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5 PR Strategies You Need Now

From crisis control to AI, smart PR is good business

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Public relations (PR) plays an increasingly critical role in making or sustaining a successful business. With the rise of social media and online review sites that can make or break a business, coupled with the power attributed to key influencers and the continued blurring between paid and earned (non-paid) media, having a thorough PR strategy is a mandate for success. Likewise, having no strategic PR plan potentially places a business in jeopardy.

Like PR itself, the job of the active practitioner has evolved dramatically. While PR pros still require fine-tuned writing and relationship skills, today's top performers master technological advancements while accessing emerging PR platforms.

In media circles, it is no longer acceptable to churn out and distribute a standard press release. The masters have transformed their skills into becoming compelling storytellers and content producers who manage a range of formats and platforms that engage and resonate. To borrow a phrase, this ain't your daddy's PR machine.

I'm fortunate to have worked on both sides of the PR equation for more than three decades. As a degreed journalist and former magazine and newspaper editor, I've witnessed the best, the worst and the downright ugliest on the receiving end of PR. And, as a former full-service advertising and PR agency owner and current practitioner representing multiple global and national brands (and as head of marketing for in-house organizations), I've been responsible for strategic planning and execution of countless PR campaigns. From my earliest days until now, I've consistently championed the need to stay abreast of trends, and to subsequently integrate new findings and best practices.

I've recently researched and zeroed in on what I believe are five critical PR trends worthy of review. By grasping these developments and investing in both training and technology, I believe your business can command a higher level of awareness that can help you break through today's oversaturated media marketplace while preparing for challenges and opportunities.

1. Reputation Monitoring and Crisis Management

We live in a 24/7 news cycle. In one shattering instant, a PR volcano can engulf your company in a social-media explosion. In a flash, your company's reputation can go up in flames. Are you prepared?

Who in your organization is in charge of monitoring and safeguarding your reputation? Who is scouring the online forums, social media and any number of blogs or comments for news that may affect your company and its reputation? How comprehensive is your approach and strategy?

How, exactly, are you listening to and monitoring social media conversations? Have you invested in a platform that allows you to track and measure activity? How thorough are your findings? How frequently do you monitor results?

Who serves as your official voice in addressing issues or concerns? Is he or she well trained for this critical function? Is management apprised of such activities? Do all who need to know what's happening actually know? Are processes and protocols in place?

Reputation management has emerged as a key deliverable in today's PR arsenal. Every company worth its salt should have its finger squarely on the pulse of its reputation, with experienced staff fully poised and prepared to respond when concerns arise.

In addition to the ongoing reputation assessment, is there a crisis management/PR plan that has been communicated across all levels of your organization?

Who is responsible for internal and external communication? Have key talking points been prepared for potential scenarios? Is your CEO or company spokesperson trained to communicate in the face of a pending blow?

Whether it's a natural disaster or a business catastrophe that takes your company by storm, your leadership team should be well organized and prepared for a potential crisis. Don't wait until you're in the thick of the storm to figure out how to navigate. Lack of PR planning has sunk many a ship!

2. Customized Channel Messaging

PR involves shaping and communicating a message to different audiences. While this fundamental focus has not wavered, the quantity of distribution channels has exploded.

Prior to selecting your outlets, consider your goals. What do you want to achieve? How will you measure performance? Whom, specifically, do you want to reach? What is the message? What is the best way to package and promote that message to each channel?

Gone are the days when the publicist distributed to a simple list of TV, radio and news contacts. Unlike the one-size-fits-all press release of the past, today's audience demands customized content favored by its viewership or dictated by a particular platform.

We now communicate across a broad and varied mix of traditional and digital channels, using customized content as appropriate for each unique medium and audience. To be successful, PR experts must clearly understand and package content to meet the desired format for each specific audience.

Whether you are packaging your communications in a 20-second video or a Facebook Live clip, an Instagram story or a captioned photo, a blog, a traditional press release or a tweet, your ability to laser-focus the message in the channel's format of choice will affect your success.

3. Influencer Marketing

There's a reason big companies pay celebrities to hawk everything from weight-management programs to discount airfares and hotel rooms. The right celebrity can move the dial.

A newer trend is the development of influencer marketing. Regular Joes or smaller scale micro-celebrities in a market niche can wield a big stick. Their online followers are influenced by their beliefs, activities and endorsements.

Media personalities and reporters reviewing a product or service and delivering a thumbs-up can create credibility and buzz. PR pros have now expanded this reach to engage popular online influencers whose third-party commentary can likewise build positive awareness among their targeted followers.

Say, for example, you're marketing a new brand of foul-weather gear and you offer free samples to top contenders (influencers) in the sailing and sportfishing sectors, in exchange for mentions in their blogs and online social media activity. Some may gladly accept the freebies, while more seasoned influencers may demand coins in the coffer too.

The sticky wicket is whether or not the influencer divulges his relationship to the product or service being promoted, and whether he is paid for the endorsement. Some believe a financial arrangement affects credibility, while others don't seem to care.

To test an influencer, have goals in mind and determine how you will measure results. Research candidates to understand previous successes, and speak with sponsors who can share valuable performance insight. Confirm exactly what you can expect in return for your investment. Ask if you have input into content, or if you are at risk with no guarantees.

4. Paid vs. Earned Media

In the old days, PR was considered earned media when a publicist's pitch resulted in editorial coverage without cost. This strategy remains viable as publicists clamor to get their clients featured in print and digital publications, podcasts and blogs, webcasts, radio and TV broadcasts.

Two developments, however, have affected earned-media strategy.

First, the number of legitimate media outlets continues to dwindle, providing fewer opportunities with higher demand. ^[P]_[SEP]

Second is the rapid growth of brand-generated/owned content and self-publishing, along with paid media options. Brands today produce and distribute their own content, targeting internal and external channels.

5. Artificial Intelligence

If the concept of creating cutting-edge PR campaigns with enhanced messaging for specific audience segments appeals, then artificial intelligence should be a major consideration.

“AI refers to computer systems that are able to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence,” Wendy Marx of Marx Communications writes in the article “Artificial Intelligence and P.R.: What You Need to Know.” On the PR front, Marx notes that AI has the potential to “write data-driven stories, create media lists, help in crisis management, transcribe audio and video into text, predict media trends and monitor social media.”

Marx says AI can quickly analyze chunks of data to assess campaign start times, subject lines and social media channel preferences; identify influencers; and sort top facts to promote.

Meltwater, an outstanding PR and media platform that I once managed in-house, includes media monitoring, coverage clipping, reporting, and competitive analysis. It has also developed AI-powered chatbots as a tool for corporate PR and social interaction.

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