

# Guide to PR and Media Relations

GREEN

## GREEN Communication's Guide to PR and Media Relations

### What is Public Relations?

It's ironic that an industry concerned with the art of communication hasn't found a better title with which to describe its role. Whilst the names of other communications disciplines, such as advertising and direct mail, immediately convey both the 'what' and the 'how', the term 'public relations' does neither. As a result, the role of a PR agency remains woolly and ill-defined.

This lack of clear self-definition has given PR consultants a major image problem. It has allowed the role to be defined by people outside the industry - usually in less positive terms than the industry itself would like: spin, propaganda, free lunches and (in the UK) the Labour Party.

So what might be a better title to describe the work carried out by public relations practitioners? In our opinion, the role can be encapsulated in just one word: advocacy. It's a word that immediately conveys what PR is, the primary definition in the Oxford Dictionary being to: 'publicly recommend or support'. And if you look at the synonyms of an advocate in the Oxford Thesaurus, you will find: champion, upholder, supporter, backer, promoter, proponent, exponent, spokesman, spokeswoman and campaigner.

All describe exactly what public relations practitioners do. They go out on behalf of their clients (or themselves) and put the most positive case forward to the target audience. Unlike advertising, which does essentially the same thing, advocacy implies (and is), a more personal two-way dialogue. Like advertising, though, the end objective is invariably to drive sales.

As to the 'how', most people probably associate the word advocacy with verbal communication between an advocate and one or more people. It's true to say that the great majority of most PR practitioners' time is spent doing precisely this - persuading journalists to write yards of favourable editorial coverage about their clients.

But the traditional news media is only one of many communications platforms from which PR practitioners can champion their clients. Others include the Internet (websites, forums, e-mail discussion groups), events (launches, stunts, conferences, hospitality), and direct mail.

Regardless of the platform used to communicate the message, successful public relations depends on two skills. The first is that you can champion your cause eloquently and convincingly. In other words, you need to be able to talk and write well.

These skills are common enough that many companies can and do carry out their

own public relations in-house. But the best writing and speaking skills in the world are worth nothing without the creativity needed to get the attention of your target audience in the first place.

That's where GREEN Communications comes in. We brainstorm attention-grabbing ideas for marketing your product through the media, the Internet, events and direct mail. Our experienced team knows what works, and what doesn't. So, if you've got the skills to implement our recommendations in-house, you can do exactly that, with none of the expense of hiring an agency to do it for you.

## When and How to Use Public Relations

Public relations is such a flexible communications tool that it can be used as part of almost any marketing strategy. However, it is a discipline that relies on having an interesting story to tell about your product or service. The more interesting it is, the more you can expect journalists to write about it, key opinion leaders to want to have an opinion about it, and consumers to want to know about it.

If your product or service isn't inherently interesting (plenty of good products aren't), then you'll need to spend more on your public relations to make it so. If you don't, your PR efforts will fail. It really is as simple as that.

A couple of examples to illustrate the point. Let's say your company has just launched a brand new product. It's the first of a kind. It could be used by millions. It'll save people lots of time and money. That's a story. In this case, a well-crafted press release might be all you need to generate media coverage worth hundreds of thousands.

But most of us don't have the luxury of such a big story to tell. Most of us are marketing something which has either existed for a long time, or isn't hugely different from something else which has existed for a long time. Take condoms for example. Been around since 1564. There are lots of different brands. They all do the essentially the same thing, and have been for over 400 years.

Now, say you're a condom manufacturer and you want to increase sales with PR. The question is how? It's very unlikely that a press release explaining the merits of your condoms will have any take up at all. What you need is a story.

Trojan condoms made their own story. They hired a good PR agency and gave 60,000 free condoms to Sussex's taxi drivers, so that they in turn could offer them to people returning home late at night. Now there's a story. Nobody's done it before. It raises all sorts of discussion points. In short, it's news. As a bonus, it's also an example of public relations serving two purposes: increasing sales and doing some social good.

There's another important point to make about PR. Most people think of it as a tool primarily for generating offline media coverage. In that sense, it's sometimes seen as an alternative to traditional advertising (and advertising offers guaranteed space in a publication, where there's never any guarantee of that with PR).

Online, however, it's a very different story. Online, advertisers have essentially just one choice: banner advertising. There are two problems with banner advertising.

