



Developing a PR Plan

Want to make sure your business's name gets heard this year?
You need to plan for PR.

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For most businesses, the new year is a time for assessment, goal setting and strategic planning. When it comes to PR, this is the time to set objectives and formulate a clear, defined plan that'll help your business achieve optimum results in the media.

When planning your PR activities for the year, as a general rule, consider the full year ahead, plan for six months, and expect to revise after three months. Like most business activities, PR requires flexibility and a recognition that things will change over time. However, there are a number of factors that'll make a measurable difference to your company's success if you take them into account at this early stage.

Assess & Plan

First, review the past year in terms of PR activity. If your business received media attention last year, review the resulting coverage with an analytical eye. Determine the angles and pitches that worked well and resulted in positive coverage. Take note of which journalists reported in your favor and which didn't. Look at the overall amount of positive, negative or neutral coverage you received. If you subscribed to a media measurement service, assess the results of your campaigns and, if possible, compare your progress against your competitors.

Next, consider your overall business objectives, and use these as a basis for developing your key media messages. Make sure that what you say and how you say it reflects what you're trying to achieve. Your messages will form the backbone of your communication activity for the year.

Finally, develop a plan of attack. Review your business plan through the eyes of a journalist--what would be of interest to your customers or investors? Identify potential media opportunities that could occur during the year, such as product launches, expansion activities and new service offerings, and develop a calendar that lists the events. If you can, try to organize major news events to create the most buzz. For instance, if your company is introducing a new line of beach apparel, time the launch in the spring to coincide with warming temperatures.

Always remember to put your goals and objectives in writing so you can refer back to them throughout the year and evaluate your success.



Tools & Tactics

Once you've sketched out your plans for the year, it's time to consider the activities that'll enable you to achieve your objectives.

Establish a news release calendar to plan out the news releases you intend to issue throughout the year. You may need to revise this calendar as you move through the year, but it'll give you some initial structure to adhere to and help you stay focused on generating news.

Media outreach in the form of pitching reporters and placing articles is still the essence of PR, and the foundation for any PR program is a solid media list. Before engaging in any PR activities, take the time to carefully research and build a database of key reporters. Your list should contain the contact details of the publications and journalists that pertain to your industry and be organized according to how valuable each is in terms of reaching your target audience.

Once you've created a list, schedule time on your calendar for media outreach. Contact each reporter individually to introduce yourself and to arrange informal meetings where you can discuss the outlook for your company and industry.

Publications' editorial calendars offer an excellent vehicle for planning media exposure. Researching them will enable you to identify opportunities to offer yourself as an expert source, contribute an article or even suggest a feature on your company. Once you've set your list of targets, begin contacting them as soon as possible. Most editorial outlets have deadlines several months ahead of their publication dates. Pay careful attention to the closing dates, or you'll risk losing out on the opportunity. For more on editorial calendars, see "Generating Coverage Between Press Releases."

Contributed or "bylined" articles can be an excellent way to generate exposure and establish yourself as an industry expert. Research magazines, newspapers and websites to find those outlets that are open to such articles, then contact the editor to propose a topic. Remember to make sure the focus of the media outlet is in sync with your business objectives and the article contains your key messages.

Case studies are very attractive to the media because they offer a tangible, real-world example of the benefits of your product or service. The challenge with developing case studies is they require active customer participation. So talk to your clients and ask them if you can report on their successes. While this'll require your customers to share their "war stories," it offers them--and you--a chance to shine.

Speaking opportunities offer another avenue for generating exposure. When planning your PR activities for the year, research conferences, trade shows and webinars for opportunities to nominate yourself as a keynote speaker or a member of a panel discussion. The value in securing such engagements can be tremendous, especially for a growing business; however, they also require vigilant planning because most speaking opportunities are finalized several months in advance.

Blogs and social media have grown in popularity as communications tools because they offer a way to have an active discussion with a motivated audience. When considering PR tactics, don't forget to research the blogs that relate to your industry and get to know the styles and personalities of their authors. Technorati, the leading blog search engine, is a great place to start. A presence in the blogosphere can add to your company's perception as a thought leader. But remember, all material published on a blog is open to a wide audience and can initiate a line of discussion that may not always jive with your point of view.

If you want to launch your own blog, there are free tools, such as Blogger and Blog.com, that enable you to do this easily. When it's all set up, make sure it gets listed on Technorati.

The internet also contains a number of social media networks such as del.icio.us and Digg. These networks are used to store and share content and information--like articles--among members. Additionally, if you have video content that you'd like to share with a consumer audience, you should familiarize yourself with video sharing sites such as YouTube and Metacafe.

Crisis planning is also an essential part of your business's PR plan. This should include all possible negative scenarios and the appropriate responses to them. Ensure that other members of your business are aware of crisis procedures, and take time to do a test run to help iron out any inconsistencies or holes in your plan. Planning your PR strategy now will not only help generate new ideas and opportunities for you and your business to shine, it'll give you peace of mind in your day-to-day operations. While PR plans are always subject to change, planning ahead will enable you to stick to your overall goals and maintain your focus.

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