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(PR)ACTICALLY SPEAKING: Ethics should be key part of PR strategy
Be honest, respect competitors when promoting your business

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Ethical dilemmas can often arise in marketing efforts and present challenging and unique issues for many small businesses. What information do you share with the public or the press? How do you respond to an allegation of misconduct? Should you publicly smear your competition, if it benefits you, and it's just a "little white lie" anyway? Should you be honest with your employees about the financial state of your business? Many of us have come across situations just like these or worse. In many of these situations the answers are not clear cut. Being a communications consultant, I take marketing and PR ethics very seriously. After all, it is my job to protect my client's reputation and relationship that they have with the public and the press. As a small business, your reputation should be based on integrity and public trust. Without these things you

will have a difficult time being successful in the long run.

Here are some tips that will help keep you in good graces:

Always tell the truth

One of the most important things you can do to avoid putting yourself and your business in a sticky and unpleasant situation is to tell the truth. A lie, no matter how small and innocent, is still a lie and you can count on it coming back to haunt you. I often tell my clients to never write or say anything, at any point in time, without proof to back it up. The slightest misstep can ruin your hard-earned reputation. One of the foundations of a good business is honesty, so conduct your business with this in mind. There is a lot of competition out there and others won't waste their time on you if they don't see you as a credible, trustworthy source.

Treat your competition with respect

There is no quicker way to make enemies than by bashing your competitors, or portraying them in a negative light. Publicly smearing your competition is childish and in bad taste. If you want to come out on top, strive to make your business the best it can be with hard work and diligence, not by making someone else look bad. Let your actions speak for you. Those in the same industry often run in tight-knit circles and the slightest comment or wrong-doing on your part can quickly get out of control. I suggest you always treat competitors with the same respect you would like to receive. In the end, you will gain more respect from your colleagues in the industry when they see you as a team player.

Value your clients and employees

Maintaining a positive working

relationship with your clients and employees should be top-of-mind when it comes to running your business. Treat them with respect and never do anything questionable that may compromise your relationship. Keep both your clients and employees apprised of changes within your company. You don't need to divulge all the details, but make sure you keep them in the loop. The last thing you want to do is catch them off-guard and make them feel as if they don't matter. I believe that without your clients and employees, you don't have a business-- so I make sure to take the time to care for and nurture them.

Every once in a while, I like to change things up a little in my office and give my employees some time off to regroup. Just last month, I had my staff split up into groups and do a scavenger hunt throughout downtown Sacramento. It gave us a chance to bond with one another, and the pictures that came back were hilarious. Team building events like this are a great opportunity to show

your employees that you appreciate them and the hard work they put into your business each day. Something you can do for your clients, is to make your relationship with them a little more personal. Make sure to get to know your clients. Do they have children? Is a birthday or anniversary coming up? Send cards, flowers, or a quick email to let them know you care. Your clients will take notice and your relationship will grow stronger.

Earn public trust

How the public perceives you can make or break your business. By conducting your business with honesty and integrity, you will ensure that you are doing everything in your power to earn their trust and faith in you. Listen to their wants and needs and see how you can work to accommodate them. Now, more than ever, it's important to set yourself apart from others and show the public that you truly value them and their desires. Something as simple as getting involved in the community

shows the public that you appreciate them and are willing to take the time to get to know them. If you make promises, follow through with them.

Redeem yourself

If you do find yourself in a situation where you have lost the trust and respect of others, do everything possible to make things right again. Reclaim any lost relationships by following through with promises and obligations. Be honest and forthright about past mistakes, but reassure them you are changing for the better. Always employ ethical business practices and do not stray from them.

I often tell my clients that when you conduct business in an ethical manner, others will see you in a positive light. You gain public trust, build your reputation and you become a business your employees are proud to work for. Deviating from ethical business standards may result in bad publicity, a loss of clients and in a worst-case scenario, may even lead to legal action.

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