

# Businesses, PR pros think outside the box for more effective marketing

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Plumbing M.D.'s concept isn't hard to identify on the streets. The former ambulance trucks go from place to place looking to fix clogged pipes instead of racing injured people to the hospital.

"It's an awareness deal," said Bob Munson, franchise co-owner of the Reno franchise.

The tactic to attract more clients with the message that the company can serve businesses' and residents' most difficult plumbing needs through such a vehicle is one of many innovative methods of marketing some companies are employing in a quest to gain new business.

Munson said it's a way to generate more customers in a very simple manner in tougher economic times.

"It's actually been slow because there are a lot of plumbers out there, at this point, out of work and people are using them because they're cheaper," Munson said, added that some of the cheaper options may not be licensed or insured.

So to try to keep up, he has begun a marketing campaign to raise awareness of Plumbing M.D.'s services with media press releases and a special called the Customer Care program that offers plumbing diagnostics and a year-long discount for any services needed for annual check-ups. Before Valentine's Day, some members of the media received a small, yellow, artificial plunger attached to a release that said "Nothing says I love you like clean pipes" as a strategy to take his business into homes.

He has also engaged in more traditional methods as well.

"The other side is I've

been going to businesses and knocking on doors ... especially with the restaurants and property management groups and real estate," he said. "I think it's an awareness deal and what you can do for people. It's all about service."

Local marketing and public relations professionals, whose business is to help other companies come up with strategies that would get their name out, say such positioning is key, especially in uncertain economic times.

Marlene Olsen, president of Olsen and Associates in Reno, said she tries to help businesses of all industries remember one thing: The downturn isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"The thing people forget is that businesses grow in a bad economy," Olsen said. "They're growing and doing fine, but what we've all learned by being challenged in this recession is to get smarter with our operations and how productive we are and how we're spending our marketing dollars."

Olsen, who recently attended a conference for owners of landscaping companies, said a popular technique for landscapers is to use unused plants and put them on somebody's doorstep to advertise their business.

"You put them on somebody's doorstep that was a former client or a client you're trying to get or one you have now," Olsen said. "You take those little things you have around and remind the customers or potential customers that you're there."

Betsy McDonald, a public relations director, and Sarah Polito, an account executive, both with Reno's Bauserman Group, said companies should do what it takes to distinguish themselves from other businesses.

"Your creativity has to be

outstanding and innovative (to make it) through the noise and clutter," Polito said.

One of her recent projects was to convince a company that wanted to leave the Reno-Sparks market to take a more global focus in an effort to perform better than the local economy. They created a concept and prepared a package to the client's satisfaction.

"In the planning stages, when you initially want to accomplish something, you set your goals and objectives so they're measurable," McDonald said. "Sometimes (the media press kits and packages) are pretty effective. If the client works in construction, you get together a bunch of little construction items, like hardhats or hammers or graphing paper instead of a legal pad. It all depends. It seems to be very, very successful and the media responded and said, 'We got your package and it was awesome and we'll be there.'"

"The key to that," McDonald added, "is really knowing your target audience and tailoring it so that it will stand up to them and won't be a throwaway."