press coverage.

The strength of the Disney brand has helped the company successfully ride out the storm during turbulent times. You might remember the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad accident in 2003, or the French people’s condemnation of Euro Disney when it first opened in the early ‘90s, or most recently, the downfall of Michael Eisner. Thanks to savvy crisis management and its Teflon-like brand, the company’s image and bottom line sustained no long-term damage despite the negative media coverage generated by these events.

Everybody Needs a Brand

Nike. Starbucks. Target. Victoria's Secret. John Deere. American Express.

These major companies have established a strong bond with their customers through branding. Each company has created a brand identity that has connected it with its target market through a shared ideology or system of beliefs. The brands have staying power because the companies consistently deliver on the promises made through the brand.

But you don't need to be a corporate giant to benefit from branding. All companies need a brand strategy – whether you are a small business manufacturing product for a local market or a start-up firm with the long-term goal of going global.

Sometimes, a winning brand strategy can actually earn small companies with small budgets a place at the table with the big guys. Ben & Jerry's started out in a converted garage with a \$12,000 investment and strong brand appeal in the late '70s. This small business with a large following was acquired by Unilever for \$326 million in 2000, and Ben & Jerry's ice cream is now available around the world.

Over the past 20 plus years, I have worked with large and small companies in many different types of industries – manufacturing, communications, tourism, economic development, outdoor recreation, hospitality, and food service, to name a few. As a PR practitioner, nothing makes my job easier than a management team that understands the value of establishing a cohesive, consistent and unique company identity that accurately portrays what the company has to offer its customers.

Whether you are competing on a local or global scale, having a great product is no longer enough. There are lots of great products. And because there are more products to choose from, the customer's expectations are higher. Furthermore, we are constantly bombarded with promotional messages, so it's much harder to capture the cus-

Case Study #2: The Cola Wars

Without branding, all colas would be perceived exactly the same. Brown, syrupy liquid -- not visually appealing. Branding is what gives colas their identity.

Packaging comes into play. Taste tests are held to position one brand against the other. Brand messages are tailored to appeal to very specific target audiences.

Coke reached out to racing fans by establishing Coca-Cola® Classic as the Official Soft Drink of NASCAR. Generation Y was the target in the recent Pepsi commercial that featured rap mogul P. Diddy. In the commercial, P. Diddy hitches a ride to an awards show in a Pepsi truck. Soon, all sorts of celebrities popular with the Generation Y crowd are following suit with their own decked-out versions of Pepsi truck transportation.

The cola wars are proof that branding works. Think about it – even non-cola drinkers can distinguish between the Coke and Pepsi brands. Some cola drinkers are so loyal to one brand or the other that they will only drink their brand of choice, even if they have a mighty thirst and the competing brand is the only thing in the fridge.

On a more localized level, Moxie soda is a great example of how good branding can generate a fiercely loyal following for your product. Moxie is a distinctively flavored soda concocted in the 1870s. The cola was heavily marketed in New England in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the State of Maine, its popularity stuck. Over 100 years later, Moxie still enjoys a wide cult-like following. Many Mainers firmly believe its name embodies the spirit of the state's residents: spunky, gritty and determined. There is a Moxie Festival held in Maine every summer. Car bumper stickers proudly proclaim, "Moxie Makes Mainers Mighty." In 2005, Moxie was made the official state soft drink. How's that for brand loyalty?

tomers' attention. You can no longer sit back and wait for the customers to come to you.

You have to establish a distinctive identity – like a thumbprint – in the minds of your customers. Find what is unique and different about what you have to offer – something your customers will relate to – and then use it to set yourself apart from the competition.

And creating a successful brand doesn't have to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Targeted public relations, an important component of brand-building, is cost effective and has proven to be a very effective means of generating excitement about our clients' identities.

Case Study #3: Madison Business Gateway

Business parks are everywhere. All tout the same qualities: the best location, the best mix of services, and the lowest cost of doing business. So how do you set your business park apart from the rest? You guessed it: Branding.



