



Creating and using PR in your business

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Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that the media wields an enormous amount of power and influence within our society. Good PR is capable of harnessing this power, and is one of the most cost effective ways of getting your company noticed- yet it is also an area that is neglected by many businesses. One of the reasons for this is that the success of a PR campaign can be difficult to monitor accurately. At its best PR, can achieve spectacular results for very little outlay both in time and expenditure, at its worst, it can flop completely. Surprisingly, whatever the result, the cost to you will often remain the same.

The secret to superior PR is in the planning and thought that goes into it - using simple yet effective strategies to gain maximum exposure for your company. Whilst PR can sometimes be considered a cheap form of advertising, this is simply not the case. There are definite costs in terms of software used, time spent on the campaign and so on. In addition, if you employ a company to do your PR for you, then this will also incur a cost- often charged at a daily rate. However, if you can create a successful PR campaign, then your business will receive a tremendous amount of publicity and credibility for a relatively small outlay.

How should you start generating exposure for your business?

1. Reflect on what your company does that is newsworthy- brainstorm with colleagues, friends, partners for a variety of perspectives. You might not think that you do anything to justify media coverage, but think again. Look at what your company does: the service it provides or product that it makes from different angles. Within its specialised sector, you should be able to come up with some form of newsworthy angle – are you the first in your sector to offer a specific service, are you launching a new product, have you upgraded the service that you offer your clients?
2. Decide upon your target audience and be as specific as possible. Are you aiming for national coverage, will your angle be of interest to local people, or people working within your specific area of the market? An angle of interest to the local community could be the creation of employment within the area. Alternatively, the specialised trade press may be interested in the use of new

technology within your company, you could even catch the attention of the national media with news of a service that your company provides linked in with a current topical issue e.g. selling a health bar aimed specifically at children to combat the increasing trend towards childhood obesity.

3. Narrow your focus when sending out a press release. There is no point in contacting a national newspaper if the story you are sending them is of local interest only. Likewise, the publishers of 'Ball Bearing Monthly' may be fascinated to read about a new product that you are manufacturing, but this will be of no interest whatsoever to the readers of 'The Daily Mirror'.

4. Remember that you are NOT writing an advert- if your press release takes this form, it will go straight into the bin. Your article must contain information of interest to your target audience.

5. One of the advantages of press releases is that they can be easily adapted for different audiences. Once you have written the main copy of your release, it can be adapted for the local press or the specialised trade press with minimum effort, maintaining a narrow focus and an angle that is interesting to its intended audience.

6. Consider the topical subjects in the news- childhood obesity, crime, anti social behaviour to name but a few issues which are 'hot' at the time of writing, but will soon give way to some new topic. Can you find a way in which your product or service impacts on these topics? If so, the media are far more likely to pick up on any article that you send them. If your release hits the right spot at the right time, you can gain an enormous amount of coverage for very little effort.

Structuring the press release.

A press release should follow certain conventions.

7. Whenever possible, confine your release to one sheet of A4- there may be exceptions to this, but as a rule of thumb, releases contained on one page are far more likely to be read.

8. Keep the emotive language to a minimum - you are recounting the facts and should therefore aim for an impersonal written style, avoiding adjectives as much as possible. Remember, you are not writing an advert- your release should be written in an objective, unsensational style.

9. Bear in mind your audience. Think about their perspective and present the facts in a way that is interesting to them: the readers of 'Pig Farmers Gazette' will be interested in different items to readers of 'Watercolours Weekly'. If you are writing for a trade publication, you may want to go into more technical detail and use specialised vocabulary, but this should be avoided in most cases when dealing with the mass media.

10. Your headline is vital as this is what first catches an editor's attention - I recommend writing this last of all. The headline should be a précis of the whole story, and it is only once the whole release is written that you are in a position to summarise it with pinpoint accuracy.

11. Consider first paragraph of the release very carefully: it should tell your audience what the key information is and why they should be interested in reading it- in other words, it should summarise what the rest of the release is about. Once you have written the whole release, you may be in a better position to redraft your first paragraph to ensure that it is as effective as possible.

12. Spend plenty of time crafting the first 10 words of your release- they must make an impact straight away. Because editors receive so many releases, it is essential that your first sentence grabs their attention. Spending half your time writing the first sentence and headline is a worthwhile investment of your time. Try to think about what is interesting about your story – why would people in the local area / trade etc want to read about it? Try asking the question 'which means that...' once you have made a statement to see if any greater truth can be told about what your company or organisation has done.

13. Deal with the facts- don't be tempted to embellish a release with fancy language and irrelevant information. It can be particularly difficult to resist this temptation when writing a release that really doesn't have much content to it. However, bear in mind that you need a good, strong story, so if it can be covered in two coherent paragraphs, don't be tempted to add a third- an experienced news editor can spot waffle a mile away.

The layout of the press release

14. On the top left hand side, type 'News Release' with the date that you are sending it out. Further along the line, 'For Immediate Release' should also be written. This top line may be underlined and possibly highlighted in a different colour- I choose to highlight mine in red, but this is a personal preference.

