

Tools You Can Use!

Media Relations on a Shoestring: What, When, and Why for Growing Businesses

You can add proactive public relations to your marketing mix for a relatively modest cost in time and money, if you understand the basics of the media business model and you follow some common sense guidelines in a disciplined manner. In the next few pages we'll discuss:

- an overview of what you need to know about how the media business functions;
- a simple model to help you strategize your initiatives with the media;
- the basic rules for getting the media's attention; and
- the best way to ensure you receive fair and accurate coverage of your message.

Just one caveat before we begin – the focus here is entirely on getting the maximum benefit from proactively communicating positive news, things like an expansion of your business, your best in class quality, winning an award, and so on. Reacting to negative news is an entirely different matter. If you are developing a crisis management plan, responding to an unanticipated damaging event, managing a chronic issue like litigation, or find yourself in any situation where your goal is to control damage and minimize exposure, you will be well served by the dispassionate advice of experienced public relations professionals.

The media business.

The news business is a business, although not one in which the customer is the main source of revenue. Every news outlet (print, radio, TV, internet) provides content to its customers who pay little or nothing for the service; advertisers pay a great deal of money to send their messages along with the content. The emergence of the internet has profoundly altered the playing field, more so than did the emergence of radio and television, but the basic rules are unchanged.

Every successful outlet has a target audience and employs an editorial policy that will strengthen its relationship with that target audience. Advertisers are keenly aware of the characteristics of each outlet's target audience and make their purchasing decisions accordingly. Think of the outlet's target audience as having just one question: "What's in it for me?" (WIIFM).

Being the first to break a story has always been a cardinal rule in keeping the loyalty of one's target audience - the global internet has merely made 24/7 real-time news routine. As long as your news is neutral or good, this is not a big issue.

Competition in the news business has always been intense, and the internet has only increased the difficulty of turning a profit. Cost cutting has resulted in reduced staffs in virtually every outlet, and the movement of some editorial work offshore. In other words,

there is more news to cover, less time for the journalist to digest your news and report it, and, oh by the way, the journalist may be on the other side of the world and have no first hand knowledge of your business to help her understand your message.

For you, what may be the most important impact of the internet on the news business has nothing to do with reporting the news. Whatever has been written about your business is always available. Archival sources have always been available to those with the necessary time and access to explore them, but even if you were fortunate to be affiliated with a major university you could spend days going blind at a microfiche reader and still not cover everything. Now, with metasearch engines like Ixquick.com anyone can dig up all available information on a subject with a few key strokes. If the problem now is too much data, search engines like Ask.com use intelligent algorithms to organize content into more useful categories for you.

Strategy first.

Going to the media without a clear idea of what you want to communicate and to whom is, at best, a waste of your money and everyone's time. You have a marketing plan, you advertise, you have a web site, you probably have an opt-in email newsletter, and you may do podcasts and write a blog. All potentially useful tools that take your message directly to your target audience – so why do you want to use the news media to get your message out?

Let's start with the down side: the news media is an indirect means to reach your target audience. A third party will take your message, interpret it, and present it to their target audience. The overwhelming majority of outlets make every effort to communicate the news in an accurate and balanced manner, but there is always the risk that your message may be distorted or incomplete.

That's the down side, now some of the advantages in your existing markets. The media can carry your message to potential customers who don't know you exist and to current customers who don't realize the breadth of your product offering. Confirmation of your message by a third party lends credibility to your advertising and your direct communications. Customers who have recently purchased from you will be reassured they made the right choice. In new markets, the third party coverage can have a dramatic impact on your acceptance: media coverage can demystify you, demonstrate how you, the outsider, mesh with the market's culture and values, and persuade potential customers to give you a chance.

The most straightforward way to look at strategy is to define your media outreach actions in terms specific goals expressed as concrete what-to-who statements. A good what-to-who statement will help you select the most cost-effective actions, and suggest ways to measure success. For example, a tire distributor worried about the impact of growing doubts regarding the safety of Chinese manufacturer goods might set a goal to inform his recent customers (who) their tires are safe (what). A specific media action might then be to provide the local business reporter with a helpful write-up containing a clear explanation of how consumers can tell where their replacement tires were made and what to ask their dealer if they have doubts, using his own franchise as the example. Number and content of calls received would not only measure the impact of the story but also provide additional data on the importance of the issue among buyers of

replacement tires. An example of unhelpful goal would be to establish thought leadership (what) within the xyz space (who).