- A slogan: "The Power for Success Comes with a Beautiful View"
- A logo resembling a mountain vista and a surge of electricity

Nancy Marshall

Communications started working with Madison Business Gateway, a 55-acre business park in rural Maine, in 2002.

The business park is surrounded by beautiful mountains and pristine lakes. Some of New England's best spots for outdoor recreation are literally right at its doorstep. The area has a very low crime rate, housing is very affordable, and the public school system is excellent. The key differentiating factor to this business park? There's a municipally-owned electric company located at the entryway to the park. Electric costs are the lowest in New England due to the nature of the municipal electric company.

In doing research for the Madison Business Gateway branding effort, we determined that quality of life was an important factor, but it was the low electric rates that would grab the attention of the number crunchers.

We had the basis for our brand. Our target audience valued quality of life, and they were looking for a cost-effective location for their business. We began assembling an arsenal of promotional tools to convey the Madison Business Gateway brand:



- Advertisements conveying a feeling of family and community in an affordable setting
- Quality of life testimonials told by real people living and working in the area
- Commercials, aired on a local ski resort's cable station, targeted at business executives vacationing in Maine
- A Web site and promotional booklet that reinforced the core messages of the brand

Brand building takes time, particularly when it comes to a competitive field like commercial real estate. However, the effort is paying off. In 2005, Madison Business Gateway welcomed its first major tenant and signed a letter of intent with a commercial greenhouse company.

The greenhouse company plans to make a \$20 million capital investment in the area and create approximately 75 new jobs. Their operation requires a huge amount of electricity, and it was the brand message about the low-cost electricity that attracted them to Madison. This project is expected to have a significant economic impact on the region and will help a mill town to reinvent itself for the future.

The Integrated Approach to Brand Building

Advertising, marketing, and public relations are all part of building a strong and sustainable brand. When all three tactics are used together, you can hit your target market from all angles.

Advertising is buying space – on television, in a newspaper, on-line, on a billboard, etc. – to promote a product.

Marketing is about making sure that you're meeting your customers' needs and getting value in return. Marketing initiatives include market research, pricing, promotions, and sales.

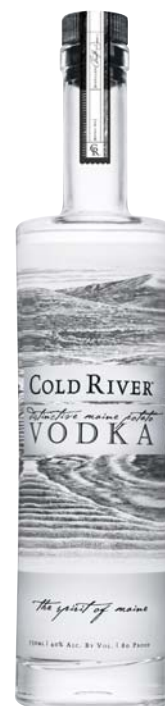
Public relations helps the public understand a company and its products. PR allows you to tell your story in a thorough and authentic way. It helps a company achieve 'transparency,' which is what customers demand in today's economy. Working to generate positive media coverage is a big part of public relations. Stories in the media are like third-party testimonials, and people are more likely to believe what they read in a news story than in an advertisement.

Case Study #4: Cold River Vodka

Brothers Lee and Donnie Thibodeau grew up in the heart of Maine's potato country listening to their family talk about turning potatoes into vodka.

In 2002, as they were driving back to their childhood home, the idea resurfaced. Donnie, whose father taught him about the potato business, and Lee, a Maine neurosurgeon, decided the time was right to explore the possibility of commercially producing potato vodka.

Soon, the concept for Maine Distilleries, LLC, Maine's first distillery, began to take shape. The Thibodeaus, along with their strategic business partners Bob Harkins and Chris Dowe, named their product "Cold River Vodka" after the river from which the distillery would take its water.



After spending nearly three years on product development, the Thibodeaus contracted with the creative partnership of Briggs ADV of Bath, Maine and Nancy Marshall Communications to create a distinctive brand for the vodka.

The popularity of super premium vodka brands was soaring. But, with the vast number of vodkas already on the market, the creative team knew they had to establish a very unique niche for the new Maine potato vodka if it was to succeed.

