

Guide to Effective PR

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GREEN Communications' Guide to Effective PR

A good image is a valuable asset. Effective public relations creates good publicity, building your reputation with customers and others whose opinion matters to you. While advertising can be purchased immediately, generating positive publicity can take time. On the other hand, PR has greater credibility and can have more impact than advertising. So where do you start?

Planning

You may need to reach several target groups, all with slightly different messages. Your planning process should prioritise these target groups and agree key messages for them. Decide what your objectives are. Most PR aims to build your reputation with customers. Favourable comments by journalists about your product are more credible than the same claims made in your advertisements.

PR can be used to increase awareness of your business and products. Even a single mention in a national paper can generate a large number of enquiries. PR can reinforce advertising campaigns and other promotional activities. For example, local newspapers may be prepared to provide editorial on businesses which advertise with them. You may be able to publicise events, such as product launches, through the media.

Trade publications often have sections for this kind of announcement. You can use PR to influence people who matter to your business - and sometimes to get them to change their minds. For example, suppliers, trade associations, local councils, MPs, community groups, regulatory authorities or investors.

PR usually brings long-term benefits, rather than immediate sales, so begin it well in advance of when you need the results. You cannot control the timing of media coverage. You may have to send press releases over a period of months to a publication before it pays any attention to you. Although a single mention may have an impact, good PR will create a cumulative effect, as your publicity builds up. Some publications have long lead times. Many monthly magazines operate on four-month lead times, while guides (eg for hotels) are published annually and may need to be contacted months in advance.

Choose media that reach your target audience and are likely to give you coverage. Ask your customers what they read, hear and watch. Use directories such as BRAD, Hollis or Willings Press Guide to find details of publications in your area. Or search the web – the Newspaper Society website is very useful as is Periodical Publishers Association.

Research publications and broadcasts to find out what kinds of stories they cover. Request an advance features schedule. It is always easier to get exposure in lo-

cal newspapers and specialist magazines than in the national press. But do not be afraid to approach the nationals, if your story is strong enough.

Budget realistically for the time and costs involved. The largest cost of PR is often management time, rather than cash. Using a PR agency can increase the effectiveness of your PR and reduce the demands on your time (but will increase the cash costs).

It's Not All Selling

Public relations can sometimes involve a lot more than putting out press releases and talking to journalists. You may have important objectives that cannot be achieved just by gaining press publicity.

You may need to reach small, select groups of individuals directly, with complex or specialised messages. Advertising tends to simplify issues. With carefully targeted PR, you can put a different spin on your message for each of the audiences you need to address.

You may be able to influence key 'opinion-formers' to think well of your company and mention or use your products. The opinion-formers you decide to target will depend on your markets. For example, councillors, MPs and MEPs, local politicians, pop or sports stars, celebrities, authors or business leaders.

You may be able to lobby and influence trade bodies, or even the government, to adopt policies favourable to your business.

Opportunities

Most businesses generate natural opportunities for PR activity. For example: A new product launch. Opening new premises. Appointments of new staff. Large or interesting orders or customers. Milestone events (eg your 1,000th customer or your company's anniversary). You can maximise the publicity value of these opportunities by thinking of an angle to make them more interesting.

You can create publicity opportunities. For example: Submit articles for publication in your local press or trade magazines, or on relevant websites which are looking for content. Commission a survey (serious or frivolous) that can be written up as a news release. Promote yourself as an expert and offer yourself for public speaking or comment on topical issues. Suggest a local newspaper competition with your products as prizes.

You can become involved with events and stories which are already in the public eye. Send 'letters to the editor' about local or industry issues. Help with, or donate products to, charity events. Sponsor a local sports team or exhibition.

You can also get involved in organisations which are likely to attract future publicity. Team up with suppliers or customers to work on attracting joint publicity. Become a figurehead in an organisation, so that its publicity brings you publicity.

Creating Interest

Journalists will only cover your story if they think it is interesting or newsworthy. News is typically controversial, new or surprising. It is amusing or funny. It is directly important to the readership (or audience). It is confidential or secret. It is linked with famous people or places and linked with conflict or romance.

You can make a story more newsworthy by giving it the right angle such as inviting a celebrity to the opening of your new premises or writing your press release to highlight the interesting aspects of the story (eg telling how your new MD once climbed Mount Everest).

Tailor the same story to suit different publications. For example, a trade journal may want technical details of your new product, while a newspaper may be more interested in the impact on local jobs.

Be prepared to compromise on what the release says if it will improve your chances of publication. Your first priority is to provide a story which will be published. A press release which reads like an advertisement for your business is unlikely to be interesting. If your main objective is to increase awareness, the details of what is published may not be so important. However, beware of providing stories which can lead to bad publicity.

Handling the Media

Unlike advertising, where you buy space to publish what you choose, with PR you have to sell yourself to the media to get good publicity.

