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The role of public relations practitioners and tactics has changed dramatically over the past few years. Before then, companies and businesses relied on public relations primarily for image-building and reaction to both planned and unplanned crisis. Whether it was to organize, plan and promote a community outreach program or activity-such as manning a food drive or making a donation to a local charity-or to assign a media contact to speak with reporters following a newsworthy event or issue concerning the business, public relations and marketing were, for the most part, two separate beasts with different functions and individual goals.

On one end of the spectrum was marketing, which often included print, radio and television advertising, direct mail campaigns, telephone directory listings and ads, and, more recently in its history, banner ads on Web sites. Although never a guarantee that every member of the targeted customer group would read the message and take action on it, these marketing tactics ensured that the company's name and information was publicized and available to anyone interested in learning more. In essence, a company would pay to be in the spotlight, which oftentimes required a significant marketing budget.

And on the other end of the spectrum was public relations, tactics used to generate free publicity by engaging the media and local community on topics of interest to their readers and their residents, respectively. Unlike marketing, whose primary goal was to immediately increase sales, the main focus of public relations was to build awareness for that business or specific issue and establish the organization as an expert and resource in that field, with the long-term expected results being greater revenue and growth. However, unlike paid marketing campaigns, there was no guarantee that the media outlet or organization receiving the information would actually run it. It was a gamble with an unexpected outcome.

Although walking hand-in-hand toward the overall goal of company success, they took two different paths to reach it.

The rise of the Internet's role in today's society changed all that. Business owners and operators with news to share were no longer at the mercy of newspaper and magazine editors. Nor did they have to continue to devote large portions of their marketing budgets to paid advertisements or TV spots. People worldwide-including their customers-quickly turned to the Web when searching for goods and services.

And businesses of all sizes quickly learned that many of the proven tactics used by public relations practitioners for years could now be used even more effectively in driving both current and prospective customers to their product.

THE MULTI-FACETED PRESS RELEASE

The tool of choice among public relations professionals to announce news and promote a business, these traditionally were mailed, faxed or e-mailed to typically only one or a handful of reporters or editors. If the release peaked their interest, they would run the information. If not, it usually ended up in the trash can. Given the number of press releases a reporter or editor received on any given day, the chance of success was fairly low.

But thanks to press release distribution sites such as MarketWire and PRWeb, a business is now guaranteed that its press release will indeed be published on the Web. And this is exactly where more and more customers are looking for information.

Today's Web press releases are important for a variety of reasons, including:

- A business can promote itself instantly and include all of the information it wants published, instead of hoping that a reporter or editor will run all of the pertinent details in the release.
- A business can boost its Web site's Search Engine Optimization (SEO) juice, thereby ensuring higher search rankings. Through back-links and key terms sprinkled liberally throughout the copy, a press release is not only a document for readers to get information. It's also a tool to boost Web site's ranking performance.
- Widespread traction through the Internet. Depending on the interest the press release generates, a business owner can expect that their release will be reposted on other news sites, blogs, forums and other outlets. This puts the information in front of other readers, as well as further distributes your key-term back links.

Regardless of the type of product or service a business offers, a Web press release can be the best medium for telling its story to the world. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when preparing and distributing your release:

- **Pick an interesting topic or angle.** A press release can and should be more than just a general info piece about your company. Try to tie it into a current event, time of year or other angle that makes it timely and pertinent.
- **Grab them with a catchy headline.** Write a headline that will make them want to read the release. Include one or more key terms to help readers find the release when searching for the product or service offered by the business.
- **Make sure it's well-written.** Anyone conducting a search for just about anything will encounter an array of poorly written and sloppy press releases, articles and blog posts. A well-written, professional release stands out from the crowd and can position a business as an expert in its specific industry.
- **Boost your SEO with key terms and back-links.** Most press release distribution services allow its clients to include key-term back-links in the copy. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THESE! These not only send prospective back to your site when clicked on, they also help improve your SEO. (Some press release distribution services limit the number of these based on word count, so be sure to check before submitting the copy.)
- **Know your audience.** Press release distribution services generally offer distribution options to its clients, such as specific industries that the release will be sent to (and hopefully be reposted). Go through these diligently and select those media outlets that would be most interested in your story.
- **Keep 'em coming.** A lot of fresh, newly-written copy can do wonders for a business's SEO, not to mention for continually placing info in front of readers' eyes. Don't settle for a handful of press releases a year. Keep a steady stream of them flowing onto the Internet.

Marketing is all about getting a business's name and information in front of prospective customers. The price most press release distribution sites charge for distributing a release is fairly nominal, compared to the costs of other marketing devices. And it's one of the best ways to build awareness for a product or service, establish a business as an expert in its respective field, and increase sales at the same time.

PITCHING PUBLICATIONS

Another tried-and-true public relations tactic that has become an even more valuable tactic in a marketing campaign is pitching. This involves personally contacting an editor or writer and

sharing with him or her a subject that would be of interest to the publication's readership. If successful, it can quickly set apart a business from its competitors as an expert and resource its industry.

A Web press release states everything that a business wants to convey to readers, but an article written by an unbiased third-party that includes mention of the business in the copy lends instant credibility. The same holds true for a published article authored by the business owner or staff member that runs in an issue of the publication, as the editor must grant approval for it to be published. And if the topic wasn't of interest to reader, he or she would have turned it down.

Since many magazines publish both print and online versions of their periodical, a successful pitch could result in the story appearing in two places. And as with press releases, an interesting article could gain traction as it's reposted and shared throughout the Internet.

Additionally, the success rate is much higher now than it was when magazines and other periodicals only produced a print edition, as some editors will still run a story online if it's not approved for the print version.

Those unfamiliar with pitching could find it intimidating at first, but keeping the following tips in mind can help alleviate any of those fears:

- **Do your research.** Conduct a search to identify current publications that are applicable to the type of product or service offered. Create a database of these publications, along with editor contact information and any deadline information available.
- **Unless allowed, pitch a general topic, not your business.** Businesses that pitch themselves instead of a general topic are usually sent an advertising-rate sheet instead of an interest in the story idea. Put yourself into the readers' shoes and determine a topic and angle that would be interesting for them.
- **Make the pitch clear, concise and right to the point.** Clearly explain the story idea in the first line or two. Story ideas buried in the middle or bottom of the copy are usually unsuccessful.
- **E-mail the pitch.** E-mail is typically the preferred method of sharing story ideas with writers and editors. Although some public relations professionals will say otherwise, a quick telephone follow-up a few days or a week after sending the initial pitch can be beneficial (if the editor or reporter has not replied to the e-mailed pitch).

Most individuals want to be informed on an issue or topic, not just sold to. While pitching has its roots in public relations, it's now seen as a valuable marketing tool as well. Capturing people's attention and educating them on pertinent subjects can plant the seed for future sales down the road.

A successful marketing plan is not as cut-and-dry as it used to be. There are many pieces of the overall puzzle, with each playing a pivotal role for a successful operation. An often overlooked piece is public relations, which has transformed itself over the years from a method to build awareness and positive recognition for a company to a tool to drive revenue and growth.

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