

What is PR?

Introduction

There are many clever technical definitions of PR - but in essence it is the art of publicising your business at little or no financial cost. How? By harnessing the fact that newspapers and magazines need to fill their column inches with news as well as advertising.

PR has two key advantages compared with conventional advertising:

- You don't need to spend much *money* on PR - although that does not mean that it's completely free, and you will certainly have to spend *time* on it.
- People are much more likely to read and believe editorial coverage - so a good PR campaign can be one of the best ways of getting your message across. It gets people talking about you - and word-of-mouth advertising is, of course, one of the most powerful marketing tools around.

Why not give it a try? It's easier than you think, costs very little and can help you win new customers. It's also a lot of fun!

What is newsworthy?

Overview

The first lesson of PR is simple - journalists will *not* give you a blatant plug when there is nothing newsworthy about your story. But happily almost every story has a news angle - the trick is to make sure that you find it. An example will help to illustrate the news angles that can be found (or created) in seemingly mundane circumstances.

Example

SmallCo has just launched a new product, the Plugger, and wants to publicise it in the local press. Some of the angles on this story that would make it newsworthy include:

"Revolutionary new product could create 20 new jobs in Ourtown";

"Local firm set to put Ourtown on the map with its revolutionary Plugger which could see orders pouring in from all over the world"; and

"Lucky Ourtown school children have been given a unique insight into business. John Smith, managing director of SmallCo, gave ten keen youngsters a guided tour of his factory on Thursday. He explained what was involved in designing and manufacturing their world beating products, including the revolutionary new Plugger".

Angles

These examples illustrate several of the common angles taken in the press eg job creation, children and putting a town on the map. Above all, of course, they demonstrate that if you want to get publicity in local papers your story must have a very strong local angle.

Here are some other relatively commonplace stories that stand a good chance of being covered:

- The appointment, promotion or retirement of a member of your staff
- Your imminent move to new premises
- An unusual hobby or pastime of one of your employees
- Your caring approach to the environment
- A visit from a prominent person
- Giving local school children a guided tour of your business premises to help them assess their career options

- Offering work experience to local youngsters
- Awards or prizes that you, your firm or your employees have won. It is genuinely amazing that more businesses don't enter for awards. The publicity and credibility that awards can bring are worth their weight in gold - and yet they are completely free. And we should know since we have won 12 major awards since 1993. To find out how we did it - and how you can copy our success - ask us for a copy of our guide to winning business awards. What have you got to lose?
- Exams that your employees or colleagues have passed
- Winning a major new customer or contract, especially if it could bring jobs, money and prestige to your area
- Your involvement with or sponsorship of a local charity or good cause. It may sound calculated, but the good publicity that involvement with local charities creates makes it worth what can often be a modest outlay on your part. And of course, it's the kind of deal that nobody loses out on. What could you donate to help out a local charity that is worth a lot to them but costs little to you?
- Hosting a seminar or event. Apart from the PR, this can bring you valuable networking opportunities, and the chance to establish yourself as the local expert in your chosen field.
- Helping a customer to clinch a major deal or achieve some other very visible success, eg. saving jobs, winning a major export contract or passing an important milestone
- Launching a new product or service - especially if the paper's readers will be able to understand its benefits and relate to it. A useful tip here is to base your press release around a local case study - demonstrating how one local person or business has already benefited from your new service, and including quotes from the customer along the lines of "SmallCo's new Plugger has helped us to cut our costs by £30,000 - and that means we can now create two more jobs for local people."
- Your investment in new technology - especially if you can illustrate the benefits in some graphical way
- Your comments on the effect on the local and national economy of events such as: the Budget, general or local elections and the introduction of new laws or regulations. (See press release on page 10 for an example).

Even if your possibilities are limited, it is often possible to put an amusing "twist" on your story.

Think about your business, talk to your staff and customers, and think laterally about the latest issues affecting them - you'll be amazed at how many stories and news angles you'll find.

How to get your story published

Press releases

Journalists can't write about your business and its stories unless they know about them. How do they find out? It's quite simple - you tell them. The easiest way of telling them is to send them press releases. A press release is simply a written summary of the key elements of your story: who, what, where, when, how and why?

