

The ABCs of Public Relations
OR
Everything You Always Wanted To Know About PR But Were Afraid To Ask

In this white paper you'll find out

- What public relations is
- How public relations meshes with other marketing tactics
- How public relations can benefit your organization
- How to begin a basic public relations effort
- Where to go next

Public relations (PR) is arguably the most misunderstood marketing communications discipline in use today. Ask the average person on the street what PR is, and you'll likely get answers like "publicity" ... "free advertising" ... "spin." These definitions are inaccurate or downright wrong.

Though misunderstood by the general public, PR has nonetheless become a nearly ubiquitous marketing communications tool. In fact, a survey of North American marketeers conducted by McBain Associates for M. Booth and Associates shows that they believe PR is unequaled for "establishing the credibility, building the equity, and maintaining the strength and vitality of a brand."

One of the key reasons that organizations' use of PR has blossomed is the amount of information consumers, both individuals and businesses, now can obtain over the Internet and in other ways. As you'll see, PR is all about offering information rather than just generating an image or emotional response. Thus, as consumers of all stripes have become more sophisticated in their ability to research potential purchases, PR has come into its own as a marketing communications tool.

If you're interested in understanding PR and using it effectively, this white paper will reveal why PR has earned marketeers' praise and how you can get an effective, basic PR program off the ground.

What is this thing called "public relations"?

Here's a definition from the Public Relations Society of America (www.prsa.org):

Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other.

Clear as mud, right?

Try this: Pat Jackson, the late PR guru, defined PR as building relationships with the groups—"stakeholders"—with whom an organization interacts to change attitudes and bring about desired behaviors. Depending on the organization, stakeholders can include employees, customers, investors, local communities, media, analysts, legislators, activists, society-at-large and more.

Your organization builds relationships with these stakeholders to let them know who you are, what you do and why, and why anyone should care. The ultimate goal is to increase their support of your organization. In turn you provide ways for stakeholders to respond to you—hence, the use of the word "relationships." PR at its best is a two-way communications tool.

How does PR fit into the marketing mix?

PR does not take place in an organizational vacuum. The best PR effort will be tied closely to your organization's marketing goals and integrated with other elements of the marketing mix. PR enhances and amplifies an overall marketing program in several ways, but the primary reasons to add it to your marketing mix are the following:

1. **It's credible.** An article in the newspaper or magazine or a TV or radio story on your organization, people or products is much more believable than paid advertising because it's created by a third party—the reporter—who has no vested interest in promoting you. Indeed, a recent study of 850 opinion leaders in the U.S. and Europe showed that 86 percent agreed that "I believe information that I get from articles or news stories more than I believe information that I get from advertisements." That's a fairly substantial majority.
2. **It's targeted.** With PR, your organization can easily target very specific groups to hear its messages, which increases the likelihood that the right audiences hear your message. In addition, PR tactics frequently provide opportunities for direct contact with small, extremely valuable groups of stakeholders.
3. **It's cost effective.** The cost of a major PR effort is much less expensive than you might guess, allowing your organization to take some communications risks that might be prohibitive because of the cost of other marketing tools.

What can PR do for your organization?

PR works because it helps your organization persuade people who are more and more resistant to commercial messages. In a world of ever-more-ubiquitous advertising messages, PR messages generally appear in a context that interests people rather than in a context they tune out. In addition, PR tactics are frequently educational in nature, offering the kind of information many people now commonly seek out when making purchase decisions.

With PR you can:

- Build credibility for a young organization.
- Generate greater awareness of a relatively unknown organization.
- Lay the foundation for sales efforts.
- Educate stakeholders on complex products, services or issues.
- Improve or restore the reputation of a damaged organization.
- Help influence public opinion.
- Keep the organization aware of what's important to stakeholders.

