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Effective PR

Good public relations can be the making of a start-up business. Inept PR can ruin it. In its broadest sense, PR is a way of effectively and accurately communicating with your audience to make sure they understand your company. It also enables you to develop a positive image in their minds.

One advantage of PR is that, unlike advertising, you can usually get it free of charge. Another is that favourable PR has greater credibility than similar claims made in an advertisement.

This briefing explains:

- How to decide what PR can do for you.
- How to prepare a press release.
- How to spot or create PR opportunities for your business.

1 Why are you using PR?

As with any business activity, you will do better if you are clear about what you wish to achieve.

1.1 Your **immediate** objective is to gain positive publicity that will help your new business become established and profitable.

- You may simply need to let the world know your product or service is there.
- You may want to generate leads, to bring in immediate sales and profits.
- You may be keen to create a distinctive positioning for your company or product, to build your image and credibility.

1.2 Your **longer-term** goal may be to project the image of an honest, reliable, successful, progressive and caring company.

The payoffs from nurturing an image like this will come in many forms, including:

- Attracting new customers.
- Being able to charge higher prices.
- Being able to do better deals with suppliers.
- Attracting, and retaining, good employees.

Without PR, it can take years to build up such a reputation.

2 Target your media

What newspapers or other channels of communication do your potential customers pay most attention to? What type of information do you need to put across to them?

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2.1 You can **tailor your story** to suit different publications or broadcasting formats — and different sections of the public.

- Your local paper will be interested in one angle — new jobs, or a local person's business success.
- A specialist journal may focus on another angle — a technical aspect of the product.

2.2 TV and radio **broadcasts** can bring your message to life, through words or images.

- A news item on local TV could get people talking about an unusual service you offer.
- An interview on local radio can get people thinking about your product or service.

2.3 Consider the **geographical location** of the people you wish to reach. For example:

- A complimentary write-up in a tourist guide could attract people to your pub from outside your area.
- A mention on a specialist website could bring in enquiries from all over the world.

3 What does an editor need?

If you want editors to run your story, you must give them what they need — news.

Heading for the wastebin

Editors say the ten most common mistakes in connection with press releases are:

- 1 Long, boring text with nothing to say.
- 2 Dull photos of products (with no people) or of rows of middle-aged men.
- 3 No quotes (again, people make papers).
- 4 Failure to think up any angles.
- 5 Good story, buried in paragraph 4.
- 6 Failure to tailor the press release to the media it is being sent to.
- 7 Sending a press release about a business outside the circulation or broadcast area.
- 8 Missing the deadline.
- 9 Sending the press release to the wrong person or just to 'The Editor'.
- 10 Spelling the journalist's name incorrectly.

3.1 News is typically one of the following:

- New or novel.
- Shocking or controversial.
- Amazing or funny.
- Directly important to readers.
- Confidential or secret.
- Concerned with famous people or places.

3.2 News that arrives too late is no good to anyone. Find out a publisher or broadcaster's **deadline** for receiving press releases.

- Submit your press release well in advance, unless it is a 'hot' news item.

3.3 Find out how editors prefer to **receive** releases (eg by email, fax or post).

- Editors are often happy to discuss ideas over the telephone. It can save time and ensures you hit their deadlines.

4 Routine PR opportunities

To get into the national press, a story about your business success has to be highly newsworthy. To get into a local paper, or the trade press, it only needs to save the editor work and be interesting to local people or those working in the industry.

4.1 Get ready, in advance, to announce a success when it happens.

The subject of your press release could be:

- The launch of a new product.
- The opening of new premises.
- Large or interesting (eg overseas) orders.
- Staff appointments.
- A milestone event, eg the anniversary of your company, or your 1,000th customer.

4.2 Some trade magazines have sections for this sort of announcement. **Send** appropriate information, making it clear which section of the publication the information is for.

4.3 Better still, **invite** a trade journalist to the event in the first place.

5 Think of an angle

To the outside world, your product or service may seem deadly dull. Try to make a connection that links it to something interesting.

“PR that gets you coverage in the wrong place is simply useless. As with advertising, you need to put your message in front of people who are genuine potential customers, or your business will not benefit.”

Bernard Curren,
Business Link
Devon and
Cornwall

5.1 Invite a **celebrity** along (the mayor may appear free) to open your new premises.

5.2 Offer **prizes** for milestone events (see **4.1**).

5.3 Imagination can make all the difference.

- A new restaurant researched the favourite dishes of famous people and put these celebrity meals on its opening night menu. Both press and radio picked up the story.
- A florist wrote a highly successful press release based on the traditional medicinal uses of the flowers in her shop.

5.4 Think about the **image** you are promoting.

- Your story about your encounter with a poisonous tropical spider may generate plenty of publicity. But it will not lure many extra customers to your fruit shop.

6 Put out a press release

6.1 Adopt a simple press release **format** to make it easier for the journalist.

- Use your letterhead paper, with 'PRESS RELEASE' across the top of the page.

6.2 Write an attention-grabbing **headline**, without being obscure or over-clever.

- The headline should indicate what the press release is about. But if it is boring, the editor may not bother reading further.