Firstly, they are by definition limited in size and 'presence'. You just can't create the same impact with a banner as you could with a page in a tabloid newspaper. Secondly, there is growing evidence that the more time we spend on the Internet (and we all are), the more we condition our brains to ignore banner ads, and indeed any other extraneous information that we aren't looking for. PR, on the other hand, integrates your message right where it needs to be: within the actual text of the information the reader is looking for.

With that in mind, here are a few examples of when and how to use public relations. This list is by no means exhaustive:

## When

- To launch and establish sales of a new product or service.
- To maintain awareness about and drive sales.
- To directly increase traffic to a website and drive online sales.
- To increase a website's search engine rankings.
- To get key opinion leaders to influence others about your product.
- To get distributors or retailers to influence others about your product.
- To secure more favourable terms from your suppliers.
- To minimise the impact of a crisis relating to your product or service.

## How

- By generating editorial coverage in the traditional trade or consumer media.
- By generating coverage in the online trade or consumer media.
- By placing advertorials (paid for editorial), in the trade or consumer media.
- By hosting or sponsoring an event.
- By carrying out a public stunt or guerrilla marketing.
- By sending a direct mail piece.
- By contributing to online discussion e-mail groups.
- By triggering word of mouth discussion, on or offline.

Those are just a few of the ways that you can communicate your message using PR. There are many others. And by necessity, we can only describe the 'hows' we've listed in very broad terms.

The million dollar questions are: "What initiative will generate media coverage for my product, on my budget?", "What event can my company host or sponsor on

our budget?", "What can we do to trigger word of mouth discussion?", and "What mail shot can we send that people will open and respond to?". These are questions that are so specific to your product or service that they can only be answered individually. And the quickest and most cost-effective way to do that is to ask GREEN.

## **How to Write a Press Release**

Public relations ideas developed by GREEN give you the 'hook' you need to generate media coverage (or increased media coverage) about your product or service. Just as important is the press release you use to 'sell in' the story to the media. Follow these guidelines and you shouldn't go far wrong.

### **Think like a journalist...**

Too many people write press releases that read like an advertisement for their product. Don't do it. Think first what the journalist wants: a good story. Avoid overly floral language and hyperbole. Avoid clichés.

### **...but don't lose sight of your objective**

The road to successful PR is littered with the corpses of stories that generated yards of media coverage, none of which mentioned the product. So whilst your first consideration is always the story itself, make sure your product or message is integral to it.

### **Stand out from the crowd**

Your press release may be one of hundreds in the journalist's in-tray. Make it stand out with an attention-grabbing headline. Consult GREEN for other ways to get your press release noticed.

### **Mind; your puction and chock your shpelling**

A mistake in the first paragraph is the kiss of death for even the most exciting story. So, after you've written your press release, print it out, proof read it, make changes, print it out again, proof read it again. Do not make mistakes. Ever.

### **Be succinct**

Journalists are busy. Get to the point and try keep your press release to one side of A4. They'll be much more likely to read it. And somewhere, a tree will thank you for it.

### **Supply pictures with stories**

Pictures, especially of children, animals and beautiful people all help 'sell' a story. So, if you can, make sure your picture includes at least one of these, if not all three.

## **Include quotes and interview opportunities**

They too add depth and flavour to your story.

## **Be accurate**

Journalists are an inquisitive and sceptical bunch. A small amount of embellishing in the name of a good story is one thing. Overdo it, and things can backfire. Tell the truth.

## **Be contactable**

You'd be surprised how many people forget to include their contact details. Yet more put their contact details, and are then unavailable when the press release hits the news desk. Be there.

## **Use a clean, easy-to-read layout**

If you use some ghastly unreadable font, the journalist will probably just skip to the next press release. If in doubt, use Arial font throughout. 12 pt bold for your heading. 11 pt regular for the body text, with line-and-a-half spacing, fully justified. 11 pt regular for your Notes To Editors (supplementary information that isn't directly relevant to the main story, such as: picture and interviewee availability, or background information). 12 pt bold for your contact details.

## **Choosing a Public Relations Agency**

If you use a media relations campaign or tactic recommended by GREEN you can either carry it out in-house, or commission a public relations consultancy to do it for you. If the latter, your choice of PR consultants is critical to the success of the project. With the benefit of experience, these are GREEN's top tips for selecting a public relations agency.

