

Hold The Front Page!

WE'RE SENDING A PRESS RELEASE



David Gent says that, despite a questionable image, PR should be taken seriously.

How do you communicate with customers and prospects? Undoubtedly, you produce brochures and leaflets, probably make them available online, mail them out to your database, hand them out at meetings and events. You might well advertise in key magazines, to project your image and capabilities. You'll have polished up your website at considerable cost, tried some pay-per-click activity, sent out some e-shots and watched them bounce back. But have you tried simply reporting on your business successes and developments? Many trade titles, web magazines and local newspapers would be interested in your news and if you are not publicising your activities, perhaps you should.

It's called PR, or press relations, or even public relations. Strangely for a marketing technique that's all about image building, it has a surprisingly poor image itself. Could be that the political spin-meisters and tabloid hucksters give it a bad name. It could be that everyone knows someone, who knows someone else who tried PR – and it didn't work. Or it may be that you once used a PR company and ended up writing all the copy or paying for every meeting, phone call and mile travelled. But that's not PR, in my view that is bad PR. Good PR can reach the places other marketing strategies cannot and deliver desirable outcomes like 'awareness', 'communication', 'information' and 'market education'.

PR is different, because it is filtered through a third party. Somewhere, an editor receives your story, subs it, changes it to fit editorial style, builds it into a feature or review, or simply spikes it. That means there's never any guarantee of coverage, but when your story does appear, the whole filtering process makes it more worthwhile. Somebody felt your story was worth publishing, of interest to their readers, and when it appears on the news page or as part of a report, it will be read – or at least noted in

passing. "That's interesting," the reader thinks or "How come they get so much coverage!"

But, one might say, 'we don't have enough stories', while another complains 'we have too many to cover properly'. Neither case is likely. Given publishing cycles, one story a month and the occasional feature article would constitute a productive PR programme and most organisations can summon up a dozen items of interest. They don't have to be earth shattering. Despite the title of this article, very few PR stories actually make the front page, but if you've won a notable contract, successfully implemented a noteworthy project, developed a new product or training course, even made a key appointment, then that's news in your market sector and your locality. If you have more than a dozen candidate stories, then either cherrypick the best to create a varied campaign or publicise them under different divisions or brands, to indicate they're separate entities and worthy of distinct coverage.

Here's another tip, it doesn't have to be up-to-the-minute news, namely that week or even that month. It is news when you put the story out, so you can save stories till later to avoid clashing with your other PR. On the other hand, don't keep putting out exactly the same stories with slight variations. I did come across one

company that successfully recycled its stories on a six-monthly basis, but its products were so extremely high tech (mass spectrometry, as it happens), editors probably didn't fully understand them the first time, or the second. Another transmission company continues to put out a feature story I actually wrote fifteen years ago – and still gets coverage – but that's not really the way it's done (and I'm sure readers notice).

There is also the conviction that PR is all lies anyway. PR people lying, how could you think that?! True, many tawdry stories that make the red tops may be 'economical with the actualité', but in the more prosaic world of trade and B2B PR, the material should be factual and true. Editors familiar with the marketplace will soon spot inappropriate hype or superlatives and damn your story in print with such phrases as 'the company claims' and 'according to a spokesperson'. That's not to say you shouldn't trumpet your 'firsts', 'biggests' and 'bests' or claim your rightful market status, because PR is, after all, a promotional tool and you should subtly employ it as such. For one client's PR programme, I once studied many university and college prospectuses and found very few made any claims regarding their strengths and specialities, which meant they all came across the same. That's another tip then, if you've got it, flaunt it – spell out your USPs and tell the world you're good at what you do (presuming you are).