15. Make sure that the date on your release is for the day that you are sending it out- it can take a few days or even weeks for a release to be circulated and approved by appropriate departments, and so the original date can soon become obsolete. An old date makes your release look like stale news.

16. Underneath this comes the headline, which should be changed depending upon which publication you are sending it to. For example, if you are sending your release to a local newspaper, I would start with "Coventry company wins new award..." but for a regional newspaper or radio station, the headline would be more effective starting with "West Midlands company wins award..." The release may stay the same, but the headline is more relevant to the news organisation that it is being sent to.

17. Try to include some quotes in your release, from two people if possible. Whilst the main body of the release is written in factual, unemotive language, by using a quote you can introduce an element of subjectivity and persuasion. For example, "we have been thrilled by the enthusiasm that our customers have shown for our new magic duster..."

wouldn't appear in the main copy, but could be attributed to the managing director as a quote.

18. Always get approval for any quotes that you use- you don't always have to actually speak to the person, but you do need to ensure that they have seen and approved what you have written.

19. Your quotes should show your company in a positive light, but do not use them as an opportunity to deride your competitors- be aware that comments can be deemed as libellous, so do think through quotations carefully.

20. At the end of the copy, and above the list of contacts, write the word '/Ends' – this indicates that everything below this line is for the journalist's information only and will not be published- including any phone numbers that have been given out.

21. At the end of your press release include at least two contact numbers of people that journalists can speak with if they require further clarification or information- a journalist will not consider publication of a release with no contact details. Include a landline and a mobile number if possible, and make sure that your contacts know that the release is going out so they can make themselves available.

22. Journalists prefer to receive releases as an e mail- it is more instantaneous for you, ensuring that your news isn't stale by the time it reaches its recipient; it is also easier for the journalist to cut and paste.

What happens next?

23. Once your press release is ready, you now need to send it out. You will need to invest in some form of database which contains the contact details of all sections of the media. I use PR Planner which provides a comprehensive package: names, contact details and useful background information such as circulation figures and target audience.

24. The use of a database makes it quick and easy to send out large numbers of press releases, but this in itself has its pitfalls. Do not succumb to the desire to send out huge quantities of releases which do not have a clear focus audience. You must edit your recipient list carefully by reading through the background information and deciding if this particular publication, radio or TV station would find your release newsworthy- remember that this will be different for different areas of the media.

25. Plan the optimum time for sending out your release- if it is a current hot topic; send it out as soon as possible. As a general rule, the best time to send a press release is between 9am and 2pm; having tried a combination of times, I have found that these work best. Friday afternoon is best avoided unless you have a specific reason for sending your release out at this time.

26. Having sent the release, make sure that all your contacts are available and that their mobile phones are switched on- if a journalist tries once or twice to get through to you and can't, they may well not try again. A good rule of thumb is to treat a journalist as you would a business prospect i.e. make it as easy as possible for them to reach you.

27. As a general rule, don't follow up your press releases with a phone call. Journalists are very busy and hate being swamped with calls about every release they receive. If they find your story newsworthy, they will come back to you for more information if they need it. The only time you should routinely call the newsroom is if you wish to offer a story as an exclusive, or if the story has changed significantly since sending the original release.

28. If a journalist phones you for more information, what should you say? Basically listen to their questions and answer them as fully as you can. They may want more background, or to know how an idea originated. Prepare for this by discussing these elements with the other named contacts to ensure consistency, and also that you have the information at your fingertips. You are selling the idea to them, but not the product.

29. One good way to prepare for a possible interview is for a colleague or friend to ask you relevant practice questions - this way you are conversant with the information and fully prepared, enabling you to make the most of the opportunity offered by a one to one contact.

30. A newspaper journalist will ask questions and write down a summary of your answers, so if there is a particularly significant point that you wish to make, slow down and repeat your point for emphasis. This is particularly important when it comes to statistics or price, as it is so easy to make mistakes with figures. Try to equate price to something tangible e.g. this system costs £8000 the equivalent of VW Polo- this way a journalist can't get it wrong.

31. However, when carrying out a radio or TV interview, the opposite is true. Whilst it may be edited, you can't be misquoted. This means that all your hesitations and repetitions may be broadcast, so it is important to think carefully about what you intend to say and which points you wish to make before going into an interview situation. If you make a mess of an important point ask if you can say it again.

32. Journalists very busy people and will normally have to visit and write up several stories in a day. Please respect this and don't expect them to make your story the focus of their day! If they give you a time that they will be with you, show them the courtesy of being there, prepared and ready for them when they

arrive. I waited around outside a client's building in the cold once with a reporter who was supposed to run a live piece during the breakfast show at 8.20. Nobody turned up at the building until after 8.30. The live piece had to go out late, the producer of the breakfast show was not pleased and this act of rudeness will not have done the company any favours for future news releases.

33. It is worth remembering that the vast majority of releases you send to publications will disappear and you will never hear about them again. Even if a story is a hit, you may only hear from a handful of reporters. Of the rest, many will be binned, although a lot of magazines will either run your release as it is, or in an edited version. They won't bother to contact you about it; they will just run the story.

