

How to...



How To Succeed in PR

How you can succeed *in PR*

Having a good relationship with the press – whether it be your trade magazines, your customers' trade press, business magazines, local papers or the nationals – can be an important tool for businesses large and small.

PR (Public Relations) offers a cost-effective way of conveying your message while also obtaining credibility from an objective third party. The problem is the press receives far more press releases and 'important news stories' every day than it has room to publish.

So how do you cut through the noise and get your message into print?

Getting your story into print

To increase the chances of your story being noticed and picked up by the media you need to make sure your subject is genuinely newsworthy. A newsworthy subject is:

- **Fresh** - You must be announcing something new; something that was not previously known. A journalist is less likely to be interested in a story that has already appeared elsewhere
- **Intriguing** - You need to grab the journalist's attention and the story itself must be of value to the reader. Ask yourself: "Would I be interested in reading this story if it was about someone else?"
- **Benefit-orientated** - Emphasise how your product or solution will benefit customers. Put yourself in your customers' shoes and ask: "Why should I care?" Identify the key benefits of your product or solution, and make sure you highlight these benefits
- **Innovative** - If you are writing about a new product or solution that your company has developed, emphasise its innovative qualities - the elements that have never been applied before. Genuine innovations are, inherently, news. But once again, try to be objective – just being new doesn't guarantee a product or service will benefit anyone; illustrate how the new features enhance the benefits your customers derive

- **Reflective of industry trends** - Readers are always interested in keeping up with the latest trends. If you can show how your product or solution fits into broader industry trends, you will increase the newsworthiness of your story. Beware of falling into the 'me-too' trap; following the herd is unlikely to make you look impressive

Types of publications

There are four broad categories of publications that you should consider for your publicity efforts:

- **IT industry press** covers your industry and it is used by IT professionals to inform and influence their purchasing decisions. An important sub-section of the IT trade press is the reseller /partner press who are always interested in hearing from Partners. Not only can you secure coverage in their news pages, but you may cultivate good contacts in the reseller press who may approach you regularly for insightful comments on the key issues of the day. It is worth remembering that the reseller press is widely read by many vendor marketing managers and can be an excellent way to raise your profile in front of your key vendor partners
- **Vertical trade press** focuses on a particular vertical industry segment, such as banking, grocery, aerospace or accounting, which your target customers in that sector may read avidly. Such publications are usually looking for stories that focus on the customer and not the supplier. Consequently they may regard you with suspicion and any material you send them that might be construed as little more than sales and marketing material may be ignored. Stories that show how one of your customers has benefited from your work will be more favourably received
- **Local press** covers general news for a particular city or area, and will be interested in you as a local business or employer. Your stories for the local press must, therefore, stress your local connection. Local press especially like to hear about businesses helping local charities, or partnering with schools, and so on
- **National, regional or local business press** can be used to raise your profile and enhance your image as a 'player' in the market. But be realistic: unless you are a publicly quoted company, don't expect the Financial Times to be very interested in you. Similarly, The Economist is used to talking to multi billion-dollar multi-nationals, so think carefully about where you think you are likely to get the best results. How do you gauge this? Take a look through the publications you are interested in and see what sort of companies and stories are mentioned there

Subject matter

For the most part, journalists look for stories that will interest their readers. Journalist Guy Clapperton recently spoke about good story writing and commented, 'If you take the technology out of the story, is it still an interesting story? To use an example, the story 'computer X goes Y faster' is not nearly as interesting as 'computer X saves half a day!'

Compelling stories usually cover areas such as:

- **New products or solutions** - Benefit-led descriptions of new products or solutions you have developed, at a level of technicality which is relevant to the publication's readership

- **Case studies** - Successful applications of your solutions that have solved problems for existing customers, particularly in a specific vertical industry
- **Trends** - Discussion of industry trends and how your product or solution reflects or affects these trends
- **Personalities** - Success stories of key people in your organisation

Unpopular subjects

The following is a list of topics that tend to fall by the wayside when it comes to getting the press excited. It's not an exhaustive list, and occasionally someone will strike it lucky with one of these, but avoid where possible!

Don't despair, we've included some pointers on how to spin these types of story to make them more appealing.