## **Judge the people not the pitch**

Public relations agencies will usually field a team of their most senior staff to pitch for your business. Nothing wrong with that. Certainly you need to have confidence that the people in charge know what they're doing. But they're rarely the people that'll be representing you to the outside world. So don't just talk with the organ grinders, go and spend some time with the monkeys: the account execs.

## **Scrutinise the quality the account executives**

Passion and enthusiasm – make sure that the person who'll be talking to journalists on your behalf is as excited about your business as you are.  
A charming and easy manner – hard to define, but you're looking for someone who is easy to warm to. They may have only seconds to make an impression over the telephone, so they'll need to be enthusiastic without being annoying; confident without being arrogant.

Grasp of the facts – sector experience can help, but it's not the be all and end all. What's really important is that your PR grasps the facts quickly, and can answer a journalist's questions promptly.

Common sense and a can-do approach - public relations is often unpredictable. So whether a project throws up a completely different outcome to that expected, or a journalist sets a seemingly unmeetable last-minute deadline, your PR needs a problem-solving attitude.

### **Don't be over impressed by contacts**

Sure, it helps to know people in the media. But only inasmuch as it helps a PR company get the job done quicker. What matters above all to a journalist is the story. That's all. If the story is good, they'll take it from a stranger. If it's not, even their best friend won't persuade them to run it.

### **Size matters**

When you select the agencies you want to pitch for your business, make sure you include a big and a small agency on your shortlist. Bigger agencies may have access to more resources, and offer economies of scale. But the bureaucracy associated with bigger agencies can stifle individual initiative. Smaller agencies may also be hungrier for your business and offer a more personal and accountable service.

### **Don't be impressed by jargon**

On the contrary, the more jargon an agency uses, the less likely it is able to 'connect' with the public, or its intermediary, often the tabloid hack.

### **Watch for hidden costs**

Many public relations agencies charge extra for things that you might presume would be included in a retainer fee or project costs, such as photocopying. Some also charge substantial mark ups on expenses. Be clear from the start exactly what you're getting for your money.

### **Maximising Media Coverage.**

Almost every story presents multiple opportunities to secure media coverage. So, once you've written your main press release, identify any other categories of journalists that might be interested, and tailor the release for the different needs of each category:

### **National vs Regional vs Local Media**

If your story was initially targeted at the national media, is there an angle for local or regional media? If there is, prepare additional releases that lead on the local angle. For example, you've organised a national competition - you should be able

to secure media coverage in the home towns of each of the finalists.

If, on the other hand, your release was originally targeted at a local newspaper, consider whether it might be strong enough for the nationals. If the story is that you're opening a new store, probably not. But if the ribbon's being cut by David and Posh Beckham, the nationals will want to know.

### **Other print media and the Internet**

There may be many different angles to your story. Say you've just commissioned research (as we once did on behalf of a client), that has proven that children from pet-owning households are healthier than children that don't have a pet. That's a national news story. But you've also got obvious angles for the parenting media, the pet press, and children's magazines. Whilst you're there, don't forget to submit your press releases to Internet-based news services. They are becoming more valuable in their own right, and your story may get picked up from the Internet by an offline journalist.

### **News agencies**

Want bucket loads of media coverage with the least amount of effort? Then don't forget to submit your story to a regional or national news agency. Get your story in with them, and it could get picked up by all the nationals for the next day.

### **Radio**

Write your radio press release to read more like a script. Make it sound like something you'd expect to hear being read on the radio. Offer an interviewee and include, say, five proposed interview questions that the broadcaster can ask your interviewee.

### **Television**

Television is the hardest nut to crack. Broadcast media in the UK is governed by very tight regulations concerning how and if commercial products can be mentioned. Your story needs to be very strong and very visual. You'll have to be very inventive in finding ways to get your product mentioned or seen (unless it is inherent to the story).

### **Contacting Journalists**

If there's one thing that really annoys journalists, it's being telephoned when they're in the middle of writing something, by someone who wants to know whether they got a press release.

They've had fifty, for God's sake. And there is probably only a slim chance that they'll remember yours. But that presents something of a problem, because unless you ring, how are you going to know whether they got it? Press releases go astray all the time.