So, if you acknowledge the potential viability of PR, you appreciate that material should be fundamentally truthful and that one single story does not a campaign make, then who should write the press releases? You, someone in the office who's not too busy, someone especially employed for the role or a dreaded 'PR consultant'? You could do it yourself, but to be frank are you proficient enough at creative writing and do you have the time? I've known many erudite and articulate people, some not too far from this desk, who take ages to construct a business letter or report that I could write much better, in half the time. That's not arrogance, that's experience. Besides, even if you were a master or mistress of prose, undertaking an extra unpaid role means that something is bound to suffer – and despite your best intentions, that will inevitably be the PR programme. The same applies to 'somebody not too busy', with the added concern that being unable to fill the working day might not be the best credentials for a key marketing function.

Employing an in-house PR person is an option, but really only if yours is a large organisation with a sufficient wealth of material to justify a full-time role. Even then, he or she may lack the experience of different techniques and creative strategies that comes from running a mix of PR campaigns, across various market sectors. You could also lose the independent perspective that helps to identify newsworthy angles and highlight market strengths, which an outside consultant can provide. After all, you probably know how difficult it can be to recognise all your 'unique selling propositions' from within the organisation.

Which leaves you to consider – and note how subtly I sew in the PR message at this point – hiring an external PR consultant. But at what cost? It seems anyone who understands anything at all about PR agencies, knows they charge something mysterious called 'a monthly consultancy fee'. This often raises hackles in accounts departments and board meetings, but really it's a straightforward way of charging for services, where there is no paid-advertising commission or design cost. It covers meetings, creative writing, campaign management, press release distribution and a whole lot more. It's not just an elaborate hoax contrived by the PR industry.

But, again, what does it cost? Here I'll go out on a limb – and risk rival PR agencies poaching all my business – by stating that a typical monthly fee for a trade or B2B PR account could be in the region of £750 - £2,000, depending on output, complexity, content and, let's face it, where you're based. You'd probably pay more, often a whole lot more, for consumer, financial and corporate PR, involving media briefings, press calls and creative stunts. If you pay a lot less, then either you've been with the agency for a long time and the fee hasn't changed or you are getting the sort of service many clients complain about, where you do all the work, leaving the agency to just retype and circulate. In my experience, properly researching and originating a story, involving an initial brief, studying contracts and other documentation, internet and desk research, interviewing third parties, then actually writing the text, can take several days. Longer if it's an original feature article. So the fee needs to recognise that and all the associated admin work and press liaison.

As to where you should send your stories and how, then it's here that a PR specialist can help justify the fee. There are regularly updated online and printed directories of media titles and contacts that can be used to compile distribution lists and most PR agencies will subscribe to these. Admittedly, one big agency I knew sent every single story to the same megalist of 500 or so publications and correspondents, which was a waste of resources and annoying to journalists. Far better to tailor the list to those who might possibly be interested in that particular story – and that will vary according to content and any third parties featured. With regard to how to circulate material, most journo's now prefer to receive copy and images digitally, although some still want hard copy and prints via the post, and it's the job of your PR consultant to determine which is which.

To recap then, PR can be a distinctive addition to the marketing mix and if you've never tried it properly, then you owe it to yourself and your business objectives to set aside some budget for a trial. Even if you've had a previously unsuccessful experience, it could be worth another go, using someone else. After all, you probably know what you should be telling the world, or your particular segment of it, you just need somebody to put it into readable words and send it to the right people. It could be you, assuming you have the time and particular talent, or it could be a PR professional. Over the years, many of my clients have become converts, evangelical even about the power of PR, although admittedly there are some products and services that are impossible to publicise. Like truck clutch plates, but that's another story. However, you won't know if your brand has PR potential, unless you take a deep breath and jump in the deep end. Come on in, the water's lovely!

The received wisdom is that stories should be short, covering no more than a single sheet of A4, but in my experience longer copy is acceptable to many editors and can always be subbed down to the right length. I tend to write press releases so that all the salient facts are covered in the first two or three paras, then expanded upon on subsequent pages. That leaves a local paper to run a briefer news item or picture story, while a trade title or web magazine, with more space and deeper interest in the subject, can run the piece in full, which means more coverage.



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