The hook was a no-brainer. Maine already possessed a solid brand image, and there were strong parallels between the Maine mystique and the Maine Distilleries product.

The vodka would be 100 percent Maine-made, using pure Maine water and Maine potatoes. It would be made by a family who had lived and worked in the state for generations. Maine's scenic western mountains provided the backdrop for the family farm.

Also, Maine has long been considered a wellspring of creativity for artisans. Maine Distilleries, LLC would be a small artisan distillery – a new addition to Maine's traditional cottage industries.

It was decided that the creative team would leverage the power of the Maine brand to establish a name for the Maine-made vodka.

If you have the resources to use the integrated approach to brand building, advertising, marketing and public relations should have an equal place at the table when formulating your strategy. The whole creative team should work together to develop the key messages and images that will compose the brand for your product or service. Each brings a different area of expertise to the table, and their combined knowledge will help develop a sound brand image that will resonate with all target audiences across a broad spectrum of mediums.

Marketing establishes who your customer is and what makes them tick.

Once the framework for the brand is established, public relations starts the buzz going prior to the roll-out.

Marketing devises the packaging that's going to make your brand stand out from the rest and communicates directly with potential customers to promote it.

Public relations and marketing work together to devise innovative promotional materials and a cutting-edge Web site that will catch and keep your

Cold River Vodka

Briggs ADV, Nancy Marshall Communications and the Maine Distilleries team set to work on building the brand from the ground up. Open lines of communication and collaboration throughout the process ensured that the messages and imagery were consistent throughout the marketing, advertising and public relations aspects of the brand strategy.

A slogan was developed to reinforce the Maine connection. "The Spirit of Maine" was used consistently throughout the campaign on all promotional materials including packaging, publicity materials, and advertising.

Maine Distilleries set the price point at \$31.99 a bottle, comparable to top-selling super premiums such as Grey Goose and Belvedere. All promotional pieces and packaging were designed with a classic look and feel to reinforce an image of exceptional quality.

The long-term goal was national distribution, but the product would initially be distributed in Maine and New Hampshire only for quality control purposes and to reach out to the regions where the vodka would have the greatest initial brand appeal.

An exclusive bottle design, created by Maine artist Bruce Hutchison, tied together all elements of the brand with its depiction of the Cold River flowing out of the mountains and meandering through potato fields. Elements of the artwork were carried through on the Web site, in the press kit, and on the invitations to the first tasting.

Before the invitations to the first tasting were even sealed, Briggs ADV launched a beautiful Web site for the brand at www.coldrivervodka.com. Nancy Marshall Communications worked with the media to create a buzz about the product far beyond its initial distribution area. The brand began to catch on immediately.

An Associated Press story that appeared over a month before the official November 2005 first tasting reiterated the messages that were at the heart of the brand. Other articles appeared in the Boston Globe Sunday Magazine, and stories ran on every Maine TV station. In early November 2005, Nancy Marshall Communications helped the

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Hot potato

Two Maine brothers boost the humble spud to new heights - as high-end Cold River vodka.



By MEREDITH GOAD
Informer

Three years ago, Lee and Donnie Thibodeau were driving up to Presque Isle to be with their father, who was having rotator cuff surgery.

In the car, as they usually did when they traveled together, they began talking around ideas for small business projects they could work on as a team. Five potato vodka. Head estate. Food labels. Potato alcohol. Consider cooling systems.

beer over vodka, or maybe a little wine. "I don't think I've ever had a vodka in my life up until probably three years ago," he said.

That was about the time they walked into their parents' house and said, "Hey Mom, we're thinking about doing potato vodka." As Lee recalls, she replied, "Boys, you don't want to do that. That's not right."

"And Dad said, 'Audrey, leave them alone. It's good for the potato industry,'" Thibodeau recalled.

Masters who haven't been living under a rock the past few months know

only one other producer of potato alcohol in this country, and the balance is made in Poland and Russia. Some guys aren't talking. It's all very proprietary. Closely held secrets.