They cleaned up

A new company specialising in cleaning the homes of old people was struggling to find customers. Advertising hadn't work. The problem was that people needed to have trust and confidence in the company.

The answer lay in PR. The new company sponsored the local drama society's amateur production. It ran a raffle at the church fête. And it paid for the church choir to travel to a music festival. This all cost less than £1,000.

The company had made the effort to build a relationship with the local newspapers and all three events were written up, with photos.

As intended, the company's name became better known in the community. Its image was transformed and sales took off.

6.3 The opening paragraph must **summarise** the story and highlight key points of interest to the people the editor is aiming at.

6.4 Next, give some **details**. Put the most interesting information first, as the editor may not read the whole press release. If you are launching a new product, the follow-on paragraphs should explain:

- What is new about your product.
- Its advantages.
- Its applications — who can use it for what?
- Its details — specification, price.
- Who to contact for more information.

Limit your press release to about 300 words, with no more than 60 words per paragraph. Put additional background and technical information in 'Note to Editors' at the end.

6.5 Use **short sentences** and short words.

- Avoid jargon — unless you are writing for a technical magazine.
- Always include some quotes in direct speech, as these spice up the material and are popular with editors. Comment should always come from a named person, not your company.

Make your words easy to use, by matching the style of the publication or programme.

6.6 Below the text, put the **writer's name**, address, email address, office and home telephone number, and the date.

- Make sure the person named is available. Editors will lose interest if they cannot get hold of anyone.

6.7 Make contact with the publication or programme you are aiming for.

- Find out the name of the journalist who is most likely to cover the story.
- Send the press release and then phone to check that the journalist has received it.

7 Give them a photograph

An interesting picture will draw the journalist's attention to your press release — even if your story is not particularly strong.

If the photograph is published, it will catch the reader's eye, too.

7.1 The photograph must be **relevant**.

“PR is a cost effective and creative way of keeping in the public eye in a positive way and an excellent tool to differentiate your business from competitors.”

Michelle Render,
York Place
Company
Services

“It sounds obvious, but don't tell lies. You don't have to tell the whole, unvarnished truth in a press release, but you always give hostages to fortune if you say things that are untrue.”

Jenny Botsford,
Botsford Public
Relations

7.2 Plan ahead.

- How can you make the photo interesting? Think about the background, people, poses, products, props and lighting.
- If your story catches an editor's attention in advance, they may send their own photographer.

7.3 If the picture is meant for publication, check what kind of **print** or transparency is needed. Prints should be at least 7" x 5".

- Always send a photo in a cardboard-backed envelope. Do not use paper clips or staples.
- Consider sending a digital photo. They can be sent instantly and can be edited. Check the publication can accept them before sending.

7.4 Put a **caption** at the bottom which includes your company's name.

- The caption should be written on a piece of paper which is then stuck to the back of the photo — so that it hangs down.

7.5 Pictures taken by a **press photographer** have a better chance of being published.

8 Other publicity ideas

The PR possibilities for an imaginative start-up business are endless.

8.1 Promote yourself as an **expert**.

- Offer yourself for public speaking.
- Phone up publications and broadcasts to offer your views on topical issues.
- Send 'letters to the editor'.
- Submit articles for publication, or offer amusing work stories to a newspaper's business diary.

8.2 Get to know the **journalists** who cover your industry. Offer them a training day.

- Join trade associations and local bodies.

8.3 Learn to work with **local organisations**.

- Produce a newsletter for customers and staff and send copies to the local papers.
- Suggest a local newspaper competition and offer your products as prizes.
- Help with — or donate your product to — a local charity.
- Sponsor an event or a team.

9 Watch your back

PR can backfire. Journalists will write what they think makes a good story. They will often look for controversy, and the first person they contact may be someone with the opposite view to you.

Bad press coverage tends to focus on complaints from customers or staff. Customers may claim to have been ripped off, and staff may protest about dismissals or poor working conditions.

9.1 Be **careful** what you say.

- Make it clear which of your employees are allowed to answer journalists' questions.
- Avoid 'off the record' comments, unless you already have a good relationship with the journalist.

9.2 **Do not duck** questions about controversial issues affecting your business. But do not be rushed into a spontaneous reaction.

- Check what the newspaper's deadline is, construct your statement carefully, and respond promptly, within the deadline. Do not lose the chance to tell your side of the story.
- Evasive tactics may result in an article ending with 'not available for comment', which always looks furtive.

10 Will PR work for you?

The best form of PR is a satisfied customer who recommends your business to others.

10.1 Ask yourself whether your time would be better spent building up your business and nurturing your **reputation** with customers than putting effort into PR activities.

- Or can you achieve more by winning sales leads and honing your image through PR?

10.2 If active PR has a role to play in your business, but you do not have the resources for your own campaign, consider using a **PR agency**.

10.3 Look at what **your customers** read.

- Could you feature in these publications? If the answer is yes, you may be missing a good opportunity if you are not using PR.

Expert contributors

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