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Want More Out of PR? Then "Getting Ink" Isn't Enough

By Lela Cocoros

Quite often, we hear the following when our public relations agency receives an inquiry from a prospective client:

"Hi! We have a... unique/fantastic/successful/groundbreaking... company/executive/product/service

for which we want more... attention/visibility/buzz/awareness!

We're sure you'll want to get right to work on this..."

We're in a media world that never sleeps, where outlets for information dissemination and personal expression proliferate by the minute. So it's understandable that companies under increasing pressure to break through the clutter turn to the "free" placement and third-party endorsement opportunities offered by public relations agencies. And, there are lots of PR firms and practitioners eager to jump in to pursue the quick hits on your behalf.

But, when you're putting your hard-fought budget dollars down on a public relations effort, it must be about more than just the clippings to truly get the maximum return. Whether you're working with internal or external resources (or both), here are some thoughts and ideas to keep in mind before you take the PR plunge:

- **Think holistically from the get-go.** Make sure your PR people are part of the business team as early as possible, working closely and integrating its strategy and tactics with marketing, advertising, finance, operations, whoever is appropriate. Remember that PR is about telling a story, influencing target audiences, developing the company's positioning and managing its reputation. The more information that is gathered and the earlier it's shared helps encourage a smooth process, helps take advantage of more opportunities and lessens the likelihood of unfortunate surprises down the road.
- **Identify clear PR objectives that everyone understands.** PR is one of the most misunderstood professions by outsiders. Not easily measured (a whole article could be written about this subject alone) and therefore not as tangible in its financial value, PR needs to be more than how many mentions the person, product or company gets in a particular timeframe. Certainly this can and usually should be part of the way PR is conducted and evaluated. But, sometimes keeping the subject out of the media, or providing some behind-the-scenes context that lays important groundwork for future benefit, or preparing all your employees with appropriate messaging surrounding a critical event, should take precedence over publicity. Start by asking each person on your team what his/her definition of PR is – it's important that everyone generally sign off on what role PR will play in the process.
- **Don't hire "yes" people.** The PR function is sometimes referred to as the conscience of the company – and, if you get a good, credible team in place that's given the latitude and authority to do what they do best, that's what you'll get, plus a whole lot more. Yet, you'll note that in movies, the PR person is generally depicted as a shallow suck-up or a backstabbing snake and there's a reason why these caricatures exist. Phonies abound, but so do the real deal, so do your homework and don't be fooled.

Don't be seduced by a person who agrees with everything you say, who speaks only in superlatives about the subject at hand, who doesn't ask the snarky questions, challenge your ideas or poke holes in your beloved scenarios. It's painful at times, but a lot more valuable in the long run.

And please, resist the temptation to hire a "muffin brigade." You know what I'm talking about...a team of nice, young, good-looking, happy folk who simply regurgitate your talking points without really understanding strategy or subtext. If you're lucky to get good PR people who ask the right questions and understand

the strategy and they also happen to be nice, young, good-looking and happy, that's fine too, of course. But make sure the substance is there first and foremost.

- **Think long-term.** In a world addicted to short-term results, this is a challenge. But, it can have a significant impact on a company's overall reputation and position in the marketplace. PR is about relationships and building reciprocal trust with an array of constituents. These things do not happen overnight. Over time, employees, customers, clients, affiliates, board members, investors, reporters, analysts, franchise authorities – whoever you're reaching out to – will get to know your company, hear its story, evaluate its credibility and form opinions.

Even if you're doing a simple product enhancement or customer promotion, their reception to the news is colored by their existing perceptions. Working to build long-term, positive relationships before you really need something back from your audiences will give you a better chance of breaking through clutter and generating the kind of attention you're seeking.

What does this involve? Continued communications with your current constituents, introductory outreach to new contacts, and knowing and respecting that these relationships are two-way. Don't assume that you'll always get what you want without seeking to reciprocate. Consider the time and resources put into this effort a necessary investment.

- **Get real.** Know what's news and what isn't. Don't waste anyone's time or demand big results from every new development within your company. Allow some singles, doubles and triples to rule the day – not just home runs – and expect a few strikeouts along the way.

Be honest about your company's place in the world; know your strengths and weaknesses and those of your competitors and detractors, and plan your proactive and reactive communications accordingly. Beyond being true to the brand, be true to the company's culture and values and make sure your work reflects them appropriately.

Be aware of what others are saying about you and take the temperature on their perceptions – check blogs, survey employees, ask your personal contacts their views before signing off on the right storyline.

Finally, don't promise what you can't deliver. Credibility is key – once you lose it, getting it back is iffy at best, and attempting to do so can be an excruciating process and set you way back.

Increasingly, public relations is taking its rightful place alongside marketing and advertising as part of the broader, more integrated stories companies are communicating to customers and other key audiences. But I know from experience that within our industry this still isn't happening as readily as it should be. Adding the right PR to the mix can maximize resources and help turbo-charge your efforts. So, if you've been calling the PR team at the last minute to crank out a press release and make follow-up phone calls to get a story or two placed, next time try inviting them to the planning meeting and see what happens.

October Strategies, Inc. is a strategic public relations and promotional marketing firm that helps clients achieve business goals through innovative and effective communication. For more information, Lela Corcoran can be reached at lela@octoberstrategies.com or visit www.octoberstrategies.com.

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