So far, the brothers' gamble seems to be paying off. The holiday season of the launch, the media hype, the growing market for super-premium vodkas all created a kind of perfect storm, and the Presque Isle distillery where Cold River is made has been swamped. There have even been some shortages.

Now that the holidays are over, the company is hoping to play a little catch-up on production and get ready for the coming tourist season.

"We're hoping that we can supply the demand at home in Maine over the next several weeks, but our limitation in terms of production is that this is a batch-distilled process," Lee Thibodeau said. "It's very hands-on. Most vodkas are produced with a continuous system through big stainless steel columns. And they can just push, push, push, and increase their production significantly, whereas we can't."

The Cold River system uses copper, which improves taste but slows production down.

FAMILY BUSINESS

The Thibodeaus may not have known much about vodka when they started, but they know a lot about potatoes. Their family has been in the business for about five generations.

The boys grew up in Presque Isle, on and around the potato farms of Arrowsick County. Their father, Lawrence "The Godson, who died last year at age 88, was the youngest person ever to hold a potato broker's license when he opened his own business in Carleton in 1928.

The walls of the gift shop at Maine Distilleries are covered in photos of vintage black-and-white photos of their family's potato operations. Some of the photos go back to the early 20th century.

One taken on an uncle's farm shows beary men unloading barrels of potatoes in a potato house.

Another image, one that's being used to help market Cold

target market's interest and enable them to interact with the brand. They team up again to stage an unforgettable product unveiling event that will generate direct sales as well as tons of glowing media coverage.

The advertising contingent continues the momentum by developing attention-grabbing ads that reinforce the brand image and communicate brand value to the customer. The ads are placed in strategic locations that attract your target market.

After the roll-out strategy is complete, the team continues to work together to ensure communication of the brand remains clear, consistent and constant.

Cold River Vodka

Maine Distilleries team forge a marketing partnership with the four-diamond Harraseeket Inn of Freeport, Maine, to stage a first-class unveiling, inviting key restaurants, liquor purveyors and media to a "first tasting." Cold River Vodka was served neat and in uniquely Maine cocktails, including a blueberry martini made from local wild blueberries. Media guests came from all over the state and New England to test the product and meet the people behind it. As a result, articles in major national magazines are in the works and will be appearing in the months to come.

Because the Cold River Vodka brand image was communicated clearly and consistently, target audiences were able to clearly understand what the product stood for and what specific value it held for them.

Since the first pour, the demand for the product has been overwhelming. In fact, Maine Distilleries has been working hard to keep up with the demand and has literally sold out on several occasions.

The creative team continues to work to penetrate markets beyond New England in anticipation of the product's increased distribution.



Public Relations: The MVP

When it comes to the brand-building game, public relations is your star quarterback. You need marketing and advertising to run the ball, but you won't make the touchdown without PR.

Advertising and marketing are great when it comes to reinforcing a brand, but PR is the most important player when it comes to building brand affinity.

PR gives a brand substance by telling its story. PR lets you get down to the who, what, where, when and why – little nuggets of information that people will remember and relate to.

When I find a product or service I connect with, I want to tell everyone about it. The people that work in my agency are the same way. The best place to buy shoes, the hottest new movie, a great new restaurant . . . we tell our friends, they tell their friends, and so on. That's what PR is really all about – creating a buzz. Good PR gets people talking.

With advertising and marketing, you control 100 percent of the message 100 percent of the time. With PR, you relinquish control over exactly what will be said.

This distinction is exactly what makes PR such a powerful tool when it comes to establishing credibility in the mind of the customer. People are skeptical about claims made in ads and marketing materials because they are subjective. With PR, the information is coming through an objective third party that does not have to endorse your message – the media. This builds trust.

