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Public Relations Can Be Your Shop's Most Effective Marketing Tool

Good PR is a win-win-win situation if you follow five basic rules.

By Tom Rankin, APR

Public relations (PR)—with regard to gaining editorial in trade publications—is perhaps the least understood, most overlooked and potentially most effective marketing tool your shop can employ. In a nutshell, providing trade editors with material they can use will result in coverage for your shop and its products and services: coverage that can build brand awareness for your shop, enhance the credibility of your technology, generate inquiries on your products and services, make you and/or your CEO industry icons, and much more. And unless you employ the services of an outside PR firm, all this needn't cost you a thing.

Putting on a PR Hat

The catch with PR is that in order to do it effectively, you must first put on a PR hat. Imagine it as a battered old fedora with a "Press" sign stuck in the band. Wearing a PR hat means being non-commercial and using *soft sell*. PR requires a "nose for news" and that you not be self-serving or overly promotional. It requires you to step outside yourself and report on your company and its doings with a sense of objectivity, even applying just a hint of journalistic skepticism. The other catch with PR is that it involves writing. Other than that—if you can develop, acquire or hire a nose for news and if you have access to someone who actually *likes* to write—PR is not really that hard. All it takes is an awareness of certain ground rules and a healthy dose of common sense.

Finding News

The process of *doing* PR involves:

1) Identifying newsworthy subjects or resource information; 2) Filtering them through the messaging strategy developed as part of your marketing plan; 3) Delivering them to the appropriate media in as many different ways as meet their needs.

To be successful, the process should be active, ongoing and consistent. So, what newsworthy subjects do you have to talk about? Selection of appropriate topics should be based on your objectives, but should *not* simply be things you want to say; they should be things other people (your prospects) also want to hear.

In general, viable topics include:

- Products and services—Any new or revised product qualifies, as do any products that have not yet been released.
- Market-specific products and services—Any new or unreleased product that has a specific market application.
- Technologies and applications—New ways of making or doing things, new processes incorporated into your products or which your products facilitate or incorporate into. New or unique ways of solving customer problems.
- Company news—Major contracts, strategic alliances, acquisitions, new equipment and/or facilities. New personnel in key technical or management positions also are of interest, as are announcements of speeches, technical presentations and seminars, new marketing campaigns, awards, patents, etc.
- Trends—Other industry trends or developments also can provide fodder for executive pronouncements, which can be very effective newsmakers.
- Research/background information—Statistics and other data quoted in speeches and executive statement releases are almost always newsworthy.

Getting into Print

The trick is to fashion your message so that it *fits* into one or more of the various sections of a trade publication as seamlessly as possible (see Finding Opportunities sidebar). To do this a variety of tools is used, each of which is designed to achieve a particular result within the

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Finding Opportunities

Looking at the other side of the equation, at the media that have an interest in your news, there are many. The current **Bacon's Magazine Directory** lists more than 15,000 business, trade,

context of a marketing program—generate inquiries, increase technological reputation, etc. Some of these are developed exclusively for a single publication, while others are intended for broadcast distribution to a specific group or an entire list of publications.

The following are a few types of press to take advantage of:

- Basic news releases can be used to announce just about anything and are the staple of any PR program. For small to medium-sized businesses, it is recommended that you develop and issue eight to 12 releases per year, but it is entirely feasible to do much more than that without cannibalizing pick-up.
- Product application releases are essentially product or service releases, modified to describe a product's appeal in a specific market. They are distinguished from application releases (see below) in that they do not involve a specific customer.
- Executive statement news releases are tools that can serve a variety of purposes, and involve quoting a senior executive of some sort—often a CEO—on a range of issues of interest or importance to the organization. Announcing a new trend in the marketplace that your product or technology neatly addresses is one typical ploy.
- New literature releases are company brochures.
- Application news releases are mini case histories that typically involve a named customer. They are normally broadcast to a smaller list than product releases, and are excellent tools for generating coverage in vertical markets.
- Press kits are a collection of news releases, backgrounders, speeches, graphics, etc., for use at trade shows or press conferences, on press tours or in conjunction with a special launch of some sort.
- Case history feature is a full-length article on a customer's use of your product or service, placed exclusively with a single publication.
- A feature article—which is typically bylined—can be how-to, state-of-the-art, profile, etc. and is placed exclusively and is often developed in close collaboration with the editor.
- OP/Eds fit the "Back Page" or "Speak Out" sections of many publications. While they are developed exclusively for a publication, it is not unusual for an op/ed opportunity to emerge from an executive news release mailing.
- Columns are opportunities to develop ongoing columns in a key trade. However, column opportunities require broad topics that can be treated objectively.

professional and consumer publications in the U.S., Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, serving some 90 market classifications. So depending on how many markets you sell into, the list can get rather large. The good news, however, is that most trade magazines follow a similar format in how they present their content. This presents a number of opportunities to generate coverage for your business:

- Start with the cover. Many books use a thematic cover or one built around their lead article, and product tabloids put products on the cover.
- Other sections to take advantage of include news, products/literature, events and letters to the editor. News covers topics like acquisitions, contracts, patents, etc. Letters are often cited as the most read section of many publications and can be very handy for things like getting your name back out there after a competitor has gotten some major coverage.
- Feature articles are of several types, including staff-written industry overviews, product/technology round-ups, company profiles and case histories, as well as a selection of staff or contributed technical, how-to and/or state-of-the-art pieces. Many publications also offer a selection of columns presenting a wide spectrum of fact and opinion that may mention one or more companies.
- Along with these regular sections, most publications offer special issues throughout the year with focused coverage on topics such as trade shows and other key areas of interest to their readers. This publication, for example, offers special issue coverage on topics such as CAD/CAM, machining, cutting tools, mold components, materials, hot runners, EDM, maintenance and repair, as well as research and development, business, sales and marketing, education and training, finance and more.

Other tools include letters to the editor, newsletters of various types, backgrounders and white papers, press tours and conferences, trade show support, presentations of various sorts, direct mail, brochures and booklets—even books. On the downside, publicity in the trade press often involves long leadtimes, so there are no guarantees of acceptance and PR can be very time intensive.

Playing by the Rules

Good PR is a win-win-win situation: you win by having your name in print, the editor wins by printing valuable material and the reader wins by getting information that helps his/her job or business. But in order to play, you need to follow five basic rules:

1. Understand that there are no guarantees your material will be used as-is or at all.
2. Don't try to use your advertising as leverage.
3. Don't play favorites with editors or publications, but honor whatever exclusives you grant.
4. Don't over-hype or misrepresent your product because dishonesty in any form will come back to bite you, and might even sink you.
5. Never ever miss deadlines.

Which is why I'm stopping right here.

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