A brief aside ... although we'll focus on the basics in this white paper, you should be aware that PR is a multi-faceted discipline. After you get an initial effort up and running with a few strategies from the list below, you can later consider others:

- **Media relations**—Learning about and developing ongoing relationships with media that cover your organization or industry.
- **Community relations**—Actively participating in the community in which your organization operates.
- **Public affairs**—Involving your organization in the public-policy process.
- **Government affairs**—Communicating with legislators and governmental entities on behalf of your organization and its mission.
- **Issues management** – Identifying growing issues or trends that could significantly affect—positively or negatively--how your organization operates.
- **Financial relations**—Maintaining relationships with the financial community (analysts, regulatory agencies) and investors/shareowners.
- **Internal communications**—Providing ways for employees to learn about your organization, its mission and their role in it.
- **Trade relations**—Relating with other firms in your organization's industry and with trade associations.

How do you get started?

The first steps we'll discuss represent the most basic PR activities you can undertake. They do require an investment of, primarily, time. If you don't have staff to devote to a PR effort, you can investigate working with an outside PR specialist. Don't think that you must use a large, East- or West-coast agency, however.

An independent PR professional, with solid credentials working with companies of your size or type, can provide high-quality service without the sticker shock. A solo PR pro might also have access to a virtual network of independent marketing and communications professionals who can provide other services—marketing consulting, writing, design, Web services, etc.—as needed. Paul McAfee and his team of independent professionals work in just this way.

Develop a plan.

Before you do anything, you should pull together a PR plan to guide your efforts. A strategically thought-out PR plan, complete with objectives, targeted stakeholders and evaluation, ensures that your PR effort is coordinated with and reflects your marketing plan. Without it, you might very well be spinning your organization's wheels attempting PR activities that might—or might not—make sense in light of where the overall organization is going.

See appendix A for an outline and tips for developing a basic PR plan.

Create your materials.

Provide informative, well-written materials to stakeholders. The following are the minimum you should have ready.

- Media frequently need special materials found in a press kit, which can be hard copy or electronic. Parts and pieces of a typical kit include brief organizational background (including history); fact sheet; product/service background, including technical information and product specifications; key executive biographies (again—brief!) and professionally taken head-and-shoulder photos (called “head shots”); and media contact(s).

Check out the “media room/press room/news” sections on Websites of companies such as Xerox, UPS or The United Way to see how they write and format their press materials.

- If you have a Website, make sure the above information is posted in a pressroom section. For any site visitor, you should also include links to your recent press releases and an archive of older releases, if possible.

Get to know the media.

One of the biggest mistakes that organizations inexperienced in PR make is to approach any and all media with their news or stories. Invest the time and/or money to research the media who will be interested in your organization, and compile a good, targeted media list.

To do this, you'll first need to determine the appropriate media. For instance, if your organization develops software for lawyers and is located in Charlotte, N.C., your media list might include

- Charlotte daily, weekly and business newspaper reporters who cover business, technology and the legal beats. (Also include assignment editors at television and radio stations that air newscasts. They are the people who decide what stories get covered.)
- trade magazines and Webzines that focus on technology and/or the law
- national news or business publications that cover technology and/or the law.

Contact each media outlet directly or check their Websites to find out specific reporters' names and how they prefer to receive information (email, fax, phone calls, and snailmail). Make sure you request a sample copy of any printed publications so that you're familiar with what each publication on your list covers. With local media, you might want to stop by the newsroom and introduce yourself, or offer to take an editor to lunch to find out what they consider newsworthy information.

If your media list is likely to be lengthy and involve lots of legwork to compile, you can access an online resource such as www.bacons.com to purchase lists for your purposes.

Prepare your spokespeople.

You'll need two levels of internal folks to deal with media.

1. The “media contact” who fields all day-to-day initial calls from reporters or editors. This person's name will appear on your press releases and in your press kit. S/he evaluates media inquiries and determines how to handle them. For instance, does the inquiry require an interview with an executive or internal expert, or simply require some information s/he can provide?
2. The spokesperson(s) who will speak in interviews with the media. These should be executives and experts who can speak intelligently and simply about your organization, what it does and why it matters.

Most important of all: Talking with the media is frequently a scary proposition even for executives and experts. Make sure that you provide the media contact and spokesperson(s) with professional media

training. This will educate them on how the media works and how they can effectively handle interactions with them.

Get the news out.

