



Why PR?



PR consultant David Gent of David Gent Creative provides a straightforward briefing

The PR industry has grown substantially over the last thirty years, its techniques form part of the modern marketing mix and it is one of the most popular career choices for graduates. Yet, ironically, PR itself suffers from an image problem, born of the sometimes questionable tactics of celebrity publicists, political spin doctors and PR stunt organisers, and because it can be difficult to understand and evaluate. So I felt it was time to return to basics and answer some fundamental questions about PR, like what does it mean? how does it work? and how much does it cost? For the purposes of this article, I have discounted political lobbying, financial PR, online communications, crisis management and other more esoteric disciplines, focusing instead on the straightforward business-to-business and consumer PR that is relevant to most organisations and implemented by the majority of practitioners. It won't answer all your questions, but I hope it puts PR back on your marketing agenda, if you've been dissatisfied in the past or haven't yet explored its potential.



What exactly is PR?

PR or Public Relations concerns communicating effectively with an organisation's or brand's target audiences, or 'publics', and positively influencing perceptions, opinions and trading. Although it also targets the broadcast media, PR primarily operates through the editorial pages of the press, hence the alternative term Press Relations, and its output is usually seen as news or feature coverage. It can contribute directly toward business growth by opening up new markets, identifying new customers, attracting high calibre employees, influencing share prices and creating favourable awareness of brands, products and services. It should also help generate a favourable climate of opinion amongst stakeholders, employees and the community at large.

Why is it effective?

Since it operates through the editorial medium and is effectively filtered by professional journalists and reporters, PR coverage is positioned alongside news and feature content, so is quite distinct from paid-for advertising. This imparts added weight to PR stories and is more likely to attract favourable comment from colleagues and customers than a display advertisement, at a fraction of the cost. Disregarding tabloid-style stunts, it also tends to be fundamentally newsworthy and honest, partly due to the editorial filtration process, so PR material is often actually interesting and believable (yes, I mean that). One caveat, however; PR is not instant like advertising, it needs time to bed down and accommodate learning curves, dialogue building, copy deadlines and publishing cycles, so allow around six months for it to be fully functioning.



Is it like advertising?

Although the marketing goals are similar, the short answer is no. Advertising relates to paid space or airtime and you control the message, the content and visual style. PR stories are run effectively free of charge, but are published or featured at the discretion of the editor or producer. Whereas with advertising if you pay the price your message will appear, there is no guarantee that a particular title or programme will run your story. Put the effort and expertise into making it interesting and newsworthy, however, and the prospect of coverage is considerably enhanced. Even then, other news priorities, space restrictions and copy deadlines can intervene and your story may be spiked, not necessarily through lack of merit.





How long should a story be?

The received wisdom is that press releases should be short, around 300 words of text on a single sheet of A4, but I disagree with that. True, most consumer titles and daily newspapers, which have the journalistic staff to follow up stories, do prefer shorter releases. But many trade and business titles and website publications actually welcome longer stories, on the basis that you can sub-edit text down but can't sub it up. That's why I structure releases so that all the key points are in the first few paragraphs, then develop the story over the following pages, allowing journalists to cherry-pick the content they want. I have achieved enough full length coverage to know that's what editors often want, although I do put a great deal of effort into writing newsworthy, informative and publishable copy.

Are PR and advertising linked?

In bona fide media organisations, the editorial function is not linked to or influenced by the advertising department. There's something called journalistic integrity that runs through the veins of most writers and reporters and they hate to be unduly influenced by commercial considerations. If you're running advertisements, don't expect this to buy favourable treatment editorially and if you're offered 'free editorial space' you might question that publication's journalistic stance. Equally, should the ad department ask you to support upcoming PR news or feature coverage, then it's quite acceptable to decline.



How does PR work?

Getting back to basics, there are three main elements to a PR story: the client input or brief, the creative writing process and targeted distribution. Regular client-agency briefing meetings provide the fuel for a PR programme, with the agency identifying the news stories and angles, as well as assimilating the information, and the client contributing the product or technical input and the market insight. Such a meeting should generate sufficient material for a number of press releases and features, which are written up by the PR consultant and approved by the client. Each story, usually together with an accompanying picture, is distributed to a precisely targeted list of editors, freelancers and correspondents, who might reasonably be expected to consider running the item.

Jargon

Account – industry term for a PR or marketing client

Account handler – executive responsible for dealing with a client

Advertorial – editorial feature funded through paid advertising

Approvals – clearances of PR material by client and external third parties

B2B – business-to-business strategy, marketing to other businesses

B2C – business-to-consumer activity, aimed at general public

Boilerplate – standard description of company at end of press release

Brand – registered identifying name or symbol given to product or service

Brief – information supplied by client to direct campaign or originate story

Bylined article – feature piece attributed to author's name and organisation

Column inches – coverage measurement multiplying height by columns

Consultancy – term applied to an external PR agency

Consumer – customer of goods and services for personal use

Copy – text for press releases, newsletters and marketing material

Copywriting – origination of text for marketing and promotional material

Crisis management – strategy developed in response to problem

Cutting service – dedicated supplier that scans press for coverage



Why an ongoing PR campaign?

The jargon refers to a 'planned and sustained effort to establish goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics'. What that means is that, unless it's a really big news story, one-off and sporadic PR rarely works, since you need to build a dialogue with your target press and publics. That can take some time, especially if there's been little concerted communication before. Besides, an ongoing PR campaign, with stories and other strategies happening every month, provides opportunities to explore and expound upon different aspects of an organisation, its products or services, key personnel, case studies and so on, building a more complete and persuasive picture.

What are typical PR topics?

