



Public relations can help build and bolster all three. By Matthew S. Zinman, APR

Everyone can identify with the pitfalls of poor communication in personal relationships. You may mean to say one thing, but it's interpreted in another way. Before you even realize it, you're left digging your way out of the proverbial doghouse.

Businesses have an even greater challenge because you can't simply "kiss and make up" when you're losing customers, employees or investors.

Additional problems can arise with community neighbors, government regulators or political allies.

This need to manage communications illustrates why public relations is rapidly becoming a highly sophisticated management function. PR can benefit just about any company to effectively communicate in its many relationships, reinforce brand impressions and safeguard its reputation.

Another perspective on the value of public relations is viewing it as an insurance policy. Every company faces a number of crises and harbors the potential for countless others to arise. Some examples include: workplace injury, death, fire, computer theft, layoffs, poor earnings, community unrest, bad rumors, lawsuits, regulatory pressures, and an unjustified news investigation. Investing in a "policy" of planned, responsible PR communications can prevent a crisis from "claiming" your reputation.

The rationale for explaining public relations this way is that the term is so

vague.

It seems every business could customize its PR definition based on specific needs. As an umbrella term, public relations comprises many specialty areas like investor relations and "cyber PR," as well as general functions like news and event management services. All told, the Public Relations Society of America distinguishes 14 different categories within the profession.

There are several ways to determine the best uses of public relations to achieve true value for your business. Exploring the opportunities and benefits of engaging public relations management services is well worth the effort.

The Essentials of News Coverage

The most valued aspect of public relations is still media relations - calling upon journalists to generate positive news coverage about a company, its products or related interests. There's a good reason why. Publicity is cost-efficient, has mass reach and provides third party credibility. Well-planned, it reinforces the same "brand voice" conveyed in your advertising and other marketing initiatives while it extends those key messages to regions where advertising is not cost-effective. Getting that news article or TV "sound bite" about your company or products makes your PR dollars very tangible.

Unfortunately, there's no magic wand for placing a feature article about your CEO on the page one, center column of the Wall Street Journal's "Marketplace" section. The key to winning coverage is

to identify and highlight your company's "news value." You can evaluate your potential for success based on whether your company's attributes meet the following news criteria:

1. **Timeliness** - has a transient nature rather than an anytime, "evergreen" news story
2. **Proximity** - is of "local interest," such as a community event
3. **Impact** - has a high relevance among target audiences
4. **Consequence** - provides a reader, viewer, listener service by informing or educating
5. **Novelty** - has human interest, entertainment value, innovation, conflict or a funny or odd twist
6. **Prominence** - involves someone in the "public domain," such as celebrities from entertainment, sports, academic, political or business arenas
7. **Exclusivity** - specific appeal with advance agreement to "news rights"

Many PR professionals are trained as journalists and can readily help your company evaluate its news value. If your company representatives possess expertise on specific topics, offer them as a source to specific journalists to call on them for comment.

While media relations is highly valued, it doesn't always provide the most valuable benefits. Publicity generated news has less impact in the new era of

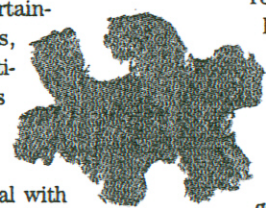
information overload. People have become more selectively attentive to news, or simply avoid the clutter entirely. On the other hand, technology trends are enabling PR professionals to reach target audiences more efficiently and effectively. This "direct PR" approach can allow your company to represent its interests without relying on media interpretations that filter the key messages

Beyond publicity, some other PR management functions include: coordinating special events, trade shows, sponsorships, and speaking engagements; developing promotions, contests, and multi-media presentations; writing brochures, newsletters, speeches, and online content; evaluating organizational communications; and providing general strategic marketing communications counsel. Overall, public relations serves as your company's knowledge manager, its voice and its conscience.

Define Your Expectations

Based on your company's interests and commitment, there are three general options for managing your public relations activities: Doing your own PR, hiring an experienced PR manager or outsourcing the work to an independent practitioner or reputable agency. Explore each option.

