

Spa Publicity

By L. Brooks Baldwin

Publicity is the life's blood of your spa business. Without it—unless you're the only game in town—you take a back seat on the road to success. With it, you take an assertive leap into the front and begin to control your spa's destiny.

Spa owners who pay little heed to the value of publicity usually point to a lack of time, resources and expertise. However, even the most random and accidental media reference can result in a surge of activity within a spa. Benefits include increased client base, a boost in staff confidence, increased recruiting exposure and the potential for further coverage.

Photography By
Brooks Ayola



The clean and consistent theme of this press kit from Advanced Skin Care Day Spa in New York City makes it easy to read and remember.

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With very few exceptions, any positive media coverage will benefit your spa. However, garnering the most valuable publicity requires a strategic approach. The first decision to be made is whether publicity will be handled in-house or by a hired publicist or agency. Here, the experts differ:

Gary Chang, owner of Aqua Day Spa in Santa Monica, California, believes that unless someone on your staff has experience and contacts within the media, in-house publicity won't be worth the effort. “Public relations and marketing are time-consuming, and expending time at the expense of your clients will jeopardize the growth of your business,” says Chang, who decided early on to hire a public relations agency.

Kathleen Bucci Bergeron, part owner and marketing partner of suburban Chicago's Asha SalonSpa, points out that a public relations agency may not always be a good investment. The agency will provide media contacts, but if your spa fails to provide a press-worthy product, or neglects to work closely with the agency in pursuing

publicity goals, little or no publicity will result. “A public relations firm is entirely dependent upon the spa to generate fresh, newsworthy ideas and events, and above all, to consistently provide its clientele with a valuable, high-quality product,” agrees Randy Currie, owner of Currie Hair•Skin•Nails, a large full-service day spa and salon located in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Larry Oskin, owner of Fairfax, Virginia-based Marketing Solutions, a highly specialized publicity and marketing agency in the beauty industry, suggests that spas consider hiring a freelance publicist rather than an agency to help them keep within the spa's budget, image and comfort zone.

To locate freelance specialists in the beauty and wellness industry, Oskin advises seeking freelance authors of beauty and spa articles in local newspapers and magazines. These authors will likely be familiar with the spa industry and have established media contacts in desirable markets. Simply contact the publication and request a referral to the specific author.

If your spa is inclined to keep publicity in-house, consider hiring a dedicated PR specialist as a member of your spa staff. Just like hotel and resort spas, well-established day spas can have marketing and media relations specialists on staff.

Publicity Planning

These are the necessary steps for creating a successful publicity plan:

1. Develop your spa image. “Once you've decided how your publicity needs will be met, the focus should shift toward how you desire the public to perceive your spa,” says Nancy Trent, owner of New York City-based

The exotic Asian services and décor of Elemis Spa at the Aladdin in Las Vegas are echoed in this striking press package.



Trent & Company Public Relations. “What would you like the media to be saying about your spa?” she asks.

Consider how you can create an identity for your spa that distinguishes it from the competition. Take into account any unique aspects of your spa such as treatment specialties or specialists, unique spa design or architecture, or an unusual business goal or standard. Make these aspects the centerpiece of your publicity plan.

2. Determine who your audience will be. “Knowing your audience is fundamental for any PR campaign,” emphasizes Trent. Note where clients live, their professions and the magazines they read; incorporate the information into the plan. The idea is to introduce your spa into as much media as you can within your target audience.

3. Set goals. “Your publicity plan should consist of a series of publicity

goals, perhaps 5 to 10, that you intend your spa to meet within a calendar year,” advises Oskin. Make certain the goals are consistent with your spa’s image. Oskin further recommends that the goals be spread out throughout the year, with particular focus on seasons and holidays. Try to promote every individual area of your spa over the course of the year.

4. Create a timetable. “Once you have your goals listed on the calendar, back up at least three to six months from each date to establish the date on which the media should be contacted,” says Oskin. Most media, especially print, require several months to consider, develop and assign a story, much less have it written and put into print. Late-breaking stories rarely receive coverage, except in daily or weekly newspapers.

Chang’s publicity plan was effectively predated to Aqua Day Spa’s February 2000 opening. “Five months prior to the opening, we ran ads in *Los Angeles Magazine* monthly because of its high local distribution, content and clientele. Three months prior to the opening, we hired a PR firm to develop press kits, gain press and television exposure—and to create a six-month plan of attack,” recalls Chang.

Press Materials

It’s essential that you learn to create effective press releases and press kits for delivery to the media. **Press releases** are fundamental tools for keeping the media apprised of all newsworthy happenings at your spa. The key to a good press release is a combination of excellent writing, concise wording and a compelling subject. Don’t try to create a comprehensive press release that encompasses all the news about your spa. The idea is to highlight one topic per press release.

The Arcona Studio in Valley Village, California, spreads the word with oversized postcards showcasing tempting spa scenes.





A simple, understated press kit brings attention to San Francisco's re:refresh day spa. Images are pleasingly presented on one, clean laser-printed page.

“It takes a good spokesperson to get your spa exposed.”

the background on key players at your spa

- The history of your spa business
- A fact sheet that lists:
 - Physical data (size, no. of treatment rooms, amenities)
 - Treatments
 - Honors and awards
 - Contact information
- Spa menus, brochures and supplemental promotional materials
- Press releases noting newsworthy features about your spa
- A list of story ideas
- Reprints of past media coverage of your spa
- Professional imagery

“When it comes to press kits, first impressions are critical,” declares Oskin. “If the media is to perceive your spa as a high quality subject, your kit must communicate this image.” Oskin suggests hiring a graphic artist to create a logo that’s consistent with your spa’s image, and using the logo on every piece of marketing and publicity material from business cards to menus. High quality paper should be used.