Once your plan, press materials and media contact and spokespeople are in place, you can begin delivering news about your organization to the media.

- If you have concrete news to announce, send a **press release**. A release should be no more than two pages long, and sent only to the media that cover your organization or industry, containing newsworthy information about your organization, people or products in an effort to obtain coverage.

Good reasons to send out press releases are new offerings; hires or strategic partnerships; awards/funding received; major sales; and projects successfully completed with results.

See Appendix B for a sample press release and writing tips.

- A great way to get attention for your organization is to tie something you're doing to current news or trends. If you can do this, a **pitch (or query) letter** of a few paragraphs suggesting a story idea that a reporter or editor will follow up on and write is often your best bet. For instance:
 - ❖ If your company makes kayaks, think ahead to summer vacation stories that every newspaper writes or events such as "National Outdoor Week," and pitch a story on how your product fits.
 - ❖ If your firm develops Website security software, you might pitch a story on how more and more companies are increasing security on their sites.
 - ❖ If your organization provides parenting education, and you read an article on a study about parents feeling ill-equipped to handle their children, pitch the writer of the article on a follow-up story about your services.

See Appendix C for tips on how to follow up with the media.

Leverage your results.

Whenever you obtain media coverage, make reprints of the article to use in your marketing materials. (Please inquire first with the publication about its copyright requirements. Enforcement of copyright laws has become quite strict.)

If you hold a special event or make a presentation, ask attendees for their contact information so you can direct future communication to them.

What's left?

As we mentioned a while back, PR is a multi-faceted discipline. Depending on your organization and its goals, your PR effort might expand in many other directions. As time goes on you might think about:

- **Case histories:** Satisfied customers or clients who have had substantive, positive results with your organization are ideal fodder for stories. Such a story is called a case history, an article often published in a trade publication that focuses on a customer or client's problem and how s/he used your product or service to solve that problem. Use a pitch letter to suggest a case history to an editor; often trade publications will ask you to write the article. Be aware of their editorial guidelines about how you write the case history—the article must focus on the customer/client, not serve as a promotional manifesto on your organization.

Check out a trade publication such as *Graphic Arts Monthly*, *American Banker* or *ComputerWorld* to see examples of case histories.

- **Speaking engagements:** Direct communication between your organization and your stakeholders is a powerful way of conveying your messages and building credibility. Propose to professional or trade associations, civic organizations, community groups and others that an expert in your organization serve as a speaker at a conferences or meeting of the group. The topic of the presentation should be educational or informative. For instance, a Web design firm might present to a chamber of commerce meeting on how to create a Website that attracts return visitors. An industrial-glass manufacturer might present to a conference of architects on how glass-forming technology is creating options for building design.

You can find out how such organizations choose and schedule speakers by contacting the program director or program chair.

- **Publications:** Newsletters, annual reports and other printed material directed to your customers, members, investors, donors and other stakeholders.
- **Special events:** Educational seminars, open houses, awards ceremonies, receptions and other events as a way to reach specific stakeholders.
- **Sponsorships/charitable giving:** Linking your organization with an event or not-for-profit group that ties in closely with your mission by underwriting an event or group.
- **Activities related to community, government, trade and employee relations.**

Appendix A: Strategic PR plan content

Introduction or executive summary

Summary of the overall marketing challenge facing your organization and a brief explanation of why you are recommending a PR effort.

Situation analysis/competitive analysis

An in-depth discussion of the competitive landscape, stakeholder attitudes, obstacles to the organization's mission, regulatory issues, trends, etc. (Topics frequently obtained from your organization's marketing plan.) Data obtained in focus groups, through surveys or through in-depth interviews can reveal stakeholder attitudes/perceptions, current knowledge, sources of information, etc.

Program/product/service description

Outline how your products/services support your mission.

Stakeholders or target audiences

A list of the stakeholders with whom your organization wants to build relationships, listed in order of priority. Should also include *influencers*, people or groups who influence the attitudes or decisions of stakeholders. Media frequently fall into this group.