Virtually every organisation generates opportunities for PR coverage, whether it's product launches, key appointments, notable contracts or orders, interesting applications and case studies, or milestone events like awards and anniversaries. In fact, most clients are initially amazed at the amount of potential material they have, then quickly become knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the possibilities, recognising PR as a conduit for corporate pride. Above all, PR should be newsworthy, so stories need to reflect current happenings; however, that doesn't mean rejecting topics that are a month or so old, because stories only really become 'news' when you release them.

Buster

- Cuttings** – tearsheets or clippings of coverage appearing in press
- Deadline** – specific date when story must be received by editor
- Down the line** – remote interview with broadcaster over telecoms lines
- E-magazine** – web-based publication serving specific audience
- Fee** – charge applied by consultancy for implementing PR campaign
- Jargon** – terms peculiar to a specific industry often requiring clarification
- Lead time** – period of time available for production of PR material
- News release** – newsworthy written communication distributed to media
- Opinion leaders** – influential people likely to affect public or market attitudes
- Photo call** – staged photographic opportunity for press and TV cameras
- Press event** – planned presentation to invited media representatives
- Press kit** – package of news information produced for events and exhibitions
- PRO** – public relations officer working in-house for an organisation
- Separations charge** – cost applied for reproducing colour image in press
- Target audience** – key groups or individuals to which PR activity is directed
- Trade PR** – PR campaign focused within trade sector, not at consumers
- USP** – unique selling proposition that differentiates product or service



What's the value of articles?

An in-depth feature article provides a platform for exploring a more complex proposition, describing a lengthy or involved case study, or 'educating' readers about a new market development. Such articles are often aimed at, and prenegotiated with, specific publications and the material needs to be sufficiently interesting, informative and free of blatant puffs to justify inclusion. The quid pro quo is perhaps a company by-line, contact details at the end of the piece and the kudos of being seen as an expert in the field. Here, by the way, I discount feature-based advertorials, in which a company profile is merely used to generate 'blackmail' support advertising and which are of decidedly questionable value.

What about story approvals?

Organisations are rightly concerned about unauthorised stories being released to the media. So client confidentiality must be a watchword, to ensure sensitive material is not divulged without permission, and strict approvals procedures developed for obtaining internal and external clearances. We prefer to undertake the approvals function on behalf of clients, since we can deal through marketing channels and avoid being snagged by day-to-day business issues. Providing PR stories show them in a good light too, customers, contractors, users, specifiers and other third parties are usually delighted to be featured and, in our time, we have secured approvals from government departments, global brands, major multinationals, overseas corporations, charities and celebrities, indicating that if you follow procedures, the answer needn't be 'no'.

Why use a PR consultancy?

In a word, expertise. An experienced consultancy will be able to interpret your marketing objectives, identify suitable stories and news angles, present news releases and other material in a professional manner, and build dialogues with an up-to-date list of media contacts. As an external advisor, the agency will take an independent view of your marketing strengths, identify promotional assets you might not even consider, and bring practical experience of other PR strategies to bear on your campaign. Also, although you may enjoy preparing the occasional report or proposal, writing news releases is difficult, time consuming and often intellectually challenging, so the PR consultancy should certainly have the necessary copywriting skills.



What are the costs involved?

The main cost element is the PR consultancy fee, which includes management and writing time, campaign administration, news release production and, often, normal travel and communications. Typically, the fee is charged in monthly instalments, ranging from say £750 to several thousand, depending upon agency time-commitments and charges. Other operating expenses include postage and stationery, PR-related photography and prints, press cuttings service and separations charges to cover editorial colour repro; strategies like press events, customer newsletters and down-the-line interviews tend to be budgeted and quoted separately. There is, of course, the option of employing an in-house PRO, but if your annual budget is less than £20k, you're unlikely to find the right skills mix for that salary level.



How do you measure results?

An effective PR campaign generates media coverage in the form of press cuttings, supplied by a specialist clipping service, and transcripts or tapes of broadcast mentions. So a useful measure is the volume of coverage, combined with the level of output, say one release per month and occasional articles. Traditionally, PR coverage was expressed in 'column inches' and AVEs or advertising value equivalents, although these tend to undervalue editorial endorsement. If PR is the only marketing tool employed, then return-on-investment analysis is viable and, in many cases, business leads arising from reader enquiry services should be factored into the equation. Perhaps the most effective yardstick is feedback and informed research amongst customers, staff, opinion formers and even direct competitors, indicating changing attitudes to and perceptions of your organisation.



What about national coverage?

Although it is harder nowadays, you can secure national media coverage, although it tends to involve an exceptionally strong or quirky story, perhaps a celebrity endorsement or outrageous stunt, a record attempt, market survey or, if it's a slow news day, a generous slice of luck. Unfairly perhaps, big brands often find it easier, because journalists and their audiences are already familiar with the name and want to hear more. I have secured national press, TV and radio exposure for clients and I can tell you it's normally tortuous and nail-biting stuff, with the real risk of disappointment if a bigger story breaks. Besides, a timely piece in a well-targeted trade or consumer title can often reap bigger dividends, with less wastage.



What are the benefits of PR?

Instead of telling people how good you are, PR entails someone else saying how good you are, in the shape of the press and broadcast news media. That gives your message the added credibility that advertising and other marketing techniques cannot achieve. Since stories tend to be distributed quite widely, it can be highly cost-effective, and as the output is received as news and feature coverage, it's a persuasive means of building market profile and generating business leads. A well-honed PR mechanism can also help avoid or deflect bad publicity and provide a reservoir of residual goodwill in case of criticism. Of course, all this depends on the PR campaign actually working, so it pays to choose a consultancy that can deliver the goods.

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