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In the Spotlight

Got a tight budget? You can still get noticed. Find out why online publicity is one of the best ways to boost your business.

By Gwen Moran

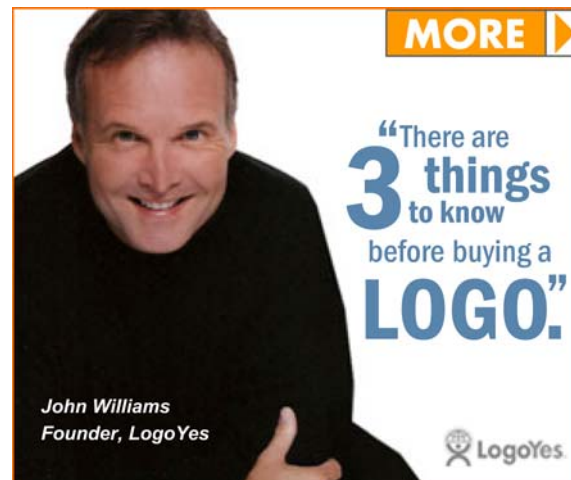
Entrepreneur's StartUps - February 2007

When popular diet blogger [Hungry Girl](#) declared her obsession with Jeff Wilkinson's low-fat coffee products, she inadvertently launched thousands of voices clamoring for his creamers. The problem: His products were only available in Arizona and California. "The biggest problem I had was that, if you're not national, large media outlets aren't interested in covering you," says Wilkinson, 45, founder of [Simply Sublime Foods](#), a specialty food manufacturer in Gold River, California. "I've been struggling [because] my biggest competitor is Nestlé Foods' Coffee-Mate, which has millions per year in advertising."

In the weeks following the August 2006 plug, Wilkinson suddenly had meetings with megagrocers such as Kroger, Ingles, Publix, Whole Foods Market and others. He says Hungry Girl opened doors that had previously been closed tight.

Welcome to the power of online publicity, where bloggers are becoming semicelebs, virtually anyone can host his or her own podcast and consumers are constantly checking out information about products and services. With the explosion of blogs, podcasts, zines and high-readership websites, a whole new world of opportunities has opened up for businesses interested in getting the word out to targeted markets. Businesses need to know how to navigate this electronic terrain to work effectively with newer media.

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Getting Pixels

When it comes to working with online media [vehicles](#), many of the traditional principles apply--but with a twist, says Steve O'Keefe, vice president of the [International Association of Online Communicators](#) and author of the Complete Guide to Internet Publicity.

"There's been a dramatic shift to the internet becoming the dominant form of publicity for most startup businesses, as opposed to a wire service or a printed or faxed news release program with phone call follow-up," O'Keefe says. "The kind of information that used to be brought into the home through newspapers, radio and television is increasingly being found through the internet."

Some of the most common tools and tactics that businesses are using to get publicity online include:

Pitching bloggers: Entrepreneurs like Wilkinson have found that an A-list blogger's nod of approval can deliver astounding results. Sarah Greene's blogs on Facebook.com and MySpace.com for [Brass Heart](#), her upscale clothing boutique in Mesa, Arizona, have delivered more in-store traffic than any other online activity.

"It helps people get to the events we do," says Greene, 29. "Our most successful event was at a club in Scottsdale, which we promoted solely through blogging on MySpace. We had 300 people show up and sold out the club on a Tuesday night." Her blogging efforts have been picked up on local fashion blogs, too, including one affiliated with the *Arizona Republic*, the area's largest newspaper. She has recently launched a third blog on her own website.

"Blogs are rocket-fuel publicity," says O'Keefe. "Mentions on popular blogs can result in an intense amount of activity over a short period of time." One of his clients, an Italian startup, published an economics newsletter and website that were later mentioned on a Freakonomics.com blog. The number of daily registrations jumped from 20 to 200 for more than a week straight.

