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## Shine the Spotlight on Your Business

Sacramento Business Journal - by Danielle Starkey

Unlike many others who go into the carpet cleaning and damage restoration business, Michael Zboralske had a sales and marketing background before he started his Rancho Cordova company 13 years ago. He also had a small budget but knew his efforts to get his company noticed had to be distinctive.

"My idea was to create an image, something that would be catchy," said Zboralske, explaining why the zebra theme was a good fit for his company, Zebra Restoration Services Inc., now one of region's fastest-growing firms.

Zboralske not only painted zebra stripes on all the company vehicles, but he also adopted the zebra image for all his advertising.

"You need to get yourself noticed and set yourself apart, not only from your competitors but from every other business out there," he said.

Having a distinctive image, along with knowing who your customers are and treating them well are crucial elements of successfully marketing your business, according to both marketing professionals and those who have rapidly grown their businesses.

Michael Farias, founder, president and chief executive officer of Plumbing MD Inc. in Davis, said all his company vehicles are former ambulances, playing on the theme of "emergency care."

"We wanted an image that would denote to the consumer a quick response to their dilemma," he said. "(The ambulances) are a market icon. Everywhere we go, people look and gawk."

Many small businesses overlook, to their detriment, the benefits of hiring a public relations firm, said Debi Hammond, president of Merlot Marketing in Sacramento.

"I know I'm an agency and it sounds self-serving, but if you want to use your money wisely, there is no more strategic or efficient way to do that than to hire professionals," said Hammond, whose own firm has grown rapidly since she started it five years ago.

Marketing and public relations professionals can help businesses find the special angle that captures the interest of the media, she explained.

"We've garnered press coverage on CNN, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, -- places (clients) never could have afforded to advertise, based on what we knew" about how to make a pitch, she said.

Farias said his business spiked when one of the leading plumbing industry publications in the western United States, Reeves Journal, ran a cover story on Plumbing MD.

"We started getting calls from as far away as Texas about franchising, he said."

Forming partnerships with anyone who might be able to help you -- or whom you might be able to help -- also makes sense, noted Jen Baker, a principal with the Davis-based public relations firm Studio66, another rapidly growing firm.

"We form partnerships with Web companies, freelance writers and others in complementary businesses ... so we have a network of people who do the kind of work we do we can call in (to work on) projects for us and who refer us to clients."

Zboralske said he also develops relationships with vendors, subcontractors and even competitors as potential sources of new business.

Joining the chamber of commerce or getting involved with a charity can provide networking opportunities as well as gain recognition for your business, said Hammond.

But nothing is as effective in developing your business as providing excellent service, everyone agreed.

"With every new service technician we hired, it generated more work," said Farias.

### More advice for getting noticed

**Establish your message:** “So often, small companies take the shotgun approach. They go out and see what sticks, instead of understanding their competitive advantage and going out with a cohesive message,” said Debi Hammond, president of Merlot Marketing.

Stand out from the crowd: “If everybody uses blue in your industry, use teal -- something that stands out a little bit but not so much that you’re not taken seriously,” said Jen Baker, a principal with Studio66.

**Get involved:** “One of the mistakes people make is not getting out into the community enough. Business owners can be the biggest evangelists for their own business by getting involved in the community ...” said Hammond.

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