Start with your bottom-line and available resources. Effective public relations typically requires a significant investment and lasting commitment. Establishing realistic goals and expectations for your PR program is critical to success. Determine your needs — more visibility in the media, a need to



manage your business communications, or develop a broader reputation management program.

Sing Your Own Praises

If you've got limited resources to invest in public relations, there's no harm in trying to get your own publicity by calling or sending newsworthy information about your company to local media. However, your news release is one of hundreds of others competing for attention.

To make it stand out is to keep it simple. Be clear, concise and tightly focused so an editor can digest it quickly and make a decision within seconds. The most favored writing style for news releases is known as the "inverted pyramid." It puts the most important facts into the first paragraph. Avoid jargon. Explain technical language. Include all critical information, as well as times and dates. References to statistics and trends add value. Make the subject line informative and attention-getting. Let editors know if photos, audio or video are available.

Target your media carefully and the odds to get news coverage get even better. Suggest internal routing to a specific kind of writer or editor. Make your contact information available. Follow up intelligently. Most editors don't welcome calls simply checking to see if they received or remember a release. Be prepared to be helpful in follow up to provide an interview, back-up information and have additional quotes ready. Sometimes access to third-party endorsers is welcome and useful. Perhaps post a more detailed release on your company web page and refer to it. Be responsive. News deadlines afford small windows of opportunity. Always be sensitive to the reporter's deadline needs for information, interviews or photos.

Hire a PR Manager

Though human resources personnel can provide appropriate guidance for hiring a public relations manager, there are other factors to consider. Your candidate ought to have specific education and practical background in public relations.

In terms of core skills, the practitioner should have a balanced strength among writing, research, strategic think-

ing, event management, presentation abilities and vendor coordination. If your company is among specialized industries, like high-technology, health-care or telecommunications, it helps for the professional to have related experience; but most seasoned professionals are adept at quickly developing a strong technical understanding.

Most important, an "in-house" PR manager should have the specific endorsement of and perhaps report directly to the company CEO.

Without this commitment from top management, your return on investment will be greatly reduced because the manager cannot be nearly as effective. Empower your manager with functional access to marketing, sales, logistics, dealer relationships and other key areas. As a communicator, your PR manager has to bridge the gaps across the various departments and help preserve the company's knowledge assets.

Insights on Outsourcing

While there's no set rule, if your annual outsource budget is under \$40,000, you'll probably get the best results from an experienced PR freelancer. For project work, the resources needed to achieve the desired result may guide specific decisions. There may be a trade-off because an independent professional will not likely have the technology and staff resources or team creativity that an agency offers. However, your agency's day-to-day account person may not be as experienced as freelancers.

There are a number of ingredients to a successful relationship with any public relations professional. Naturally, open communication, mutual respect and integrity all play a part.

You must trust your PR counselor to have access to sensitive information. This will allow them to provide honest feedback with a fresh perspective in their counsel. In return, they should invest the resources to learn about and play an active role in your business. They must go beyond serving as a sounding board to provide innovative public relations. If they are agreeing

too much, they're not doing their job. Accountability is critical. A commitment to measurement based on pre-defined expectations for success must be an integral part of your program.

When working with an agency or independent professional, designate an internal coordinator to facilitate information and secure approvals. Make a

commitment to keep activities moving by evaluating progress on a weekly basis at minimum, perhaps by alternating face-to-face meetings with teleconferences. Ideally, set a particular time and adhere to it. The criteria for evaluating agencies are quite subjective to preferences. Be sure to confirm your primary day-to-day contact(s). The qualities of that individual or team will be among the most important to your success.

Be patient. Public relations requires finesse in its strategy and performance. There may be some "quick hits" that will keep you satisfied, but as with any relationship effort, PR management requires a long-term commitment to consistent, responsible and proactive communications. Your business can reap benefits for nearly every facet of its operations by placing value on the role of PR. □

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