Though communication with bloggers is generally less formal than that with mainstream media, O'Keefe says it's essential to build relationships with key bloggers in your industry or area of expertise. Bloggers often link to sites or other blogs they find interesting, a phenomenon of sharing others' news and information that is virtually nonexistent in mainstream media.

"Blog masters are subject to persuasion, the same as any other media," O'Keefe explains. "They are hungry for content. If you're an expert and you can share your expertise with a target audience, you have something to offer the blog." He believes that, in this way, businesses can benefit from blogging without the time-consuming task of setting up a blog and having to refresh the content several times a week.

Marketing expert [Marcia Yudkin](#), author of [Six Steps to Free Publicity](#), says it's essential for businesses to at least have a website to benefit from online publicity efforts. "The online world works through links," she explains. "People reading about you on the internet are going to want to click on your website to learn more and to buy. It's too disruptive to have to pick up the phone or call information to find your number."



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Using content syndicators:

Another tactic that works for some businesses is to contribute content to online publications. Similar to contributing bylined expert articles to trade or other publications, websites like USANews.com and many others allow you to upload your feature stories, blog entries and other content, which they distribute to thousands of online publishers of websites, zines and other online media. The tricky part is keeping track of where your content ends up printed, but online clipping services like ClipGenius.com, CustomScoop.com or even free [Google Alert](#) can help you track what's being picked up and where.

"To be effective, you must have consistently good-quality content [that is] part of a bigger campaign," says O'Keefe. Syndicating pieces that have no relevance or valuable information, or are just thinly veiled sales pieces, can do more harm than good.

Optimizing press releases:

Not all press release distribution services are created equal. To make the most of your release's power online, choose services that offer keyword optimization so search engines will find your press release when customers are searching for that information.

That's what Susan Blake Davis did. The owner of [Ask Ariel Your Pet Nutritionist](#), a pet nutrition company in Dana Point, California, writes news releases on general pet topics, such as allergies in dogs. She uses [Send2Press](#), which sends news releases to media targets, lists them on its website and applies search engine optimization techniques to ensure that the releases appear when certain words or phrases are typed into search engines.

"I'm usually in the top 10 [search results] for the subject after the news release goes out," says Davis, 47. "That benefits my business directly. I check my web stats, and my traffic is usually boosted 10 percent to 15 percent. My orders increase, too."

Christopher Simmons is founder of Neotrope, the parent company of Send2Press, in Torrance, California. He says optimizing news releases is important because many journalists search for keywords through Google or Yahoo! to find sources. In addition, he says, more mainstream media are including original content on their websites, aside from the content found on the show or in the publication. The key to accessing those opportunities, he says, is to be visible. "If you want your news to be found under 'pink bunnies,' you need to use the phrase 'pink bunnies' in your news release," he explains. "There are many X-factors in terms of how search engines categorize material. It must have the keywords in it. It must be listed on a credible website. We have other proprietary techniques that we apply to get higher rankings."

Getting in on the online broadcast game: Targeting and producing online audio and video is a great way to get attention. Find videocasts at YouTube.com or on blog site Technorati.com. Explore some of the most popular audio at [www.podcastalley.com](#) or [www.podcast.net](#), and offer to do a live interview about a subject near and dear to your heart. Podcasts can give you more mileage than traditional radio or TV interviews if you get permission to post them on your website and forward them to your customer and [prospect lists](#).

O'Keefe says podcasting, however, is tremendously misunderstood. "In most cases, people think of it as an audio program," he says. "But audio is quickly being erased by video. Just as people prefer to watch TV vs. listening to the radio, you'll see online video overtake audio podcasting."

O'Keefe suggests you create a short, downloadable video about yourself. Don't pull out your video [camera](#), though. This has to be high-quality. He says poor lighting, bad sound quality and lackluster editing can reflect negatively on your business. "Try working with your local TV station," he advises. "They need to do something with that camera equipment when they're not using it to broadcast the news. You can get a video made this way for under \$1,000." This also makes great clips for TV producers to help them determine whether you'd be a good candidate as a guest on their shows.

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