

**Berg Kaprow Lewis**

Effective PR

A good image is a valuable asset. Effective public relations (PR) creates good publicity, building your reputation with customers and others whose opinion matters to you.

While advertising can be purchased immediately, generating positive publicity can take time. On the other hand, good PR has greater credibility and can have more impact than advertising.

This briefing covers:

- Planning your PR activities.
- Making news and handling the media.
- Writing a press release.
- Choosing and using a PR agency.

1 Planning

You may need to reach several target groups, all with slightly different messages.

Your planning process should prioritise these target groups and agree key messages for them.

1.1 Decide what your **objectives** are.

- Most PR aims to build your reputation with customers.
Favourable comments by journalists about your product are more credible than the same claims made in your advertisements.
- PR can be used to increase awareness of your business and products.
Even a single mention in a national paper can generate a large number of enquiries.

- PR can reinforce advertising campaigns and other promotional activities.
 - You may be able to publicise events, such as product launches, through the media. Trade publications often have sections for this kind of announcement.
 - You can use PR to influence people who matter to your business — and sometimes to get them to change their minds (see **2**). For example, suppliers, trade associations, local councils, MPs and community groups.
- 1.2** PR usually brings long-term benefits, rather than immediate sales, so begin it **well in advance** of when you need the results.
- You cannot control the timing of media coverage.

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You may have to send press releases over a period of months to a publication before it pays any attention to you.

- Although a single mention may have an impact, good PR will create a cumulative effect, as your publicity builds up.
- Some publications have long lead times. Many monthly magazines operate on four-month lead times, while guides (eg for hotels) are published annually and may need to be contacted months in advance.

1.3 Choose media that reach your target audience and are likely to give you coverage.

- Ask your customers what they read, hear and watch.
- Use directories such as BRAD, Hollis or Willings Press Guide to find details of publications in your area.
- Research publications and broadcasts to find out what kinds of stories they cover. Request an advance features schedule.
- It is always easier to get exposure in local newspapers and specialist magazines than in the national press. But do not be afraid to approach the nationals, if your story is strong enough.

1.4 Budget realistically for the time and costs involved.

- The largest cost of PR is often management time, rather than cash.
- Using a PR agency (see **8**) can increase the effectiveness of your PR and reduce the

demands on your time (but will increase the cash costs).

2 It's not all selling

Public relations can sometimes involve a lot more than putting out press releases and talking to journalists.

You may have important objectives that cannot be achieved just by gaining press publicity.

2.1 You may need to reach small, **select groups** of individuals directly, with complex or specialised messages.

- Advertising tends to simplify issues. With carefully targeted PR, you can put a different spin on your message for each of the audiences you need to address.

2.2 You may be able to influence key '**opinion-formers**' to think well of your company and mention or use your products.

- The opinion-formers you decide to target will depend on your markets.

2.3 You may be able to **lobby** and influence trade bodies, or even the government, to adopt policies favourable to your business.

3 Opportunities

3.1 Most businesses generate **natural opportunities** for PR activity.

For example:

- A new product launch.
- Opening new premises.
- Appointments of new staff.
- Large or interesting orders or customers.
- Milestone events (eg your 1,000th customer or your company's anniversary). You can maximise the publicity value of these opportunities by thinking of an angle to make them more interesting (see **4**).

3.2 You can **create** publicity opportunities.

For example:

- Submit articles for publication in your local press or trade magazines, or on relevant websites which are looking for content.
- Commission a survey (serious or frivolous) that can be written up as a news release.
- Promote yourself as an expert and offer yourself for public speaking or comment on topical issues.
- Suggest a local newspaper competition with your products as prizes.

► Some businesses find that alternative forms of promotion are more cost-effective. See **Planning your marketing, Advertising strategy, Direct mail, Marketing with your database** and **Exhibitions**.

“Be wary about commenting publicly on a topical news issue as the reputation of your business could be judged on your individual opinion. If you do have to comment, stick to an issue related to your industry and where possible give a balanced argument.”
Nichola Sharpe, Freud Communications

“Don't be shy. If your business has something to say, let people know. The worst that is likely to happen is that they ignore you.”
Bernard Curren, Business Link Devon and Cornwall

What's so interesting?

A little imagination can make all the difference, when it comes to catching the eye of newspaper and magazine journalists or local radio producers. For example:

- A new restaurant researched the favourite dishes of famous people, and included some of them on its opening night menu.
- A garage held a competition for sculptures made out of old car parts, followed by an exhibition at the local art college.
- A florist based a press release on all the medicinal uses of flowers in her shop.

If you really cannot find anything interesting to say, you either need to use an agency (see **8**) or concentrate on alternative methods of promoting your business.

3.3 You can become involved with **events** and **stories** which are already in the public eye.

- Send 'letters to the editor' about local or industry issues.
- Help with, or donate products to, charity events.
- Sponsor a local sports team or exhibition.

3.4 You can become involved in **organisations** which are likely to attract future publicity.

- Team up with suppliers or customers to work on attracting joint publicity.
- Become a figurehead in an organisation, so that its publicity brings you publicity.