### **Pick you moment carefully**

Afternoons are never much good for daily newspaper journalists, as they're rushing to meet deadlines for the next day's edition, and won't appreciate your call. Also, never ring a national newspaper when there is big news breaking (watch the latest TV news bulletin before you start ringing).

### **Don't mention the press release**

NEVER open the telephone conversation with "Hello, my name is Brian Smetherington, I wonder if you got my press release". Instead, introduce yourself and ask the journalist if they've got a couple of minutes to hear your story (they'll be pleasantly surprised you've been polite enough to ask).

Then tell the story as if you had never sent the press release in the first place. If the response is: "Ah yes, I saw a press release on this", you can ask whether they think they'll be doing anything with it. If the response is: "Do you have a press release", you can say you've already sent one.

It's obviously gone missing; can they give you an e-mail address to re-send it to. Either way, you've made contact, elicited some sort of reaction to your news, and all without asking whether or not they received it.

### **Don't take it personally**

Writing of any sort requires concentration and undivided attention. Journalism probably requires these things in greater measure, as in addition to the requirement for good copy, there are deadlines to meet. So, don't expect to be met with a warm response from every journalist you ring.

Most are helpful and polite. A small minority, usually the ones under greatest pressure, will just tell you to bugger off. Don't let the rude ones colour your opinion of journalists per se. Just take it on the chin, and move along to the next one.

### **Don't ask for commitment**

Unless your press release has been met with a hugely positive reaction, or you know the journalist well, don't expect them to commit to publishing your story. Chances are that it's not their decision anyway, and the best you can hope for is a broad indication of whether they liked it.

### **Be careful what you say**

Finally, a word of caution. By all means have a laugh with a journalist to get them to warm to you, but don't forget that you are on record, and off-the-cuff remarks may be taken down and used against you. If it happens to you, and some unfortunate remark is reprinted, put it down to experience. Learn from it. Complaining, in most cases, is a complete waste of breath.

## **Sending press releases**

If your press release is being distributed on a small scale, then it's easy enough to get the telephone numbers of the targeted newspapers, radio and tv stations, ring and find the named journalist you should address it to. Often, you'll be told: "send it to the newsdesk." Don't let that stop you from asking for a name.

If you're sending your press releases to a much wider audience (public relations companies will often distribute releases to more than 500 media outlets in the UK), your best bet will be to use one of the distribution agencies listed in the recommended links directory on this website.

Regardless of whether you have an agency distribute your press release, or you send it out yourself, there are only a limited number of ways it can be delivered on a normal budget:

### **By traditional post**

Certainly one method of press release delivery, even in these days of e-mail. Traditional post gives you the greatest flexibility as regards presentation, and what you include with your press release. In addition, a letter demands more of the addressee's attention, even if it's only to open the envelope and look inside.

### **By E-mail**

E-mails suffer from the fact that they are such transitory things. Yes they are fast, and yes, they are cheap. But if the journalist is using Outlook, your e-mail could 'fall' off the bottom of their screen after just 12 e-mails, never to resurface.

### **By Fax**

What's the point?

## **Measuring and Evaluating Public Relations.**

Whether you're doing your own public relations, working at an agency for a client, or working in-house, you'll need to measure and evaluate the effect of your efforts. Doesn't matter whether that's because you're genuinely interested in knowing what's worked and what hasn't, or because you just need to justify your existence to the board. Either way, you need to measure.

But herein lies one of the greatest challenges facing PR practitioners today - largely because public relations is so often measured in terms of media coverage generated. And how can you value something as subjective as an opinion in a newspaper? More to the point, how can you demonstrate that any increase in sales was due to media coverage?

After all, reading editorial is usually just one of the factors involved in the consumer's decision to buy, and PR is usually just one of a number of different and

simultaneous marketing initiatives.

The problem isn't restricted to measuring the value of media coverage. How, for instance, do you put a value on changing a key opinion leader's mind about something? In some cases, it could transform sales. In others, it'll make bugger all difference.

This issue is hotly debated within the profession, and there are two schools of thought. The first argues that accurate measurement and evaluation of public relations activity is achievable using various tools at our disposal, and that this task should account for a significant proportion of a PR practitioner's day.

