

# Public Relations: The Myth and Reality

By Barbara Kline

**G**ood public relations is breaking through to your target market to gain recognition and acceptance for your company's unique position in the market place. PR is a critical component of many marketing programs. PR can create visibility, excitement, and acceptance for a good product that meets a need, is priced correctly, is easily accessible for purchase, and is backed by other promotional materials, documentation and sales support.

## The Myth Versus Reality

A prevalent Silicon Valley myth is that you unveil your new software to the press, the articles appear the next day, your sales skyrocket, and you're a millionaire within a year! The truth is that unless you are blessed with celebrities as spokespersons, and lots of money, it's probably not going to happen.

The reality is that getting press attention and precious editorial space in your target trade and business publications requires vision, hard work, and persistence.

This article addresses three main issues that an entrepreneur needs to understand: what makes PR beneficial for emerging companies; what the steps are for a strong PR program; and what your commitment, as an executive, has to be to make it work.

## The Benefits of PR

PR is one of the least expensive and most beneficial tools for building a look of substance. After all, prospects, investors and employees want to know your company will be around in a few years!

PR helps you obtain a positive perception in the minds of your target audiences. Note that there are multiple audiences you will need to reach. For example, for easier sales you want to reach both those who will use your products or services and those who will approve purchase requests.

PR is an important vehicle for furthering your financial goals as well. Good PR can make you more attractive to investors. Normally, after the sale is completed, PR is cited as a major attracting factor by the eventual investors. Positioning and press can open VC doors that were closed before a PR campaign was begun. The joint combination of market-centered positioning (as opposed to product-centered positioning) and positive press (gained by good positioning, effective materials and third-party endorsements) caused several investors to take a second look.

When you advertise, you pay money to have exactly what you want to say appear exactly when and where you contracted it to appear. PR, on the other hand, is a game of persuasion. And, as in other types of persuasion, it is rarely immediate. This is where the vision, hard work and persistence come in.

## Vision

Vision is critical to a PR campaign. Let's use the game of chess as an analogy. It is easy to see that the best chess players are those who know where they are going, and what might go wrong, long before they sit down to a championship game. You must define your objectives. Why are you offering a new product or service? Who is your main market? Whom do you need to influence?

As you flesh out your vision, you will need to create a trial positioning statement. This statement should be short enough to deliver in the course of an elevator ride. What does your company do? For whom? Why should anyone care? How do you differ from your main competition?

## Positioning

Consciously positioning against your competitors is important. If you do not acknowledge competitors, most editors and analysts take it

on faith that you also have no market. For your idea to be viable, people need to want to use it - and that means they are taking some other path to the result now. A strong "Unique Sales Position" goes a long way toward getting you in the door with editors, customers, prospects, and influencers - and if you are smart, it will position you in a place that your main competition cannot assail. To use an mild but very telling example, if your candy "Melts in you mouth not in your hand!" how does your competition respond? "So do we!" is silly and any other direct response is difficult, if not impossible.

## Research

Once you have a positioning theory, test it. Explore your options. Even if you have the perfect product for everyone, you aren't going to have the resources to sell it to everyone. You will need to focus on the markets where you are best able to meet the greatest number of needs, and hopefully, where your competitors do not have the same completeness of solution.

Testing your theories can bring surprises. Just because everyone is targeting networking or college students doesn't necessarily mean that you should too. Your position should not mimic a lemming migration, mindlessly following those who went before. Dare to take a new angle. This gives you good fodder for press meetings because they love a new approach and /or insider information! One client recently changed its position after discovering that prospects noticed and appreciated a benefit that the client hadn't considered.

When you have determined a strong position and a good set of target markets, develop three key messages that succinctly tell your story. Three is an important number because that's about all your audience will be able to remember. If you try for more, often your audience won't be able to recall

any of them. Those 27 reasons why your product is the best are going to have to be culled down.

### **Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning requires time, money and objectivity. As you go through the planning process, be aware that budgeting time is as critical as budgeting money. Don't make the mistake of waiting until you want to see something in print to look for PR counsel. It takes six months for a good launch and even more time for an excellent one. You can't begin a truly effective PR program 30 days before the first press tour.

Make sure that your plan looks beyond the launch of a company or product. To maintain momentum, you need to plan an ongoing stream of communication with your audiences, and few organizations have the time or discipline to address this issue while recovering from the vigor and excitement of the launch campaign.

The press can help you reach a much broader audience by reporting information that is useful to their readers. PR tools include the technical articles, opinion articles, customer success stories, new product announcements, new relationships announcements, white papers, and feature releases.

A little showmanship can help set you apart - planning a competitive "shoot out," a contest, or a no-holds-barred press event or party can be a great occasional addition to your PR mix.

### **Hard Work**

Now comes the hard work. Make sure you have budgeted enough time for PR support - both from executives and from support staff. You need to hone messages, track coverage, revise messages, prepare a variety of different audiences, and stay in touch with the press.

It is often in your best interest, especially early in your company's life, to contract with outside counsel. Because PR is a delayed gratification game, you will almost always find something that is more "urgent" than staying in touch with editors and clipping competitive information to add to your next review cycle. More urgent, that is, until you don't appear in that big story in your key publication that an editor called you about three months ago because you were busy with (fill in whatever you had prioritized at the time).

The nice thing about PR counsel is that PR strategy, materials development and press contact is their focus rather than simply a part of the job!

### **Persistence**

Persistence is the last leg of the stool. Unless you are the latest media darling or one of the 800-pound gorillas in your market, you are probably going to want to talk to editors and analysts more than they are going to want to talk to you. Regular contact with useful information, a willingness to discuss industry issues without mentioning your product every other sentence, and a friendly but persistent effort to reach editors when you have news you feel they should hear are all a part of the PR process.

PR is not so easy and turnkey that it can be successful without providing time and money to nurture it. Neither is it so difficult and expensive that only well-heeled companies can afford it. With credit to Mary Terhune, author of "Hanna More," "Obstacles [to effective PR] are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goal."

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