4 Creating interest

4.1 Journalists will only cover your story if they think it is interesting or **newsworthy**. News is typically:

- Controversial, new or surprising.
- Amusing or funny.
- Directly important to the readership (or audience).
- Confidential or secret.
- Linked with famous people or places.
- Linked with conflict or romance.

Bad publicity

Disgruntled employees, complaints from customers, crises and accidents all make strong news stories. Be prepared for bad publicity.

A Put **your side** of the story.

- If a journalist contacts you, check what the deadline is, carefully construct a written statement, and respond in time.
- An article saying that you refused to comment always looks bad.
- Avoid 'off the record' comments. In a serious situation, there is no such thing.

B Do not let journalists speak directly to your **employees**.

- Let all employees know who to refer journalists' enquiries to.

C Take **action**.

The most effective way of dealing with bad publicity is to show that you have done everything you reasonably could to correct any problems.

4.2 You can make a story more newsworthy by giving it the right **angle**.

For example:

- Doing something to make the event more interesting (eg inviting a celebrity to the opening of your new premises).
- Write your press release to highlight the interesting aspects of the story (eg telling how your MD once climbed Mount Everest).
- Tailor the same story to suit different publications.

4.3 Be prepared to **compromise** on what the release says, if it will improve your chances of publication.

- Your first priority is to provide a story which will be published.
A press release which reads like an advertisement for your business is unlikely to be interesting.

- If your main objective is to increase awareness, the details of what is published may not be so important.
However, beware of providing stories which can lead to bad publicity (see box).

5 Handling the media

Unlike advertising, where you buy space to publish what you choose, with PR you have to sell yourself to the media to get good publicity.

5.1 Give the editors **what they need**.

- Send them interesting stories they will want to publish.
- Make sure your press releases reach publications before their deadlines.
Some publications have very short lead times. You may need to act immediately to utilise a PR opportunity.

5.2 Give the journalists **what they want**.

- Use a standard press release format, written in the right style (see **6.2**), whether you are using post or email.
- Get the email addresses of important media contacts. Many journalists now prefer to receive press releases by email.

5.3 Build **relationships** with individual journalists.

- Find out the names of the journalists and make personal contact.
- Invite them to your events, or to lunch to meet interesting people.

“Don't lie to the press. You're under no obligation to blurt out the whole warts-and-all truth about any situation or product. But what you do say must be true.”

Jenny Botsford,
Botsford Public
Relations

“You need ways of measuring the effectiveness of your PR and comparing the results of a campaign with its objectives — either by counting column inches and enquiries generated or trying to monitor increases in awareness. There are software packages now that can help you do this in a systematic way.”

Mike Johnston,
Chartered
Institute of
Marketing

- Do them favours.

5.4 Do not be **put off**.

- Send press releases whenever you have a worthwhile story, even if your last release received no coverage.
There are many reasons why a story may be rejected or held over, which may have nothing to do with your release.
- Put journalists on your mailing list for background information they may find interesting (eg your company newsletter).

6 Writing a press release

6.1 Aim your press release at the **journalist** responsible for the section in which you want to appear.

- Like an advertisement, it will need a good headline to encourage the journalist to read the whole release.
- Include all the key points of the story in the opening paragraph, but keep it tight.
- Put the paragraphs in order of importance.
- Draw attention to your story by promptly following up the press release with a phone call.

6.2 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.
- Use double spaced lines, with wide margins, to make the text easier to edit.
- Keep the text short — typically a total of 300 words, at most.
Put any detailed or background information in a separate 'note to editors'.
- Keep your credibility. Read through and check spellings and all checkable facts.
- Include contact details, so journalists can easily call if they need further information.

6.3 Write in the **style** of the publication.

- Use short sentences and short paragraphs (no more than 60 words per paragraph).
- Use similar language (eg avoiding inappropriate jargon).
- Include quotations to spice up the piece.

Aim to write a release that could be printed with no editing, and could be cut at the end of any paragraph and printed with no further editing.

7 Photographs

7.1 An interesting and relevant **picture** will always increase your chances of coverage.

- The picture will attract the journalist's attention, even if it is not used.
- If the picture is published, it will help to draw readers' attention as well.

7.2 Provide pictures that are **easy to publish**.

- Check what kind of print or transparency the publication needs and that pictures sent as email attachments are in the correct format.
- When sending pictures by post use a cardboard-backed envelope and attach a (factual) caption to the back of the photo, including your company name.
Do not use a paperclip (which could damage the photograph).

7.3 If possible, have the picture taken by a **press photographer**.

- A press photographer will have an eye for the shots the media want.
- Ask your local newspaper to recommend a good freelance photographer.
- If the publication knows the photographer, journalists are more likely to look at your press release.

8 PR agencies

8.1 Consider using an agency if your annual PR budget is greater than **£10,000**.

- For smaller projects, you can employ freelance PR agents.
Day rates can range from £300 to £1,000.

8.2 Choose an agency with relevant **experience** and contacts.

- Getting publicity in national media is extremely difficult without a suitable agency.

8.3 Provide a clear **briefing** on what you are trying to achieve.

- Explain what makes your company and your products different.

8.4 Plan how the PR agency will work with your other **promotional activities** and agencies.

- Be wary of agencies that see PR as the answer to every promotional task, with no thought of alternatives such as advertising.

Expert contributors

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Further help

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