Give the editors what they need. Send them interesting stories they will want to publish. Make sure your press releases reach publications before their deadlines. Some publications have very short lead times. You may need to act immediately to utilise a PR opportunity.

Give the journalists what they want. Use a standard press release format, written in the right style, whether you are using post or email. Get the email addresses of important media contacts.

Build relationships with individual journalists. Find out the names of the journalists and make personal contact. Invite them to your events, or to lunch to meet interesting people. Do them favours. For example, send them information they will find useful, even if it has no publicity value for you, and respond quickly to any requests they make.

Do not be put off. Send press releases whenever you have a worthwhile story, even if your last release received no coverage. There are many reasons why a story may be rejected or held over, which may have nothing to do with your release. Put journalists on your mailing list for background information they may find interesting (eg your company newsletter).

Photographs

An interesting and relevant picture will always increase your chances of coverage. The picture will attract the journalist's attention, even if it is not used. If the picture is published, it will help to draw readers' attention as well.

Provide pictures that are easy to publish. Check what kind of print or transparency the publication needs and that pictures sent as email attachments are in the correct format. When sending pictures by post use a cardboard-backed envelope and attach a (factual) caption to the back of the photo, including your company name. Do not use a paperclip (which could damage the photograph).

If possible, have the picture taken by a press photographer. A press photographer will have an eye for the shots the media want. Ask your local newspaper to recommend a good freelance photographer. If the publication knows the photographer, journalists are more likely to look at your press release.

PR Agencies

Consider using an agency if your annual PR budget is greater than £20,000. For smaller projects, you can employ PR agencies on smaller budgeted projects of between £1,000 and £5,000.

Choose an agency with relevant experience and contacts. Getting publicity in national media (eg newspapers, television) is extremely difficult without a suitable agency.

Provide a clear briefing on what you are trying to achieve. Explain what makes your company and your products different then plan how the PR agency will work with your other promotional activities and agencies. Be wary of agencies that see PR as the answer to every promotional task, with no thought of alternatives such as advertising.

Crisis Management

Finally be prepared for bad publicity and crisis management. For Allied Bakeries, it was finding needles in some of its loaves. For accountancy firm Weeks Green, a hospitality day out which ended with a client fined for being drunk on the plane home. For Railtrack it was the horror of Paddington. One day it's business as usual, the next day you are in the midst of a disaster. The media is ready to crucify you, and your company's very future is in doubt.

EXPECT THE WORST. Plan ahead for a crisis. You need a business continuity plan to keep operations going in the event of a warehouse fire, systems failure or any other disasters. You should also have a communications plan which outlines how you will communicate quickly and effectively with key stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, shareholders and the media. Make it clear who has specific responsibility for contacting particular individuals.

STAY COOL. In practice most crisis-hit executives run round like headless chickens. You need to take a cool strategic overview. Ask yourself if everyone has a common view of the situation. How bad can it get? What message do you need to put out and how?' The first 24 hours are often crucial.

HOW DO OTHERS SEE IT? What counts are other people's perceptions, not your own. To you, it might be a storm in a teacup, but if your customers, investors or other audiences perceive the situation to be damaging, that's what you must address.

GET THE MEDIA ON YOUR SIDE. Hold a press conference or issue a statement, and give journalists maximum access. You need to provide absolute transparency to the media. Demonstrate from the beginning that you'll cooperate with them, and they can be your best allies. But if they believe that you are slow in providing information, they'll lose confidence. Your aim is to become the 'Single Authoritative Source' of information.

BEWARE OF CRISIS CREEP. Sometimes an issue creeps up on you. Issues like BSE or the problem of oilrig disposal were around for years before hitting the headlines. Watch for warning signs. A story that features repeatedly in the trade press will soon be picked up by the national media. An independent investigation may also force an issue to come under the national spotlight.

TELL THE TRUTH. Tell a lie and you die. You may not be able to tell everything you know - for example, if an issue is *sub judice*, or the stock market needs to be informed - but at least try to explain why you can't tell all.

SAY SORRY. An apology usually helps to diffuse the situation. You may not want to admit liability but express your regret that it occurred and your determination to prevent it happening again.

TAKE PERSONAL CONTROL. Don't try and hide behind spin doctors or consultants. Use them but make sure that you are the spokesperson - after the Kegworth air crash, British Midlands chairman Sir Michael Bishop dropped everything, went straight there, and took personal responsibility. He gained a huge amount of credit for doing so.

BE HUMAN. Crisis management isn't a black art. If you behave as a human being, then you can't go far wrong.

DO SAY: "We would like to express our deepest sympathies to those who have been affected, and shall leave no stone unturned in our efforts to establish exactly how this happened."

DON'T SAY: "Crisis? What crisis? Let's just keep our heads down, chaps, and in a week's time it will have blown over."



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