There are many ways to get the news out to the media – press releases, pitch letters, video news releases. A skilled PR practitioner generates “hits” (what we call media coverage in the world of public relations) by offering the media useful, newsworthy information. The media, in turn, uses that information to develop editorial. A “hit” might consist of a brief mention or possibly an entire story on your product or service.

When it comes to successful PR, the bottom line is that the information has to have value to the journalist you are pitching and their readers. If your brand value is strong, identifying newsworthy story ideas will be a piece of cake.

PR's power to increase brand affinity can build a strong foundation for sales and advertising efforts. Because people have seen your company's message in the media, they are more likely to remember it and be receptive to it when they see it promoted in another medium.

For companies with a shoestring branding budget, using public relations to get the ball rolling is the best approach. With public relations, there are no media buys or large production costs to contend with. And because editorial copy is far more believable than a controlled message, media coverage will generate a strong return on investment.

Major companies like Starbucks and JetBlue Airways initially fueled their campaigns through public relations exclusively. Today, they are worldwide brands that employ a triage of marketing, advertising and public relations to continue the momentum.

What to Look For In a Brand-Building Team

Even if you have an in-house communications staff, it's a good idea to look to the outside for input because it will give you a fresh perspective and enable you to tap into the knowledge of creative professionals who have real-time branding experience.

But there are many agencies out there today promoting themselves as brand building experts. How do you select the right one for your company?

Word of mouth is the best place to start. I would suggest talking with your peers in the business community to determine who they have worked with and who they would be willing to work with again.

Also, start taking note of other brand building campaigns that catch your eye. Is there a particular ad that really stuck in your mind? Is there a new product or service that jumps out at you from the editorial pages every time you pick up a magazine? Make note of these things, and research the creative teams behind them.

Now it's time to narrow the search. Contact the agencies individually to determine which can best fulfill your needs. You may choose to interview the agencies informally or issue a "Request for Proposal" -- a formal request for competitive bids that outlines your specifications for the project. Before you start the process, be sure to have a budget and timeline in mind.

If you are looking for a full-service creative team, don't nix more specialized agencies that seem to be a good fit. It's likely that these smaller agencies have partnerships with equally capable firms concentrating in the other tactics you'd like to utilize.

However you plan to tackle the selection process, it is critical that you meet face-to-face with all of the agencies you are considering. Synergy between company leadership and the creative team is critical to the innovative process. The only way you can tell if you have the right chemistry to make it work is to get together with the individuals that would be handling the account.

During the interview process, here are a few things to consider:

- **Is the team capable of thinking outside of the box?**
Remember, successful brands grab attention. Ask about creative projects they've executed for other clients. Do they devise new, different and innovative approaches for every project, or does the team tend to stick to the same formula for every client, regardless of the product or service they are promoting?
- **Are they excited about it?**
Is the team passionate about your product or service? Can they really get behind your brand vision? If they are truly motivated and energized by the opportunity you've presented them, they are going to do the best job possible in framing up your brand.

- **Do they have a strong network of contacts?**
Contacts are critical, particularly in public relations, where the media is much more likely to return your call if they know it's going to result in a good story idea. Contacts are also important when it comes to setting up cross-promotions and getting key groups to endorse your product or service. Ask the team about their media contacts, what other businesses they have partnered with in the past, and if they have connections to any VIPs or government officials that might be useful when it comes time to launch your brand.
- **Do they have the right experience for the job?**
First and foremost, you want to establish that the candidate has real branding experience. Also, what types of industries have they worked with in the past? Ideally, you want to select a group that has direct experience working in your particular niche market. However, it's equally important to consider the variety of industries they've worked with. A team that has worked in a number of sectors, instead of specializing in just one, will be able to draw from the breadth of their experience to structure a truly unique and innovative brand strategy.
- **Do they have staying power?**
How long has the creative team been in business? A well-established agency or group of agencies – those that have been in operation for at least five years – will have a greater knowledge base and much greater access to the resources you will need to execute your brand. Staying power is also a very good indication that the team knows how to do its job and do it well.
- **Do they have the capacity to handle the account?**
Some agencies make the mistake of biting off more than they can chew when an exciting new account is offered to them. Make sure each group you interview has the staff time available to fully meet your needs. Establish how much time each member of the team will be able to designate to your account. It's also important to ensure that your branding strategy will be managed by a senior-level account executive, and that you will have ready access to that person whenever you have questions or concerns.