The other argues that there are simply too many subjective variables for evaluation to provide anything meaningful, and any time spent evaluating is time not spent getting on with the job.

Both extremes are wrong, of course. Measurement and evaluation is possible, and necessary. But the time it takes needs to be justified by the quality of information it provides. With that in mind, here are GREEN'S tips for successful measurement and evaluation of public relations activity:

### **Ask the audience**

Ultimately, the only truly accurate way to quantify the effectiveness of public relations, irrespective of the platform used to communicate a message, is to survey the target audience. Ideally before and after a public relations campaign. But that can be expensive and/or time-consuming, and the reality is that few marketing managers are prepared to invest in something that isn't directly contributing to sales.

### **Valuing media coverage**

In the absence of a target audience survey, public relations is usually judged by the amount and value of editorial media coverage generated. However, this can only be a measure of how effective you've been in placing the story, not how effective the story was in generating sales.

Given this limitation, it is simply not worth spending huge amounts of time and effort using complex media analysis software to work out the financial value of coverage achieved. So far, we have yet to find a piece of media analysis software that doesn't make the job more time-consuming than doing it by hand. And since software relies on the same subjective human inputs, the results it produces are no more accurate. In short, don't waste your money.

If you want to ascribe a value to media coverage, calculate the amount it would have cost to place an advert of the same size or duration. Then rate each piece of coverage on the tone, strength and prominence of the message, and apply a multiplier of 1.2, 1.4 or 1.6 accordingly (and if you're reporting to someone else, make sure they agree the multipliers).

So, if the coverage is 'on message', multiply advertising value by 1.2. If the point is strongly made, implying editorial endorsement, then multiply the ad value by 1.4. And if it is in the first paragraph, prominently on the page, multiply the ad value by 1.6. Apply the same in reverse for negative media coverage.

This still provides an arbitrary value. After all, it is still subjective, and what proof that people are 1.6 times more likely to act on a prominent, strong editorial call to action than an advertisement? But logic dictates that editorial does carry a premium over advertising, and if you can justify a different multiplier, then work with that instead. Our advice, though, is always to err on the conservative side.

This is a rough and ready measurement, but it takes a fraction of the time needed to input all the variables into a piece of software, and is probably more accurate for its simplicity.

### **Record and report everything**

A good PR campaign will often generate a spontaneous reaction from a wide cross-section of different people: members of the public, journalists, the sales-force, customers, even the CEO. Record any and all reaction to your media coverage, wherever it comes from. It won't be as scientific as a survey of the target audience, but it does go some way towards measuring the effect PR is having, and not just the output.

### **If you don't ask...**

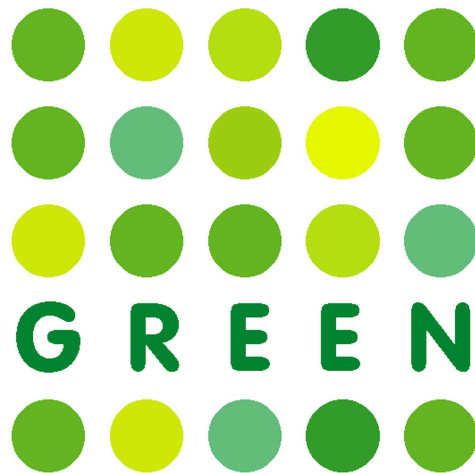
Wherever possible, include a measurable call to action in your PR story. As often as not, it'll get edited out by the media. But even if the call to action only appears in one publication, it can provide a good indication of how the broader story is being received elsewhere.

### **Hedge your bets with multiple objectives**

NEVER make media coverage the sole objective of a public relations tactic. Aside from the inherent risk in banking on someone else's editorial judgement, you should always include some aspect of the project which can be measured more accurately. For example, if you're doing a stunt to generate coverage, don't do it on the top of a mountain in the Hebrides.

Remember, you can use GREEN to get a creative marketing tactic for your business that you'll be able to measure in more ways than one.

In summary, valuing media coverage will likely remain the most widely used measure of the effectiveness of PR for some time. It's imperfect, so don't waste too much time on it. More importantly, always try and include other ways of measuring reaction to a campaign, such as a response to a specific call to action. And record all reaction to the campaign, not just the media coverage.



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