

Catching the Public Eye

The world today is a complete marketplace and it relies heavily on impressions and prejudices. Therefore, the image, the brand and the visibility of a product/ company/ individual becomes almost essential for survival in this shallow, appearance driven atmosphere. Advertising is one of the most common means of achieving visibility and recognition. Another option that is almost as effective but hasn't been given its due is Public Relations (P.R). The Public Relations industry itself has been plagued by image problems created as a result of old fashioned mindset among the clients who feel that it is cheap to court publicity. In this process, many overlook the fact that there is a lot more to P.R. than courting the media. Certainly, it will always focus heavily on publicity, but today it includes community participation, bylined articles, public speaking, media commentary, relationships with local area reporters and development of good professional relationship. These elements of P.R. can be particularly effective at local and regional levels and therefore, especially useful to people in small business. Also the advantages of publicity like the low costs involved and more credibility compared to advertising are making it an option that cannot be ignored anymore. However, good P.R. is still an art of sorts and requires serious research, thought and planning at all levels.

Public Relations (PR) can be defined as the practice of conveying messages to the public through the media on behalf of a client, with the intention of changing the public's actions by influencing their opinions. Modern public relations uses a variety of techniques including opinion polling and focus groups to evaluate public opinion, combined with a variety of high-tech techniques for distributing information on behalf of their clients, including satellite feeds, the Internet, broadcast faxes, and database-driven phone banks to recruit supporters for a client's cause. So, the main objective of P.R remains influencing the public's perceptions and behavior in a variety of ways and arenas so that they favor their clients. P.R. is simply accurate, consistent and timely communications that convey the right message to the right audience. Developing a P.R. plan is the first step in a P.R. initiative. It need not be complex. In simplest terms a P.R. plan consists of the following steps:

- Think through your audiences
- Identify the objectives and goals of your business
- Decide how you want to be perceived by your audiences
- Prioritize the most important facts about your business

Once these core concepts have been developed, you can:

- **Strategize on how you can accomplish your objectives**
For example, you may adopt a strategy of marketing your services only to those in a certain age group. Or create the impression that your products are more expensive, but worth their quality. Or position your business as an innovator in a technology instead of just a follower
- **Come up with Tactics**
The tools are the means to carry out your plan. Speeches, articles, sitting on advisory boards, media outreach are all good tactics for small businesses

Even after the advent of so many avenues of influencing public opinion, the press still remains a P.R. professional's main tool. The relationship between the publicists and the journalists is a very unique and symbiotic one. They might loathe each other, work on diametrically opposite agendas, head directly for confrontation quite often but the fact remains that neither of them can do without each other. Hence, it is always an advantage to be in the good books of the press and the media.

This can do that by building a reputation for submitting newsworthy press releases, offering timely response to their inquiries and being considerate to their preferences while dealing with them. All this contributes tremendously in the long run while building an image for your brand and consolidating its position in the marketplace.

The different ways of using the press for your P.R. activities are

1. Press Releases

A press release is simply a written statement distributed to the media. It is a fundamental tool of PR work. The text of the press release is usually (but not always) written as a news story, with an eye-catching headline and an article written in standard journalistic inverted pyramid style

2. Press Conferences

A press conference consists of someone speaking to the media at a predetermined time and place. Press conferences provide an excellent opportunity for speakers to control information and who gets it; depending on the circumstances, speakers may hand-pick the journalists they invite to the conference instead of making themselves available to any journalist who wishes to attend

3. A Publicity Event

Often called 'Publicity Stunts', they are events organized solely to gain public attention and garner press coverage

4. A "Circuit"

A PR spokesperson or his/her client "does the circuit" by being interviewed on various papers and magazines with audiences that the client wishes to reach

Press releases are the cheapest and most popular means of using the press. The rules are simple. Have a catchy headline, all in CAPITAL LETTERS, be sure to have something that may interest the editor, include your contact information, and ALWAYS mail it or hand deliver it to the appropriate person at your local newspapers. When contacting the press, you should start with your local weekly paper, as they are most likely to publish your press release. While preparing for your press release, please keep in mind the 10 elements of an effective press release. They are:

1. Only issue press releases that are newsworthy

A newsworthy press release addresses issues that your prospects or customers are grappling with and demonstrates why they, as well as the press, should care about the press release as well as your company. But a newsworthy release doesn't guarantee that it will be covered immediately, or at all, in your target publications. There are different levels of news that can be assigned to press releases:

- **Level I release** – It is newsworthy, posted on a wire service and is typically covered
- **Level II release** – It is also newsworthy and posted on wire and has over 50% chance of being covered
- **Level III release** – It is newsworthy but mostly a 'For Your Information' type of a release to keep people up to date on your company. It has less than 50% of chance of being covered but is an important way of maintaining editorial mindshare

2. Define Target Press List

A target press list consists of the names, addresses, phone, fax, and email addresses of the key press you'd like to cover your company and technology. Press lists can typically be divided into three parts that include:

- **Tier 1 press** – includes press and freelance reporters who write for publications that publish weekly or bi-weekly
- **Tier 2 press** – includes monthly publications
- **Tier 3 press** -- typically include your target vertical market publications given that the vertical marketplace is not your primary customer/prospect base

When developing your target press list, make sure you determine who covers your product or service area at the publication. Do not use a blanket distribution strategy to disseminate your press release to publications.

3. Capture the reader's attention with the headline

The headline should be in all capital letters, boldfaced, succinct, includes an action verb, and gives a benefit if possible. The subtitle is additional title information that explains the news value of your press release but it is not a mandatory requirement

4. Include your product's positioning, key features, and benefits to end users

Positioning, key features, and benefits are key elements that press will want to include in an article. Positioning is something that can be conveyed succinctly in a company representative quote or in the first or second paragraph of the release

5. Include a customer and, or analyst quote if possible

Having a customer or analyst quote in your release helps raise its level of newsworthiness and chance of being covered by the press. It's also helpful to offer these references to key press contacts to encourage them to write an interesting article

6. Include a quote from the president of your company or other appropriate spokesperson

Including a quote from the president or company spokesperson is a useful way to convey what the release means to the company and its future

7. Include pricing and availability information

Your press release must include pricing information such as the cost for software or subscription fees for content products. If providing such information is inappropriate, provide as much information as possible

8. Include contact information for press to receive additional information

It's important to include company contact information, a telephone number as well as an email address, at the top of the press release so that the press knows whom to contact for more information

9. Remember press release formatting rules

Your press release should be double spaced or 1.5 spaced with the appropriate usage of boldfaced characters. Also, your press release should be succinct and not exceed three pages in length

10. Take care while sending your release

When planning a press release, you will need to determine its Level of newsworthiness (I, II, or III) and plan accordingly.

Things to look out for:

While formulating your P.R. plan and your press release, there are a few things you should keep in mind:

- Handling the press is like tending to the seeds in your garden--both need attention or else they will die
- Don't add reports to your e-mail press release distribution list without asking
- When you send e-mails, don't use attachments
- Keep It Short and Simple (KISS)
- Don't Promote a poorly developed and maintained website
- Only if you invest time and energy in providing valuable, rich content and offer unique and viable options for users--will your site be worthy of a publicity campaign

A successful P.R initiative doesn't end at a successful press release. Public relations is an ongoing exercise to ensure that the organization has a strong public image. Public relations activities help the public in understanding the organization and its products better. Hence, after every P.R. initiative, take stock of the public reaction and look at how better you can promote your product/ website. There are a lot of options available for following up like:

- **Speaking in public**

While it may only reach a small group of people, they are atleast targeted and most likely to have an interest in what you are saying

- **Give your opinion**

Look through magazines, newspapers, and other publications to see if you can offer an opinion, suggestion, or insight on the subject at hand

- **Call a radio station**

Maybe you could offer some of your knowledge to a radio program and give away your URL, if and when it is appropriate

- **Write articles** about your industry and submit them to various content sites

All these activities will not only increase your product's brand recall but also will help you in consolidating the response received after an effective P.R. campaign. Such campaigns if done at regular intervals supplement and compliment the advertising campaigns beautifully. So, with a little bit of planning and foresight, a lot can be achieved using the power of communication and the media.

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