After the event

34. If your coverage is mainly local, tune into local radio stations, TV stations and buy the local papers that you sent the release out to. If you regularly go further afield, a good media monitoring service will charge you from about £100 a month upwards and will send you clippings of the stories that have run. They will also send you mentions of which broadcast media covered your story. It is often the only way that you will know what happens to your story.

35. You should make it a company policy that every time a new customer comes into your shop, or calls up your company, to ask them where they heard about you. It may surprise you how many people come in because they have heard a story about you on the radio or read about you in the papers – even though it may have been several months before. They may have heard about you from a publication that you didn't even know you were in.

36. If you do get hold of newspaper articles and clippings, it is worth collecting them. Creating favourable coverage for your company or creating stories about new product launches increases credibility. Most of your competitors, unless they are very large, will not bother with PR. They will probably not have the resources to create PR in-house and they are unlikely to hire their own PR firm. As a result, they will not be generating regular stories in the media. So if you are, you will instantly have a real advantage over them. How? By collecting and presenting the stories about your company when you are in front of prospects. Here are 6 opportunities that you may have to impress clients at crucial moments in the buying cycle.

37. Your office. If you are inviting a prospect to a meeting in your office, make sure that you have news stories about your company in frames on the walls. The more stories the better (provided they haven't yellowed with age). What sort of impression does this create when they walk in? It's impressive. It means that you are a 'famous' company - most people are at least a little impressed with celebrity. Having a few press cuttings around doesn't make you Terry Wogan, but it does make you newsworthy, and therefore a more exciting company to

do business with. It also establishes credibility – which is so important in the eyes of a prospect at this time.

38. Your showroom. Have you ever been in a garage waiting to pick up your car from a service? Often you can be kept waiting hours. Perhaps there are times when your customers sit and wait around to be served? Some garages will let you watch the TV or provide you with newspapers. Some dealers (the smart ones) will also let you read the latest (good) reviews of their cars. You can read about all the latest models, compare their car to their inferior competitors etc. Being car magazines there are plenty of colourful pictures of the new models. Does it make you feel differently about their cars? Quite possibly. You may not normally buy a car magazine, so you could be amazed at how much coverage the new model has generated (there are many car magazines with a lot of space to fill). This could well influence your decision if you are thinking of changing cars in the near future. What is true of car showrooms could be equally true of dentists, exhaust centres and anywhere else where your customer has to regularly sit and wait.

39. Your product portfolio. As a sales person, you are not expected to be an independent witness. I have never yet met a sales person who, at the end of the meeting, concluded that I would be better off buying a competitor's product because it is more reliable and costs less. You are expected to point out all the good things about the product and so, for that matter, is your company's brochure. But you can have a secret weapon – media coverage. "Of course you would expect me to tell you how well the system performs, but this is what the newspapers have said about us." It is at this point that you can unleash a pile of clippings – many will be articles which are more or less reprints of the press releases that you sent out, but some of which will be proper articles which really do report on what an innovative / money saving / compact / unusual product you have produced. It is like taking an independent critical set of witnesses who can vouch for your character on every sales call.

40. In written proposals. You are expected to present your product or service in its best light when preparing a written proposal. But the more independent it appears, and the less hype that goes into it, the more believable it becomes. The danger of course, is that it can become a very dull document. Direct quotes from radio interviews, TV stories or trade magazines can be a good way to back up the point you are making. In effect you are saying - don't just take my word for this, listen to what the media have to say about it.

41. On your website. Whilst the article, when it was originally written or broadcast, may have been seen or heard by a wide group of people, most of whom had no interest in who you are or what you sell, people visiting your website are very different. Many of them will be interested in who you are and may want to buy what you sell. I can't think, therefore, of a more suitable place for your press release to appear, enhanced by extracts from the magazines which featured your story. Not only will people be interested to read these stories, once again they increase your credibility, keep your site fresh and will help you to get picked up by search engines. Steve Hawkins, Director of web

design company 'Caged Fish' who specialise in website optimisation says, "The more current you can keep your website, the higher its rankings on search engines such as Google. This is because the search engines rate the fact that you take the time to keep your site up to date and refresh its contents on a regular basis. If you include the name of the trade magazine that ran your story in the first place, you may also appear when people search under that name."

42. Staying in touch with prospects. So you made your sales pitch and the prospect was interested - but not enough to buy today because they have to take it back to their board, or maybe discuss it at the next staff meeting. Perhaps even your most enthusiastic prospects take months or even years to make a decision. Newspaper cuttings about how the product is developing, detailing account wins and featuring expansion stories about your company can all help to reinforce the prospect's feelings of confidence in your organisation, make them feel involved and even prompt their memory to take action.

So perhaps it's worth going back through any recent media coverage and looking at it again. Could it help build your company's credibility, keep prospects warm or build up the trust of a prospect? If you don't have a PR programme currently in place, perhaps you can now see how useful media coverage can be at building credibility and helping to close the deal. Now is the time to start making a habit of doing more to gain PR coverage for your company, and doing more with the coverage once it has been generated. Use these tips, remember that journalists are doing their job, make the most of any coverage that you gain and you should find that the time and effort spent in generating media coverage for your business is worthwhile.

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