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Working with the media to get the word out about Sarasota County

Published: Monday, September 26, 2011 at 1:00 a.m.

Placing an ad is easy. You decide the message you want to share, select the best publication or outlet in which to place it, and "voila."

You might or might not achieve your desired outcome. This is where the fine art of media buying comes into play -- making sure you put the right message in the right place at the right time. Achieving success in the realm of public relations is another art form altogether.

Public relations, or earned media as we call it in the industry, is where you pitch stories to editorial staff and hope they not only write about what you've pitched to them, but also that they include the messages you desire. Such articles come with the added bonus of having the marketing message come from a reliable and authentic voice -- the writer.

The Sarasota Convention & Visitors Bureau sees so much value in PR that we have a team in place to help us in our efforts. How do we do it? We actively host media (generally media focused on producing travel stories) throughout the year here in Sarasota County. We work closely with these writers to ensure they are actively experiencing Sarasota County.

We pride ourselves on being the experts about the overall destination, but we realize we are not the experts on every individual attraction or venue, so we often arrange for these writers to meet with the owners, artistic directors or marketing teams at interesting places around town.

For example, we recently hosted a staff writer from Dance Magazine. We arranged for her to meet with staff from the Sarasota Ballet, Carreño Dance Festival and Moving Ethos, but also to meet with staff from the Ringling Museum of Art and to experience the culinary offerings of Sarasota, so her article on the destination's dancing scene would also include other aspects of our area, producing a well-rounded piece.

We work with writers both reactively and proactively. From a reactive standpoint, we provide information on the destination, fact check and provide research and a vast array of photography and video to aid those in writing a story about Sarasota County. On the proactive front, we provide

story ideas to journalists -- and even take our stories on the road, visiting travel writers in popular media meccas like New York, London and other targeted cities. Since we do have a small PR team at the SCVB, we rely on assistance from PR firms in New York, London and Germany to help expand our reach to media.

Sarasota County story ideas are created through SCVB staff and partners and through local freelancers to create editorial content, and then we share this information with our PR firms to actively pitch these stories to media all around the world.

The rise of social media has changed the way we work with media. We identify "friends" on the various social media channels and post information about our destination that they then may be interested in publicizing. We also use these social media channels to keep our consumers abreast of what is happening in Sarasota County. To grow the fan base on our Facebook Fan Page (www.facebook.com/visitsarasota), we just launched a campaign called "Searching for Sara."

Folks named Sara (any spelling accepted) who go to the SCVB Facebook Fan Page can select the side of Sarasota County that interests them most -- Arts/Culture/Romance, Eco/Adventure, Culinary and Family. The "Saras" receiving the most votes will become finalists to win a trip to Sarasota County. Since this campaign launched in mid-September, the SCVB has garnered thousands additional "likes" on its Facebook platforms. The SCVB will select the winners of the Searching for Sara campaign, with these winners taking their trips in the first half of 2012. When the winners are in Sarasota, they'll be documenting their trips online through social media sites.

The end result of these efforts has been the SCVB documenting around 100 million media impressions a year. Recently, our PR efforts for the announcement of Dr. Beach naming Siesta Beach the No. 1 beach in the U.S. resulted in more than 425 million media impressions.

Public relations continues to be a powerful voice in providing an excellent return on our investment and an integral part of our overall marketing efforts.

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