Golden rules

Here are some of the golden rules of successful press releases:

- Get to know your local journalists and send your releases directly to them
- Type them on A4 paper with double spacing and wide margins
- Use only one side of the paper. If you need more space, continue on a separate sheet and staple them together.
- Don't use capital letters, bold type or underlining since these have special meaning in the publishing business
- Clearly state that it is a "Press Release" at the top of the first page
- Give it a simple headline that grabs attention and says what the story is about. But don't be surprised if the journalist writes his own. After all, that's what they are paid for. Sometimes, however, you can get away with extraordinary headlines.
- Date the press release
- Write "Embargoed until XYZ" if there is a very strong reason why a story shouldn't be used before XYZ date. But don't overuse this tactic and don't be surprised if the journalist ignores it. After all, they are in the business of producing news.
- The first paragraph should capture the imagination and cover all the key points of the story. Newspapers invariably go straight to the heart of the story in their opening sentences. Don't leave any new or important facts or issues to the last paragraph because if the paper is short of space or time they will probably just leave out your last couple of paragraphs.
- Tailor the wording so that it is relevant to the readers of the particular paper or magazine you are dealing with. For

example, say "Local manufacturers SmallCo of Newtown Road...." for local press releases, and "The Newtown office of one of the country's fastest growing manufacturers, SmallCo...." in press releases for a wider audience.

- Include direct quotes from named employees, or even from satisfied customers. These add interest, colour and credibility to the story. They also make the journalist's life easier because he won't have to ring you up to get a quote.
- Include a photograph wherever possible. Head and shoulder portrait photos will do, but action photos that illustrate the story are much better.
- At the end of the story type the word "ENDS" in capital letters
- Keep it short, simple and snappy. Use short sentences, and keep it on one or two sheets of paper. A release is less likely to get published if it needs lots of work to trim it down to the right length. So make life easier for the journalist - and he'll make life more profitable for you.
- Don't use jargon
- Remember the legal restrictions: don't make claims that you or the editor could be dragged over the coals for.
- And remembering that a press release is not an advert, avoid gushing superlatives and sales talk. One cringe - and the release will probably end up in the bin.
- If you're not too confident of your writing skills, who could you ask to help you out? Friends and family may be thrilled if you ask them to check, proof-read, or even ghost-write your articles for you. (We did tell you this was going to be fun!) Better still, recruit a local journalist to do some freelance writing for you. Journalists are usually underpaid and often welcome the extra income.
- Give the name, address and phone number of the person the journalists should contact if they want further information
- Carefully check punctuation, grammar and spelling
- Make sure that your press releases are sent out simultaneously to all the relevant publications
- If you've got a particularly good story don't just stop at a press release. Expand the material into an article and offer it to local business magazines.
- *Win-win* What ways could you think of to work together

with another firm or organisation to further your mutual interests? Could you offer the readership a gift that makes the newspaper seem generous - but gets you coverage and apparent endorsement?

- Don't forget regional business magazines and business newsletters. The editors of newsletters are often short of good material and will welcome any contributions. And with a narrowly focussed readership you can re-write your press releases and articles so that they really appeal to the audience.
- Prepare and maintain an accurate and up-to-date listing of all the publications in your area that cover business stories. The list should include papers and magazines. It should also include newsletters produced by, for example, Chambers of Commerce, Business Links and business clubs.
- Make sure that you get your material to the journalist well in advance of their deadlines. And to do that, of course, you need to find out and make a note of what those deadlines actually are.
- To maximise the response to your press coverage it helps if the newspaper prints your telephone number and contact name. One useful way of making sure that they do give these details is to include in your press release a free offer - for example free samples or an invitation to a free demonstration. Because newspapers see this kind of reader-offer as a valuable service they will usually publish your phone number - especially if you make it clear that you would like them to by building it into the body of the press release and not just leaving it as a footnote.

Over the next few days he got a further 75 enquiries - making it one of the most cost-effective pieces of marketing he's ever had.

Of course there are no guarantees that your story will be published. It will very much depend on what other stories there are. A strong story may be squeezed out one week by the sheer weight of hard news. The following week a poor story may get good coverage because nothing else has happened. And even if your story is printed, you may not like what the journalist actually says. Nevertheless, press releases are much cheaper than advertisements, and they can be considerably more effective in promoting your business. Why not give them a try?