“Photography can be the deciding factor on whether or not your spa is included in an article,” notes Trent. “Editors often choose to feature the spa with great photos over the spa with none.” Professional photography is recommended, but Trent advises the spa to negotiate “buyout rights” allowing it full ownership of the photos. This prevents concerns about future residuals payments and crediting issues. Signed model and staff releases should be required of all photographed individuals. Color imagery is best, with abundant action shots. Once you have great photographs, convert them to a digital

When choosing topics, avoid those your target audience would consider mundane. A likely example is the purchase of your new hydrotherapy tub. While this is big news for your business, your audience is not apt to find it particularly interesting since most of your competitors also have hydro tubs.

Don’t overwhelm your media contacts with a constant flow of press releases. The result will be similar to the one suffered by the boy who cried wolf. Instead, consider sending customized press releases to specific media on a sporadic basis. A press release about your spa’s recent affiliation with a Botox specialist may be hot news for a beauty magazine, but would be tossed in the recycling bin by a travel editor.

Press kits are packages of information designed to communicate to the media your spa’s desired image. They essentially consist of the following:

- A folder to contain the information
- Several business cards
- Bios that identify and provide



Ettia Holistic Day Spa in New York City used its consumer media coverage to create a compelling press package.

so you can make a number of copies on disks to include in each press kit along with color copies of the photos contained on the disk.

Newsworthy Topics

The quickest way to grab the media's attention is to provide news that's compelling to their audience. If you've targeted media whose audience is your spa's desired clientele, you can create customized topics newsworthy to that group. For example, if a significant portion of your desired market is male, an innovative sports treatment designed for men will be a newsworthy topic.

Trent suggests drawing on the expertise of spa staff to create a list of hot topics and "Top 10" and "Best Bets" lists, as well as piggybacking a poll or survey onto major news events or trends.

Currie's spa has had tremendous success in creating wide-ranging media interest by participating in charity fundraising events, such as cut-a-thons

and "Hope Cuts." Aqua Day Spa received desirable coverage in *People*, *The Los Angeles Times* and a variety of entertainment magazines when the spa handed out gift bags at the Grammy awards ceremony. And when Bucci Bergeron paired up her press releases with a grand opening event at Asha that included live music and a martini bar, she suddenly had new friends in the media. Other ideas include unique promotions, giveaways and holiday activities.

Be Prepared

Readiness is key when dealing with the media. There's no quicker way to lose a potential publicity opportunity than to fail to jump when media people call. Alert all spa employees to immediately direct media-related inquiries to the staff member assigned to handle publicity, or to your hired publicity professional. If you miss the initial call, return it immediately; otherwise, it's unlikely you'll receive a second chance. Be prompt in responding to requests for press kits, interviews and appointments.

Have your team ready to talk. "It takes a good spokesperson to get your spa exposed," claims Trent, who recommends that several experts from within your spa be available for interviews. Each spokesperson should be ready with quotable statements for an interesting, informative interview.

Be prepared to host media at your spa. "Call local media and invite them for lunch and treat them to some services," says Oskin. "For national media, you may also have to cover transportation, lodging and meals." If you're promoting your spa as upscale, you should represent it as such and go first class all the way. On a limited budget? Complimentary services don't require out-of-pocket expense and



Dramatic color and design make this press kit from Michael's salon & day spa in Centerville, Ohio, hard to ignore. A CD-ROM holds spa info and images, adding convenience and a modern flair.

Once you've successfully engaged the media's interest, be sure to maximize the benefits.

allow you to act as a gracious host.

Personal thank-you notes should be sent out after each media visit and after receiving any media coverage. Always be polite, even if the coverage you receive is not exactly what you'd desired. The thank-you also provides the opportunity to include a subtle offer to assist again with future stories.

Locating Media

Begin building your media target list with items that are familiar to you. Include local TV and radio producers, lifestyle editors at local newspapers, and editors of local and regional magazines that address your clientele. Also make a

Another valuable directory is the annual *Writer's Market Guide*, which provides magazine editors' names and contact info, circulation and descriptions detailing the stories they seek. This directory is available in hard copy or online.

One of the most effective means of mining for media contacts is to network with your colleagues in the spa industry. Consider becoming a member of an established spa organization such as the International Spa Association (ISPA) (888/651-4772; 859/226-4326, www.experienceispa.com), the Day Spa Association (201/865-2065, www.dayspaassociation.com) or The Salon Association (TSA) (800/211-4TSA, www.salons.org), where you'll find many networking opportunities. Members can also request media leads from these organizations.

Once you've successfully engaged the media's interest, be sure to maximize the benefits. "How you use the media hit after the fact is the most important part," notes Oskin. He makes the following suggestions:

- Reprint articles and quotes of media accolades for use in your press kit and recruitment and marketing materials.
- Frame reprinted articles for display on your spa's "wall of fame."
- Host a party to celebrate a media event. ♦

Publicity vs. Advertising

It's important to note the difference between publicity and advertising:

- **Publicity** is media coverage that is editorial in nature; it involves information based on opinion that's provided to an audience.
- Advertising** is a paid announcement of goods or services for sale.
- **Publicity** is free and the information published is beyond the control of the subject featured. **Advertising** is costly, but the information is completely within the control of the paying subject.
- **Publicity** is given more credibility by consumers because it's based on an outside source's opinion. **Advertising** usually invites a more skeptical reaction due to its self-serving nature.

A healthy mix of publicity and advertising is recommended for best overall exposure of your spa.

wish list; this may include national women's and beauty magazines.

Then, expand your search to less obvious media with the help of directories. Oskin recommends Bacon's Press and Gebbie Press; both have online services as well. Each directory is broken down into media type, location and format.

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