- **Vendor Partner Status/Competency Announcements:** These are very worthwhile aspirations, but on the whole local press won't know what these things are and consequently won't appreciate their value. By comparison, the IT trade press see so many of this type of announcement that they frequently ignore them. If you get a new Competency, for example, talk about what it means you can now do for your customers that other suppliers cannot do; put the spotlight on potential business benefits
- **New offices.** If you've just moved into new premises you are unlikely to get much of a response from the local press, unless there is something quirky about your company or the new location. However, if you have an official opening ceremony with a local celebrity or other notable individual, make sure you get professional photographs taken, as that might win the press over
- **Customer days/seminars.** If you're holding a seminar at your premises it is likely to be a big deal for you, and for your attendees, but to the average journalist this will be seen as nothing special, just the humdrum of business activities. By giving your seminars a theme, such as "Managing Change Through IT in Your Region" you may appear to be doing more than selling, but instead acting as advisors to the wider business community in your locale. Consider getting an external speaker involved, such as the business editor of your local newspaper for added press appeal
- **Sales promotions.** If you're having a sale, don't expect it to make the headlines! The press will interpret it as "company that sells computers is selling computers" – that's what you do, after all

Defining your audiences

To carry out PR effectively, it's important to determine which of your audiences you're seeking to influence:

- **Customers.** Boost both awareness and sales by informing existing and potential customers of your latest products and solutions, and keeping yourself 'front of mind' with them. PR is not a sales tool, however. It is rare for anyone to get a sales call as a direct result of a story in a newspaper or magazine
- **Employees/internal audience.** Using PR to keep employees informed about your products and solutions not only helps them to be more effective in their jobs, but also

improves their morale. Publicity can also help your recruiting efforts by making potential employees aware of your company

- **Vendor partners.** If you are running a marketing campaign in association with one of your vendor partners, you may want to consider using PR as a way of demonstrating your commitment and effectiveness; issue press releases containing themes that relate to the campaign and target them at the reseller press

Matching messages to audiences

These tables are designed to help you match your subject matter to potential audiences via the four publication types.

Table 1 illustrates the subjects that are appropriate for each type of publication.

Publication Type	IT Industry	Vertical Trade	Local Press	Business Press
Win/Alliance Announcement	x		x	x
Product/Solution Announcement	x	x		x
Case Studies	x	x		x
Personalities			x	x

Table 2 shows which audiences you may be able to reach through each type of publication.

Publication Type	IT Industry	Vertical Trade	Local Press	Business Press
Customers	x	x	x	x
Employees	x		x	x

Choosing the right format to get your message across

Press release

A written announcement of a newsworthy event, distributed to appropriate journalists. Distribution channels include mail, email and fax. Newsworthy events could include new products or services, key customer wins, company growth announcements, etc.

Fact sheet or backgrounder

A brief document that outlines key points and facts about a company or product. A fact sheet can accompany a press release if an announcement is especially significant or innovative and the information cannot be fully conveyed in the release.

Feature article

A more in-depth treatment of a topic, typically submitted to a selected publication rather than distributed to multiple publications at once. Case studies, industry trend stories and key company personalities are all good subjects for articles. You may write the article yourself, under the byline of a key executive in your company; or work with a journalist or copywriter.

Press event

A meeting, often held in conjunction with a trade show, where you announce a subject of particular significance. Press events should be well planned and to-the-point, to ensure that future events will be well attended.

Press tour

A series of person-to-person journalist visits. Press tours are time-consuming, but they are most effective when used for making a strategic announcement, such as a product launch. Often, a company executive accompanied by a marketing/PR person will go on the tour. If the visit includes a product demo, it's a good idea to bring along a technical expert as well.

Media advisory

A media advisory is a brief written announcement that encourages the press to attend, watch, or tune in to an event such as a press event or seminar focusing on a new service or solution. The media advisory gives limited information – just enough to draw the interest of the press and provide them with logistical details (Who, What, When, Where, Why).

Photography

Clichés become clichés for a reason and a picture really can be worth 1,000 words when it comes to securing press coverage. Whatever your announcement include photography, but it has to be done well, use professionals wherever you can – avoid the DIY digital photography option unless you happen to have a proficient amateur photographer to hand. Your local newspaper will have a picture desk who can probably supply you with the names of a number of good local snappers.

Writing a press release

How do you cut through the piles of press releases that journalists have on their desks? Here are some hints on how to write a professional press release that will grab their attention.

Present the most important information first A good press release presents the most important information first. When space is too limited to run your whole story, journalists will cut from the end, so this ensures that the most important elements of your story will be included. Keep things factual and avoid superlatives – you might think what you've done is innovative and exciting, but that's a judgement call not a statement of fact. Give people the facts, let them decide for themselves; journalists get bombarded with claims such as "we are the first" and so on, they've heard it all before and won't be impressed. Make sure all your claims are verifiable and back them up with facts where possible.

Break up longer announcements. If you are covering several subjects, consider using subheads to break up the technical details section and make it easier to scan. For example, a release about a new software product might contain one section providing details on its execution speed, another describing its functionality, and a third describing its ease of use.

Supporting quotes. Quotes from vendors and other partners or your customers can help add gravitas to your announcement. In the case of Microsoft partner-related PR, there are quotes available from Gold and Certified partners to use in their press releases. In many cases these quotes are already written and approved for use in conjunction with your press outreach activities, so you can get them quickly.

System requirements, pricing, availability. Specify minimum system requirements (for software products), price information (if desired), and when and where the product can be obtained (can include contact person and phone number if desired).

