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Small Business THE JOURNAL REPORT

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In the Spotlight

You have the public's attention. Now, how do you make sure you don't blow it?

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SO YOU HAVE a successful small business. What happens when it receives that lightning bolt of publicity that many covet but few ever receive? More important: How do you make sure you don't blow it?

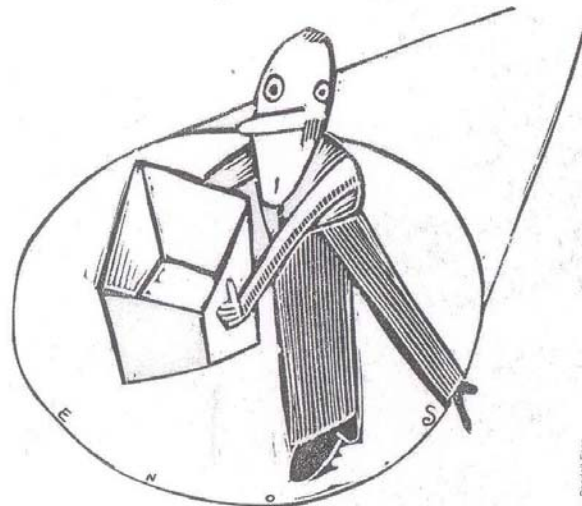
Brent Lamour, co-owner of Salem Organic Soil Inc., had been in business nearly 20 years when he got the call in 1998. The gardening editor for Martha Stewart Living magazine wanted permission to mention his product, Sweet Peet, a horse-manure-based mulch, on Ms. Stewart's television show. The editor had used Sweet Peet for years, and had introduced it to Ms. Stewart, who also became a fan.

Mr. Lamour agreed, of course, and when the show aired, "our phones, faxes and emails were on fire for days," he says.

The trouble was, due to a continuing lack of production capacity, supplies of Sweet Peet had already sold out for the season. "We were overwhelmed," says Mr. Lamour, who along with his colleagues at the Clinton Corner, N.Y., business, were left telling many callers they just didn't have the product on hand to sell.

Few small-business owners are ready for the flood of calls and customers that can arrive in the wake of national media attention. How a company handles itself in the spotlight is crucial. But just as

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important is the need to quickly ramp up production or service in order to meet the predictable surge in demand that follows. Indeed, it's often what a company does to capitalize on its publicity that determines whether a business grows from obscurity to prominence.

"Timing is very critical when a business or product gets publicity," says Alan Carsrud, who teaches at the Global Entrepreneurship Center at Florida International University in Miami. For most small businesses, he says, the big break comes too soon: "The product is not ready or they don't have enough

inventory in stock. If you get publicity and the product is not ready, the opportunity will fail."

Minding Their Manures

Even though Mr. Lamour and his co-owner, Shawn Goff, were unable to fill all the orders that poured in initially, they realized the opportunity they had to license their product and expand their business to other areas of the country. It helped them set their goals "a little higher," Mr. Lamour says.

The partners also got lucky.

In 2000, the producers of "Martha" called again, this time seeking to tape a whole segment on Sweet Peet. Messrs. Lamour and Goff hadn't been idle in the meantime. They had boosted production by purchasing bigger processing equipment, broadening manure-collection efforts and licensing out production. Their Web site was improved, too, with capacity for more visitors and automatic email responses for online inquiries. As a result, "Martha" fans who tried to order Sweet Peet anew didn't go away disappointed—and the word spread. Revenue doubled over the next few years from \$665,000 in 1999, and Mr. Lamour says sales will reach about \$3 million this year.

Shell Shocked

Having a growth plan in place when publicity hits is essential for small-business owners, experts say, as is having capital available to finance and maintain increased inventory when demand surges.

Great Gourmet Inc. didn't even exist yet when Kim Scott, the company's founder and chief executive, realized she had a unique opportunity for some great publicity. Ms. Scott was selling various products on HSN, the cable shopping network, when she learned that it was looking for a maker of crab cakes. Having previously worked for Sea Watch International Ltd., a big seafood company based in Easton, Md., Ms. Scott saw an opportunity. But she had to move fast.

Calling on friends, family and former colleagues at Sea Watch, she quickly came up with a recipe and a state manufacturing license, and got help from Sea Watch setting up her initial manufacturing operation. HSN, a unit of New York-based IAC/InteractiveCorp, approved Ms. Scott's plan, and within weeks she was selling her own company's crab cakes on a television network that claims to reach nearly 90 million homes. She also started a Web site to help sell the product.

What Ms. Scott wasn't prepared for, however, was the deluge of demand. The biggest challenge, she says, was having no warehouse and no inventory. In the beginning, she and a handful of employees sometimes worked 24 hours a day to fill orders, she says. But within weeks, she increased her staff to 19.

And just as important, she formed a partnership with Delmarva Premium Seafood Co., Chalfont, Pa., to store her crab cakes until she was able to build a warehouse of her own.

Ms. Scott continues to sell her crab-meat products on HSN and on her Web site, where she also solicits additional distributors. She estimates that her Federsburg, Md., company had revenue of a little more than \$1 million for the year ended in August, up from about \$250,000 a year earlier.

Sitting Up

Sittercity.com, a subscription-based online service that puts parents and other potential employers in touch with baby sitters, nannies and other caregivers, had been in business only a few months when founder Genevieve Thiers got her first taste of publicity.

A 2002 Boston Herald article profiling her start-up inspired a lot of inquiries and new subscriptions, all of which caused her workload to spill over into her personal and family time. By quickly adding staff and upgrading her Web site, however, Ms. Thiers managed not only to stay afloat but to ride the wave of publicity.

The bigger challenge occurred a few years later, when Time magazine profiled Sittercity.com in 2004. By then, Ms. Thiers had learned a few more things about being prepared for publicity, having been the focus of several articles that appeared in women's magazines. Several departments, for example, were now trained to help take calls when the phone lines were jammed. And a new technical-services team had upgraded the computer system and boosted the Web site's capacity.

Everything went smoothly after the Time article appeared, Ms. Thiers says. Soon afterward, corporate clients started paying fees to Sittercity.com in order to give their employees access to the company's baby-sitter network in new and unfamiliar cities. Sittercity.com, based in Chicago, says it now has 150,000 baby sitters around the country in its database.

If you want your company to be ready when that call comes, Ms. Thiers says, "our best tip is to build a scalable infrastructure for your business." ■