Earning media attention for your message.

It is very easy to get significant media attention without doing the slightest bit of preparation if you are prepared to be indicted, cited, subpoenaed, sued, or shot. Otherwise, you will have greater success if you build relationships first, starting with your local media. There are two good reasons to start local. First, it's easier: they probably already know you, they are interested in what you have to say, and they may even help you develop a story. Second, no one is local today. For example, the Milwaukee Wisconsin Business Journal's parent company owns Business Journals in 55 markets around the country. The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel sells stories and photos to AP. Local network TV affiliates and Wisconsin NPR are all anxious to help feed the global 24 news cycle with their content. And every one of them puts their content on the internet.

The basics. Certain things are the same at every level, however: deadlines exist, editors are very demanding and journalists are very busy. Three things will help you get your message through clearly.

1. Do your homework. Pick the media outlet whose target audience is closest to yours. Learn what they cover and how. Identify the appropriate journalist and become familiar with her work. Approach the automotive reporter with a great story about genetically modified petunias and your credibility suffers.
2. Find a hook and hang your story on it. Perhaps you can tie your story to the journalist's interests. Another common approach is to wrap your story up in a larger issue as in the tire distributor example above. Your goal is make your story as attractive as possible to the people who routinely read a journalist's work. Think WIIFM.
3. Introduce your idea through a short email, one that can be seen in the Outlook preview pane without scrolling down. In as few words as possible, show that you know what the journalist has written, say what your business is, and mention your story. Include your contact details; exclude all industry jargon and acronyms. If you have done your homework, found a sturdy hook, and written a focused, simple email you are likely to get a response.

Creating ongoing coverage. Once-and-done stories can be very beneficial to your business but you will need to get your message out on a recurring basis to really build your brand. Yet for many businesses, generating a series of on-message stories may be extremely difficult and costly in both time and money. At the local level, sponsorships and hosted events may offer cost effective marketing opportunities through both direct channels and indirectly through media coverage.

Let's say you are in the organic foods business. You want mainstream affluent consumers (who) to see your business as a healthy mainstream alternative (what). You might sponsor a local charity's annual 5 kilometer race and fundraiser. In addition to all the direct marketing opportunities through your website blog and your email newsletter, plus your inclusion in all the charity's marketing materials, sponsorships can create legs under your message. As the sponsor you should be quoted in the charity's press release announcing the event. Your firm will be mentioned in every story the charity

places in the run up to the event. The event itself will be covered and TV images will show runners with your name on their complementary T-shirts. And you may be quoted again in the follow up story thanking the community for its support.

On the other hand, perhaps your company makes widgets, which you sell to other companies. Only people who work in your factory have any idea what your product looks like or what it does. Your problem is attracting (what) qualified workers (who) – it seems everybody assumes you intend to offshore your production. You might host a tour of your premises for students from the local high school and invite the education correspondent for the local paper and the local TV station. TV won't come; the reporter might.

It doesn't matter; you developed a presentation for the kids detailing how your advanced processes, best in class quality, and low shipping costs give you the edge over offshore producers. Now wrap your message up in the offshoring issue and pitch it to the local business editor. When he runs it, pitch it to NPR as a regional manufacturing success story and invite TV for a tour again. If your local paper didn't sell the story to AP already, you might contact their state business reporter. You get permission to reprint the story and distribute it to your recruiting pool. The second year you invite more high schools, and invite the education correspondent again.

Gaining fair and accurate coverage.

You should expect fair and accurate coverage by the media. Most journalists go out of their way to remain fair and all try very hard to be accurate. Mistakes and misunderstandings do happen, and when they happen, the media will usually try to rectify the situation. There are some very simple things you can do to head off potential problems.

