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How Strong Ties to Local Media Can Boost Business

For many people, tuning in to the local news on TV is a reliable way to start their day or wind down for the night. In 30 minutes or less, viewers can get blasts of local and international news and benefit from up-to-date information on events happening around their community.

Many local news programs feature live or pretaped segments with local business owners, and for the professionals featured in these spots, appearing on TV can be a powerful way to market their business, display their product knowledge and connect with people who have never visited their store before.

Jim Lehrer, owner of Brownsboro Hardware & Paint in Louisville, Kentucky, has more than 20 years of experience appearing in televised segments with his local Fox affiliate, WDRB-TV. What started as a simple spot on how homeowners can keep their properties free of ice and snow during a particularly bad snowstorm has developed into a beneficial working relationship for the news team and Lehrer.

In this article, learn how Lehrer became involved with WDRB, how it benefits his business and how other independent operators can establish their own relationships with local media.

Getting Started

After moving to Kentucky from Wisconsin, Lehrer and his wife Marilyn became owners of Brownsboro Hardware & Paint in 2008. Lehrer says Kentucky winters are milder than the Wisconsin wrath he had known, but he was still surprised to see local big boxes run out of winter weather essentials.

“I drew a line in the sand and said we’ll never run out of the ‘three S’s:’ salt, shovels and sleds. We’ve held true to that promise for 20 years, and it’s been a great niche for us,” he says.

It was that reliable inventory management that caught the attention of a local news producer 20 years ago. Winter weather was forecast in the area, and WDRB decided to do a live segment from Brownsboro Hardware & Paint. Lehrer was more than willing to welcome the news crew to his store, knowing the live spot would give his business valuable exposure.

As he proved himself to be a reliable on-air source and developed a strong working relationship with reporters and the producers behind the scenes, Lehrer was later invited to do regular in-studio segments on the channel.

Lehrer says airing commercials for your business can be expensive, but these TV spots offer visibility in the community.

He stresses the news teams he’s worked with have made it clear the paid advertising side of the business is separate from the news segments. Still, the TV spots offer a valuable opportunity to reach potential new customers.

Home improvement business owners offer valuable information on a variety of seasonal topics, Lehrer says. As time passed, he appeared in spots for lawn and garden care as well as in features concerning home safety and the importance of installing fire and carbon monoxide detectors.

Independent operators are in a great position to actively market their business to local media, Lehrer says.

“The local media is hungry for content. If they go to a big box, the manager has to get corporate approval and advice on what he can and can’t say,” he says. “On the other hand, we don’t have any restrictions like that.”

On-Air Tips

WDRB reporter Keith Kaiser has worked with Lehrer on several spots over the years. He says Lehrer is a great source because he’s an informative retailer who knows what reporters and the audience need from a TV segment.

Kaiser says retailers on TV need to not just introduce products, but demonstrate knowledge simultaneously.

“TV is a visual medium, so just talking about something without holding it in your hand and showing the audience isn’t going to work,” he says. “We always think of viewer benefit, so demonstrating something on air is always important.”

Kaiser says he looks forward to working with Lehrer because he knows he is eager to participate in the segments.

“Presentation is key, and he’s very confident,” he says. He’s no-nonsense and energetic, and people notice that.”

Being Proactive

For home improvement retailers who want to collaborate with local media, Lehrer recommends proactively contacting producers and reporters.

“When producers were looking for content, I was on their contact list. Retailers should try to make their life easier; there’s a payoff in it for your business,” Lehrer says.

He also suggests business owners think about who should represent their business on camera. At the time, his business had a small staff, so it made sense for Lehrer to be featured.

“You want someone who’s credible and professional. I probably don’t look good on camera, but at least I tell a good story,” he says.

For owners who might be a bundle of nerves before appearing on TV, Lehrer says that’s natural.

“I’ve been doing this a long time, and I’m always nervous,” he says. “You want to present your business well, and the key to that is understanding the angle the reporter is trying to achieve so you give them the right information.”

Lehrer says he and the reporter usually have a brief meeting before the cameras roll to ensure they’re on the same page.

Lehrer says it’s difficult to measure the direct effect these spots have on sales, but he does notice an uptick in foot traffic after they air. Maybe more importantly, customers often greet him by name when they tell him they saw him on TV. These spots create a more personal connection that wouldn’t have been possible without a strong relationship with local media.

Above all, Lehrer says growing relationships with local media is an investment that can give businesses of all industries valuable visibility.

“Building relationships is key. You want to be that person on their cellphone they call,” he says. “When a TV crew comes, we do anything we can to help them, because there are so many rewards for our store.” ➔



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