Making PR really count

- The problem** Unfortunately today's newspapers are tomorrow's fish and chip wrappers. So how can you give your hard earned press coverage a longer shelf-life? How can you make sure that each and every one of your customers and contacts reads that story about you in an obscure trade journal?
- The solution** The answer is simple. Keep an attractive presentation file of your press cuttings on the coffee table in your reception area. All of your visitors will browse through it as they wait, and it will do wonders for your credibility and authority.
- A variation on this theme is to display your cuttings on a press notice board. For example, a local Greek kebab shop displays its press cuttings on a notice board in the shop, including a rave review by a columnist in *The Independent* - setting it streets ahead of its competitors.
- And you can also occasionally send copies of key coverage directly to your best clients and target clients. If your story is strong enough you can dramatise the impact even further by biking a copy of the publication to your key contacts. For example, we hand delivered copies of *The Daily Telegraph* last year when we were highly commended in their Customer Service Awards. Our contacts were genuinely impressed both by our achievements and our creativity.
- Never give up!** Don't give up if your press releases aren't published. One very effective fall-back strategy is to send your press releases direct to your key contacts along with a short note saying something like "You'll be seeing this in the press over the next few days - but I wanted you to be one of the first to read about it." Because very few people outside the media receive press releases they have much more impact than, say, a direct mail letter. Used sparingly this tactic can be very powerful.
- And if you're really getting into the swing of this...** If you're confident and enjoy writing, have you ever considered setting yourself up as a columnist or an editor? If you ring around publications - large and small - you may be surprised at the level of interest if you offer to produce a set of interesting articles. Again this raises your profile and helps you establish yourself as an expert in your field.

More ideas for articles

Media hot spots

Some subjects are guaranteed to grab everyone's attention. And as we accountants do find wresting media space from the Spice Girls a little wearying sometimes, we've compiled a fail-safe list of "hot topics" that will make certain that *nobody* drowns out your story.

Think about your business, and, working with these themes - or any other topical ones you can think of - look for an angle that is perhaps dramatic, or amusing, but above all relevant to the audience you are writing for. The best articles capture the imagination, promote goodwill and are enjoyable to read.

- Celebrities
- Money
- Freebies
- Royalty
- Politics
- Race
- Gender
- Religion
- Poverty
- Employment
- Terrorism
- Drugs
- Alcohol
- Smoking
- Criminals
- Environment
- Europe
- Devolution
- Police
- Health
- Charities
- Children
- Community

- Cars
- Animals
- Fashion and beauty
- Holidays
- Romance
- Sport
- Weather

With a bit of ingenuity, the possibilities for stories are endless!

And how about... Using one of the following ideas to generate more PR?

- Set up a contest in your area for a highly improbable achievement, eg. paddling across the Thames in a McDonalds carton. Offer one million pounds prize money to the first person to do it. But don't forget to take out prize indemnity insurance to prevent it from becoming another Hoover free flights type disaster!
- Pick a topical or newsworthy theme and run an editorial roundtable. Book the boardroom of a luxury hotel. Invite a select group of your best customers and targets. Invite the editor of the most prestigious journal in your market to chair the debate. Pick up the tab for a nice lunch. The editor will love you - he now has a ready made opinion feature. You are now positioned as an industry leader. Your customers feel good about being consulted, and you can now develop a relationship with some important prospects.
- If you enjoy public speaking, take every opportunity to make a speech. Ensure, as politicians do, that it contains a section phrased to capture media attention. Tell the local press about it - even if it is an internal issue in your company - it could still have significance in the local community.

(Everyone in business should think about taking some training in public speaking. It can only enhance your opportunities, and you will come across so much better if you are ever 'put on the spot').

- Consider a 'Letters' campaign. Letters to the editor are probably the second best read part of a journal. Respond to news or a feature with a strongly worded letter, perhaps calling for action from the Government or trade bodies. A debate could ensue. You could prompt several friends to write in and cause even more sparks to fly. Enjoy.
- Produce a light-hearted 'alternative guide' to your niche.

Give information and advice, and include some cartoons. As well as sending these as gifts to your customers and prospects, send them to the press.

These last five ideas come from the newsletters of The Marketing Guild, an organisation that acts as a forum for marketing and PR support, training and ideas. Ring 01582 861556 for more details and for a 30 day no-obligation trial of their services. Our resident PR and marketing guru says they're great!

And finally...

Be ready for adverse publicity too. Prepare a PR contingency plan. If the press are interested in your good news, you can be sure they will be even more interested in your bad news.

If anything goes wrong in your business, eg. redundancy, faulty goods, accidents, having a well thought out response to the press and a well briefed spokesperson can help you prevent "a little local difficulty" turning into a full-scale disaster.

Disclaimer:

The information in this document is of a general nature and is not a substitute for professional advice. You are recommended to obtain specific professional advice before you take any action. © Copyright 2001 Added Value Solutions. All Rights Reserved.