



Velocity White Paper

The New School of Public Relations

Raising Awareness for the Rest of us: Online PR

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What's a press release supposed to do?

We all know what it's supposed to do. It's supposed to magically inspire reporters to write good things about your company. In reality, this is never the case. A press release can be many things - a marketing man's nirvana; a CEO's vanity play; and a great reason for a PR consultant to throw a party.... but more often than not, it's not the thing that moves a reporter to write.

To get reporters to write you need four things: a lot of cash, a brand, a great story and a talented PR consultant. And here are the riders: when the story's absent, you need cash, brand and talent in abundance; if you have no brand, you need the other stuff in spades; and if you have no cash, then you need to play by a different set of rules.

Oftentimes, the cash question is just about buying persistence. Your story might stink, but you may have enough resources to stay in the face of reporters long enough to get them to write about you. In other words, you buy the services of a PR firm. However, it's a harsh fact that in today's world, £2,500 a month buys you not a lot of talent.... and, consequently, not a lot of success.

What's a smart, budget-conscious firm to do with PR?

Most likely your audience is very specific, and your stories are not of mass appeal. Your objective, however, remains the same. You want to raise awareness of your brand/product/service among prospects who don't know you yet.

Now there's a big wide world of PR agencies out there, waiting to eat your marketing budget, so here's a word to the wise: let them focus on the clients they're built for – the big corporate gorillas that have the cash and the brand to make the traditional PR model work. For the rest of us there's an alternative: the web.

PR on the web: avoid the middle man

The starting point for PR on the web is the same as it ever was. You still need to generate compelling content to appeal to your audiences. You still need to craft your marketing messages with a great deal of care – be they via white papers, case studies, opinion pieces or good old press releases. The difference, however, lies in how you distribute them.

Email is cheap. Publishing stuff on your web site costs almost zero. Sending your press releases via web-based distribution hubs costs next to nothing. On the other hand, to hold the front page of the FT is a more expensive ride, because the man-power of PR is not cheap. By using the web you can cut out the middle man and still get your message to your audience. As we'll see, the approach is a little different, but the result can be a lot more cost effective, targeted and (most importantly!) easy to measure.

Raising awareness, web style

You already have a web site, right? Well, it's time to put it to work. Once you've created all of those classic marcomms pieces – the white papers, the think pieces, and the press releases, they need to find a home on your site...say the 'resources' section. This first piece of publishing should cost you nothing, especially if you use a Content Management System (a CMS is cheap, too and you really ought to use one for your website).

At the same time, your website should act as a hub for the creation of a web marketing database, capturing user information as they pass through your site. For example, you should be getting people to sign up to newsletters or whitepapers in exchange for their email address. If you're doing this already then you're half way there.

Using email to drive awareness

Now that you've published your content to your site it's time to use your email lists and shout about it. There are killer email tools that help you do this at an incredibly low cost – such as [Vertical Response](#).

Use your email lists effectively in tandem with these tools and build targeted email campaigns around specific areas of interest and in specific formats. For example, you can turn that latest sales presentation into a one-page opinion piece that ties into your latest sales promotion...and then fire it off to your customers as an email

blast. Or, you can round up all the new content you've produced this quarter and turn it into a newsletter for your business partners.

This approach costs you next to nothing (perhaps a penny an email), and yet it enables you to get directly in the face of the people you care about – customers, partners, analysts and, er, journalists. And over time, as you begin to measure them, you can make your email communications smarter and more effective – you can personalise your content according to the things you learn from your audiences (ie, if nobody's clicking on your white papers, then change them! And, if Acme Co. doesn't click on your newsletter, then send them something else!)

Beyond communicating with people, today's email tools also provide you with a mass of data about the effectiveness of your campaigns. Want to know the names of the people that clicked through and downloaded your latest white paper? You got it! Want to phone them? Go for it!

Rethinking press releases

At the same time, content distribution hubs like [PR Newswire](#) will, for a couple of hundred pounds, take your press releases and distribute them far and wide across the internet – to places such as Yahoo News, Bloomberg, and other more specialist news outlets.

The primary idea here is not to generate press coverage. As mentioned, that takes a bigger chunk of change to achieve. The goal is to generate *web coverage*. In practice, when your press release is distributed by these hubs, it ends up getting published in a thousand different places across the web. All of these places are web pages, and the majority of them are automated – they won't need you or a PR consultant to persuade them to publish your story.

Whilst these sites may seem irrelevant to you, to Google and Co. they're not. For Google, the fact that they're out there means that somebody somewhere cares about you, and further, if your press releases contain links back to specific pages on your web site using effective keywords (eg, to the relevant campaign offer page) then this does wonders to the way in which Google understands you and ranks you.

So...by distributing press releases across the web, you're encouraging Google to rank you higher, which in turn means more people will be able to find their way to your web site through their own web searches. In addition, web press release distribution helps you access new markets and new web site visitors from places you'd never reach before – for example, a listing on an obscure news aggregator in Eastern Europe may not be an immediate target, but it might bring you new interest and new business.

Stop the Press! PR for all!

PR has changed. It's no longer solely about generating press coverage. This stuff is expensive to do well. It is still important, however. IBM will continue to spend zillions per year with PR agencies because the front page of the FT will continue to matter to them.

But for smaller organisations, PR today is all about communicating with people directly (through email) and generating web coverage and encouraging new visitors to web sites (through news distribution hubs). With the right tools in place, this approach is very cost effective and very measurable.

Like the old PR model, content is still king - in the sense that what you say must be relevant, valuable and timely - but the means of communication is radically different. It's web-based. It's cheap. And everyone can do it. It's PR for all!