Key elements

To create a clear, compelling Press Release follow these steps;

- 1. Headline** - a benefit-orientated phrase that conveys the key elements of your story. Should be active, attention-grabbing and short – aim for around six words.
- 2. Contact information** - precedes the body of the press release; it lists one or two people in your company that the press can contact if they want more information, with their phone numbers.
- 3. Dateline** - immediately precedes the lead sentence; specifies the location and date on which the story is being released.
- 4. Lead sentence** - presents the major points of your story in a single sentence. Get across what has happened, who is involved and why it's important. Keep things succinct – maximum 30 words for your opening sentence.
- 5. Opening paragraph** - expands on the lead sentence to convey your story in one or two paragraphs, covering the five "W's" (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and explaining the key benefits. Write your opening paragraphs in such a way that if the journalist used that information and nothing else, the write-up would still contain all the key elements of your story.
- 6. Add more context** - in the following paragraph. If the story involves a customer, explain their line of business. If it involves a product, give an overview of features and benefits – go easy on the technical details though, you want anyone to be able to understand it.
- 7. Positioning quote** - generally follows the opening two paragraphs, and quotes a key member of your organisation (usually the MD, or CEO, etc) as to the significance of this announcement. It's your one opportunity to use subjective information, explaining the impact you expect to have on the industry or target market. Here are some points to keep in mind about quotes:
 - The quote should convey information – benefits, relevance to industry trends not just empty words
 - Write it yourself, then run it by the spokesperson to obtain his/her approval
 - Make it sound "spoken" – so read it aloud several times once you've written it. If it sounds awkward, re-write it until it sounds like something someone actually would say
- 8. Boilerplate** - is a standard paragraph that you use at the end of all your press releases, presenting key facts about your company and explaining what business you're in. Include your URL.

Format guidelines

To ensure your press release is as professional as possible, here are some guidelines to keep in mind when writing your press release:

- **Line spacing.** Use double line spacing to make it easy to read
- **More, End.** All pages except the last should end with the word "More." If the pages of the release become separated, this convention tells the journalist that this is not the final page. For the same reason, the last page should end with "End" (before the boilerplate)
- **Trademark information.** As a courtesy to other companies, you should identify any trademarked terms with the proper trademark sign (® for registered trademarks, ™ for other trademarks), plus a footnote at the end of your release identifying the owner of each trademark (if you're not sure which product names are trademarked, refer to that company's literature for guidance). For Microsoft trademark information, visit: www.microsoft.com/mscorp/ip/trademarks
- **Timing guidelines.** The best time to mail your press releases depends on whether the publication has a daily, weekly or monthly publication schedule. It is a worthwhile investment of your time to contact the publications you plan to send things to and ask them about their production schedule. This could be combined with asking who the appropriate contact is

Telephone contact

With journalists and reporters receiving information from hundreds of companies, you can't assume your press release is going to be picked up. Following up your mailings with telephone contact can sometimes increase your chances of coverage. But be warned – this can also be the fastest way to get someone's back up and journalists are well known for their abusive outbursts. The PR industry is awash with stories of journalists tearing strips off people who have rung to ask "did you get my press release?"

However, regular telephone contact is an important part of establishing a relationship with key members of the press. It may be more valuable if you contact the journalist before you issue your press release to tell them about the story. If they are interested you can offer them the press release as additional material, or – better yet – ask if they would like a phone interview with your spokesperson. Don't forget to offer them the photography you've already organised!

Be sure to pitch the story at them with an appropriate angle. Your announcement may have different implications for different types of publications. For example, you may want to discuss a new product or solution in light of general computing trends for a general trade publication. Focus on implications for a particular industry segment for a vertical trade publication, and focus on the role of key company personalities for a local business publication.

Before calling each key person on your list, develop a story angle appropriate to that person's publication.

Tracking your results

If it's your responsibility to manage PR for your organisation you'll need to demonstrate your effectiveness at some point. So track the coverage you receive in the press and keep reports that you can forward to your colleagues. There are press monitoring agencies you can use for this activity, but unless you are issuing a high volume of announcements to the press this is unlikely to be a cost-effective solution.

Microsoft Partner PR Support Programme

The programme is run by Clarity Public Relations who dedicate their specialist knowledge to helping our Partners do PR. The programme has two main service offerings:

- Partners will be offered editing services to help produce press releases, approved by Microsoft and with supporting comments from Microsoft spokespeople
- Partners will also be able to get ad hoc advice from Clarity Public Relations on PR-related issues

The programme is available as a benefit exclusively to Gold Certified and Certified Partners. To contact Clarity PR call **0870 950 9670** or e-mail partners@claritypr.co.uk

If you're a Registered Member and would like to use a PR Agency, these services and more are available from Clarity PR at discounted rates to all Microsoft Partners.

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