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BUSINESS TODAY

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Russell PR focuses on franchises

The local firm assists operators with public relations, marketing and crisis management.

BY BILL WILSON

The Wichita Eagle

Blending a new franchise into its community isn't in most business plans.

Neither is dealing with that scalding hot cup of coffee that accidentally lands in a customer's lap.

That's where Carolyn Russell steps in.

Russell Public Relations, 151 N. Rock Island, has a new niche product: the "Franchise PR Partners" program, a comprehensive public relations and specialty communications service for multiunit franchise operators.

Russell will put a public face on any franchise operation, from crisis management to what she calls social marketing.

It's an idea endorsed by one of the area's biggest franchisees.

"You can find yourself working a lot, working a bunch of jobs in your own business," said David Rolph, president and chief executive of Sasnak Management, a Wichita-based Applebee's franchisee and operator of Carlos O'Kelly's restaurants.

"Then, when something breaks, where's the time going to come from? A lot of operators don't have the time and the expertise with the media, so I can see the market for this."

Public relations should be a priority for all business owners, Rolph said.

"You worry about it all the time," he said. "You're generally one incident away, and a lot of our workforce is (young). They've essentially got my reputation in their hands."

The goal of the new product, Russell said, is integrating companies into their communities.

"Franchises need more than just a good product or service," she said. "They need communications programs, and they need outreach geared to their local communities to build goodwill and buy-in."

So do franchisers in search of new franchise owners, said Gina-Lynn Scharoun, president of Value Place Franchise Services.

"It's a combined approach (to recruiting new franchisees)," she said. "We're finding that with media coverage, be it the New York Times or The Wichita Eagle, we have access to very sophisticated businesspeople who read newspapers and trade publications."

Once the business is running smoothly, bigger chains like Rolph's Sasnak can hire a marketing department to handle that outreach.

But smaller franchise groups are forced by workload to put public relations on the back burner, Rolph said, and have to rely on the tried-and-true "if it's bad, pass it up the corporate ladder" model if anything goes wrong.

That's because "how-to" PR manuals are few and far between in franchising, said Sam Moyers, a former Pizza Hut and Rent-A-Center official who teaches entrepreneurship at Wichita State University.

"It just isn't a high priority on most lists," he said. "There are a lot of ad agencies who can help, but most small-business people don't use that kind of help for anything positive. It's more of an emergency thing... even though in a lot of respects, PR -- free advertising -- can be the most efficient thing you can do in your business."



Thursday, Jan 25, 2007