Include information on *demographics* (age/gender/sex/income/etc.) and *psychographics* (attitudes/beliefs/lifestyles) whenever possible, especially for stakeholders. Again, this information is usually found in the marketing plan. If it's not contained there, consider undertaking the kinds of data collection mentioned under the "situation analysis" section. In addition, trade associations sometimes make this kind of information available to members.

Positioning

An organizational statement of "what we have that customers want that no competitor is perceived to offer" that is unique in the marketplace.

Marketing or business objectives

Should be measurable goals such as "increase revenues from widget product line by 15 percent" or "increase market penetration by widget division by 7 percent".

PR/communications objectives

What you want the plan to accomplish for your organization. Ideally, your objectives should be measurable, e.g., "raise unaided awareness among target stakeholders by 20 percent."

Key messages

Specific simple messages that all your organization's communications include in one form or another. You must define key messages for each stakeholder, to a maximum of three or four for each stakeholder. Messages must track with positioning and should address the company, your offering and the customer promise. If you like, you can include proof points with concrete evidence for each message.



Strategies

Broad statements of how to accomplish objectives, e.g., “establish XYZ executives as expert sources for the media” or “increase coverage of XYZ in national business press”

Tactics

Detailed activities supporting strategies, e.g. “conduct desk-side media tour of top five trade publications”

Measurement/evaluation

Outline when and how PR objectives will be met. If possible, tie this back to your marketing objectives.

Budget

Both available and potential funds needed for success.

Timeline

Outline the time necessary to implement the PR plan, from plan development to measurement, along with the responsible party for each activity.

Appendix B: Sample press release

This is the person to whom all media calls are directed on a day-to-day basis.

Remember, total length should be no more than two double-spaced pages

Media contact:

John Smith
(000) 000-0000
john_smith@anytown.edu

When writing the headline, try to think about what a newspaper headline would say

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ANYTOWN COMMUNITY COLLEGE FIRST IN STATE TO OFFER NETWORK ADMINISTRATION CERTIFICATION

Offering meets documented industry needs

The "dateline" includes city, state and date of release

ANYTOWN, ANYSTATE, JANUARY 3, 2003—More than 1,000,000 unfilled jobs for qualified computer technicians are driving thousands to obtain certification for network administration and a new career. Now, Anytown Community College (ACC) is the first two-year school in Anystate to provide courses leading to a network administration certification.

Try to tie your first paragraph to a larger trend or current event

ACC's new program ensures that students graduating with their certification will be fully qualified for positions as network managers, system administrators and other roles that require an in-depth knowledge of network hardware, software and troubleshooting.

"We conducted research and determined that companies statewide—and across the country—have serious network administration needs," said Jane Doe, president, ACC. "Based on our years of experience in education, we developed the only program in the state that provides the necessary training and certification students need to land jobs as network administrators."

Make sure quotations actually add information, rather than just inflating someone's ego

The school's network administration program offers courses in

- All major operating systems
- Intranets and extranets
- Network design and troubleshooting

Bullets are a reader-friendly way to give details

- And more.

For information, visit www.anytown.edu or call 888-000-0000.

About ACC

Offering high-quality, low-cost education to Western Anystate for more than 50 years, ACC continues its commitment to provide excellent public, post-secondary educational programs, community outreach activities and related services. From associate's degrees to specialized certificate programs to workforce development, ACC provides its diverse student body with the opportunity to develop academically, as well as socially, and fosters cooperative partnerships with local businesses and universities.

The last paragraph is the "boilerplate," giving basic information about the organization



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This means "the end"



Appendix C: Tips on following up with the media

- Always ask if the person you're calling has a moment to speak.
- Don't call to ask, "Did you receive our release?" Any follow-up calls should be to determine whether the reporter/editor has an interest in the story and, if so, how you can help him/her to produce it.
- Reporters love media contacts who do their jobs for them. Before you call, always have the key facts and necessary information at your fingertips.
- If a reporter says s/he's not interested in your story, don't keep asking.
- If you must leave a message, keep it brief and to the point.

Credits

Grace Lazzara, President of G. Lazzara, Inc., wrote this white paper. Paul McAfee & eXubrio Group LLC have permission from G. Lazzara, Inc., to publish this white paper.

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