1. Always keep the message as simple as possible. Use the inverted pyramid yourself in press releases and other materials you prepare for the media. If you cannot state your core message clearly in a single opening sentence no journalist is likely to be able to do so either, at least not in a manner you are going to like. Arrange your content so that the more important information appears near the top and background information at the bottom. Wire service stories are written in this style – Reuters is a particularly good source for examples. Finally, rely on verbs and nouns to express your points; journalists are rightly suspicious of copy loaded with gratuitous adverbs and adjectives – especially superlatives.

2. Be fair and accurate yourself. Samuel Clemens once said, “An honest man doesn't need a memory.” No, I'm not suggesting you might conceal an inconvenient truth or be so foolish as to lie. You're not likely to do something that shortsighted or desperate. What may get you in trouble is the natural tendency to be enthusiastic when talking about your goals for the future of your business.

The founder of a rapidly growing web services firm was interviewed by the local business weekly. In the course of the article he mentioned the firm's decision to focus solely on a specific service vertical, and as proof volunteered that he had just turned down a “big contract” with Disney. When the PR and IT management of a client in heavy equipment manufacturing read the article they wasted no time in identifying other

potential suppliers: churning in the IT supplier base was endemic, the account manager (and key creative person) had left the supplier and was not being replaced, the client's web budget was miniscule compared to Disney, etc. They began planning for an orderly transition. The supplier was shocked and insisted the Disney contract was quite small, the manufacturer was the supplier's single largest customer, the sole focus strategy was very long term, and the whole thing was the reporter's fault. They lost the account.

Because there were underlying issues in the relationship with this client, the impact of the owner's misstep was magnified, but the learning is simple: don't talk about the long term, ever; always keep your forward looking statements firmly grounded in the near term implications of your message.

Before making any statements of intent or purpose ask yourself two hard questions: how will my biggest customer interpret my comments, and how will my newest customer view them? Think WIIFM. You have a business to run – you do not have a great deal of time to devote to the subtleties of anticipating interpretations across multiple constituencies. The more longer-term an expressed intent, the more unpredictable the interpretation

3. Put one person in charge. If you plan on pitching more than one story a year, put someone inside your company in charge of all media outreach. Many people may be involved but only one person should be charged with managing the relationship and ensuring that proper internal authority has reviewed your message. Journalists are very enterprising people who work for very demanding editors; they will talk to anyone and everyone in your company to get the information they need for their story. If multiple individuals are speaking to the media, Murphy's Law will prevail.

If ever something bad should happen the journalist is going to contact you to get your side of things. The person who has been working with the journalist knows him and knows the best way to present the company's position to him. Likewise, the journalist has sized up your person. It is always better if you have a personal relationship established with a journalist – it keeps the door open.

4. Be prepared to follow up. You have put your story out there in order to achieve a specific objective. You have the capacity to handle the increase in customer traffic you hope to see and you have a simple process in place to measure the impact of the story. What about follow up calls from the media – have you considered what you will say if results are better, or worse, than expected? Can you answer the question, "What next?" without getting ahead of yourself?

Keep in mind that routine communication with the media always involves some give and take. You reached out because you had a story you wanted to pitch. You taught the journalist a bit about your company. Now she needs some background data for another story and calls the person you put in charge of managing the media. In most cases the reporter will be on deadline when she calls. Your own internal deadlines are different than hers, your immediate needs more important, your resources stretched. Every news outlet lives in the highly competitive 24/7 news environment. She may need it now and there is no better way to build for tomorrow than to help that reporter right now. Are you able and willing to respond?

The bottom line.

Media coverage can be a very cost effective component in your marketing mix, but it is not free – helping the media help you requires explicit goals, preparation, time, consistency, and continuity. You can manage a proactive public relations program without spending a great deal of money provided you understand the basics of the media business model and follow basic common sense guidelines in a disciplined manner.

The benefits can be significant. Through the media you can reach potential customers who don't know you exist. Positive media coverage lends credibility to your advertising and your direct communications, reassuring your customers they made the right choice. In new markets, media coverage can demystify you and help persuade potential customers to give you a chance.