

An introduction to public relations

Learning how to promote your business can be a crucial advantage, especially in the start-up phase. You have to engage with your target market through the right media mix, and use the right techniques. However, in the Internet age, there are more choices, opportunities and pitfalls than ever before for the small business owner looking to use public relations (PR).

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What is public relations?

Public relations (PR) is broadly defined as accessing the media to gain positive exposure for your business. It is widely used because of its low cost compared with conventional advertising techniques – where you buy the media space – and the high returns it can generate in the form of increased brand recognition. Some of the most effective recent PR campaigns have used the Internet to spread short promotional videos made on shoe-string budgets, which have subsequently been viewed by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. That kind of exposure is priceless.

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Define your image

PR efforts are most effective when they have been clearly thought out beforehand. Start by considering the image you want to present based on what your competitive points of difference are, rather than simply making it about promoting a specific product. PR is not about the hard sell, but suggesting brand values and generating credibility and trust with consumers.

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Define your public

If you haven't researched your target market, now is a good time to do it because having a clear picture of your customer in mind is crucial to effective PR. Your target market defines the media mix and PR methods you will come to use. It's easy to assume your local paper will be read by your ideal customer, but research often proves your target market has entirely different media consuming habits, so you need to find out before you start. For tips on defining your target market, try this online lesson [How to target your marketing](#).

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Choose your media mix

There are three types of media categories small businesses can promote to: Print (newspapers, magazines), Broadcast (TV, radio) and Online (blogs, news websites, social media). Ten years ago, the average small business would have simply targeted its local newspaper, but today the role of print and broadcast media is being absorbed by the Internet and these traditional media platforms are being forced to adapt by focusing on their own news websites and tablet computer editions.

This has not only made the small business's choices much more complex, but also opened a door to the rest of the globe. Choosing the right mix is no longer straightforward, but if you know your target market, their habits will make the choice for you.

For example, if your business's market is geographically local, a PR campaign based on promoting a launch event or charity initiative in your regional newspapers and on your local radio station is an obvious choice.

However, a small technology start-up that can fulfil global orders and operates in a niche market serving a defined community, perhaps even with its own set of values and terminology, will probably find using social media or targeting highly influential bloggers a lot more effective.

These types of companies can find the Internet an effective door to expanding their market while staying on target with the right audience, because Internet users are actively seeking out content rather than passively consuming it.

So choose your media mix carefully, striking a formula that reflects your target market accurately.

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Choose your PR strategies

Different PR techniques are suitable for different types of media, but in all cases the focus should be on managing media relationships so you stay top-of-mind with bloggers, journalists or editors without crossing the line. Taper your level of contact to consistent time frames and allow cooling off periods so you're not bugging them every day.

If you don't receive replies to your overtures, don't start demanding them. The relationship isn't a two-way street, and media operatives tasked with casting a wide net to find content can easily choose someone else to work with if you prove to be overbearing, demanding or inconsistent.

The standard methods of contact used to be posting product samples and cold-calling journalists - laborious and inefficient tasks routinely outsourced to PR agencies offering already established media relationships in return for a fee.

Today, an email press release promoting a 'newsworthy' event is the standard method for contacting a print media/news website journalist. However, if a high-profile journalist is on Twitter or Facebook, try following their feeds. If they need an interviewee urgently, for example, they often put the call out via their chosen social media networks.

As for bloggers, they often search for trends on social network sites rather than accept ideas directly from product manufacturers because credibility can be their biggest currency. However, this won't stop them asking for samples, even if they don't intend using them. So, in many cases, maintaining and developing an effective online presence yourself (via your own blogs and social media sites) is the best way to access other online opinion-makers. It takes time to do this, but it's worth it when so many print and TV journalists keep an eye on prominent blogs and websites to source their stories.

Here are some common PR strategies to consider.

Traditional media (print/broadcast)

Promote an event

Email journalists and editors with a press release promoting a launch event. Regional newspapers are always hungry for content to fill their pages and more open to including PR events as news.

Promote yourself

Present yourself as an expert to be interviewed for opinions in your specialist area. Never ask to be interviewed outright – just give your opinion on a news topic in emails – and always be ready for a phone call that might be an interview without warning.

Pick a cause

Instead of suggesting someone simply writes a story about your company's success or innovation, step back a little to suggest a feature story on an issue affecting your industry. A new tyre retailer, for example, could feature in a motoring article about the misuse of winter tyres. This subtler, and more industry-inclusive method, makes it easier for journalists to sell the story to their editors as an issue-based story rather than just a promotional vehicle for you.

Reach out to the community

Charity will always be newsworthy. Position your company as a recycling champion or helper of the disadvantaged, for example, but make sure you stick to the initiative. If you're caught dropping the campaign or charity action once the publicity has run its course, it can damage your brand.

Web media

Use social media

Post about an event, innovation or even an anecdote relevant to your market on your own blog, social media profile or Twitter feed. You're looking to garner a following, so it's all about being active in a social scene and blurring the lines between you and your target market – in

other words, building credibility and trust. This takes a lot of hard work, involving not only frequent posts but consistent, engaging content that doesn't hard sell or obviously push product. If you make your opinion count first, then your brand will too.

Use viral video

When a humorous or eye-catching video goes 'viral', it means a multitude of Internet users, bloggers and media outlets have linked to it and broadcast the clip. Production costs do not have to be high for it to be a success. The *Will it blend* campaign from US blender manufacturer Blendtec led to multiple TV appearances, merchandising opportunities and a host of awards. At the time of writing, these videos had been watched on YouTube almost 170 million times. The videos simply feature the company's founder blending unusual items like cell phones, golf balls and remote controls. He is demonstrating his product's abilities, and satisfying the curiosity of hundreds of millions of people along the way.

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