The Brand Litmus Test

OK. You've chosen your creative team, and they've presented you with a brand concept. You're about to invest a significant portion of your marketing budget in rolling it out. You like the look and feel of the brand, but how can you be sure that it will resonate with your customers? Will it establish an emotional connection between brand and consumer -- the key to establishing a powerhouse brand?

Here are a few questions to ask yourself, and your team, before taking that final step.

1. Does the brand communicate something new or different?

Does your brand convey a message that will make customers say, "Hey, now that's unique. I want to check that out." Think about Crest Whitestrips®. Proctor and Gamble became the first to introduce an over-the counter teeth whitening product in 2001. Soon, many other competing products began turning up on store shelves, but P&G still had the advantage because they did it first.

2. Will your customers perceive value in your brand?

If customers perceive brand value, they'll become eager buyers. For example, Old Navy and Chanel both sell clothing, but their customers – and their branding efforts – are very different. Both are successful because when it comes to clothing, they know what is most important to their respective markets. They convey the affinity through branding.

3. Can you live up to the brand promise?

A customer might try a product initially because of something he or she saw on television or read in the paper, but if it doesn't do what it says it does, they'll never buy it again. And word of mouth works both ways: You can bet they're going to tell people about the bad experience. Brand credibility is easy to lose and next to impossible to regain. Make sure that you can live up to all of your brand statements.

4. Are you targeting your market?

Mass marketing is a thing of the past. Now, it's all about niche marketing. Niche marketing is particularly important if you are launching a branding strategy on a limited budget. Marketing specifically to your target market will give you a much bigger bang for your buck. For example, if your brand involves organic pet products, sponsoring an animal rescue program will build greater brand affinity than an ad placed in the sports section of your local newspaper. Likewise, if you are launching a new brand of running shoe, working to earn media placements in running magazines should be the priority when it comes to public relations.

5. Is everyone on the same page?

Do the goals of the marketing and advertising correspond with the goals of public relations? Though each facet of the creative team is responsible for different parts of the branding effort, all of the pieces must match up if brand consistency is to be achieved. Advertising, marketing and public relations efforts must run parallel. They should be targeting the same markets and communicating the same messages.

Concluding Thoughts

Branding is a long-term investment. It will take time to build a dedicated following for your product or service. However, if you are successful, your brand will become your most important business asset.

Establishing a strong brand ensures that you will have to invest less in promotional initiatives in the long term. Once you have a loyal following, it's all about maintaining the integrity of the brand and continuing the momentum. Following a consistent branding strategy means you won't have to create a whole new promotional campaign every time you develop a new product or expand. You've already got the ball rolling.

A strong brand will also help you recover should your company ever face a crisis. If you have consistently lived up to your brand promise, you have established trust. That trust, a crisis management plan and a willingness to communicate openly with the public are the tools you will need to steer your business through.

All companies need a brand identity. Competition for market share is increasing across all industry sectors, so businesses of all sizes must be proactive in promoting what unique value they offer to their customers. While a strategy that incorporates the principles of public relations, marketing and advertising is the most comprehensive approach, many new and growing businesses simply do not have the resources to launch a full-scale branding effort.

The good news is public relations can build a strong foundation for your brand without breaking the bank. The trust and brand affinity that can be established through a well-targeted public relations campaign will make the public much more receptive to marketing initiatives and advertising placements as your bottom line grows and you are able to move forward with the next stages of brand development.

It has worked for big names like Starbucks, Red Bull, The Body Shop, and JetBlue, and it can work for you.

Resources:

<http://www.brandchannel.com>

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