

The Story Behind the Stories
A Concise User Guide on Contemporary Public Relations
White Paper



BackBone Inc.

Public Relations: a Definition

A woman was in a park wheeling her granddaughter in a stroller when a passerby paused to offer a compliment.

“My, what a beautiful baby!” said the passerby.

“Thank you so much, but wait,” said the proud grandmother, as she fumbled for her cell phone, “let me show you her picture.”

Now *that’s* what you call spin! Public Relations (PR) is often misunderstood, when it is understood at all. Ironically, it is public relations itself that could use better PR. To many, Public Relations is synonymous with spin – a highly selective collection of information used to advance a particular story and viewpoint. Fair enough, but there’s spin...and there’s *spin* (aka, fake news). On one hand, there’s the obvious but innocuous “gilding the lily” variety as practiced by the proud grandma. On the other, there’s the “who are you gonna believe, me or your lying eyes?” variety that all-too-often rears its head in our politics. Other forms of PR - investor relations and crisis management - are specialized and follow established approaches and methodologies; these forms are more about “disclosure” than outright “spin” (there are, as always, exceptions)...and hoping to turn lemons into a refreshingly tart beverage.



Edward L. Bernays, a legendary PR practitioner, wrote that, “Ideally, PR is a constructive force bringing to the public facts and figures resulting often in accelerated interest in matters of value and importance, to the social, economic, and political life of the community.” The operative word here is “ideally,” as even the most buttoned-up Corporate PR operation is in the business of creating public-pleasing narratives that airbrush over inconvenient truths. Putting a company in the best possible light, and positioning it against its competition, does require salesmanship – but it can still be ethical, truthful and credible...or not.

This paper focuses on the day-to-day practice of corporate or B-to-B PR, which, at its root, is about projecting a positive, credible image to the organization’s “publics” – the influential third parties (media and analysts) whose opinions and pronouncements shape perceptions and influence purchasing decisions. Whereas political PR is adversarial and “zero sum,” corporate PR is competitive in that you’re vying for editorial attention and “column inches” (see next section). It’s about framing information or, if you will, shaping a narrative that tells your story in the most compelling manner possible to get reporters, bloggers and analysts to take notice and provide third party validation for your brand, product and/or service. Unlike advertising or sponsored content, which is a form of

“telling,” PR is a form of “showing” through force of a persuasive argument and convincing story told on your behalf by a respected, objective expert. It’s why Bill Gates once said, “*if I were down to my last dollar, I would spend it on PR.*”

Making News

Competition for media coverage has gotten more fierce as there are simply more media outlets and media “entrepreneurs” (aka, bloggers) than ever before. Bear in mind that there are (roughly) 6 PR people to every reporter. This means two things: your audience is harder to reach, as it tends to be spread across an ever-widening media landscape, and you are competing with many other PR practitioners to reach them. Getting exposure – a mention or quote in an article, to a feature piece - requires persistence, finesse and the ability to tailor a message that stands out from the dozens, even hundreds of press releases and story pitches the average editor receives on a weekly basis. Each placement or mention or retweet is hard won. There’s a reason PR is also referred to as “earned media” (vs. paid media, aka, advertising and sponsored content).



News can take a variety of forms: a new product launch, a company milestone, a big client win or partnership, an earnings report, a significant hire. If you have something pointed or provocative to contribute, you might be quoted in an article or profiled as a “thought leader” (see the note on thought leadership at the end of this section). There are three main “channels” to deliver your news, each requiring a different approach and type of messaging.

Press releases: Cision’s Global State of the Media Report found that “for the third year in a row, media professionals ranked press releases and news announcements as the most valuable type content they receive from their PR contacts. They’ve also once again chosen the press release as their most trusted brand source.” A steady drum beat of announcements - on matters large and small – conveys that you’re a dynamic company on the march. Consistent communications is the building block of every PR campaign; it keeps you in front of the reporters, bloggers and analysts who will think of you when writing a feature story or compiling a report.

Syndicating your press release to major news websites, industry publications and blogs can drive new and targeted traffic from audiences who wouldn’t otherwise have ended up on your website. And using

targeted keywords in your press release can also improve your search engine results.

Pitching: Competition for an editor’s attention is fierce, which is why it’s critical that each story being pitched is compelling, has a unique angle, is timely, and is perhaps pegged to an emerging trend, new study or item in the news. The pitch (also known as a “query”) must communicate quickly since editors typically read the subject of the query and the lead sentence to determine if it’s worth pursuing.

It’s also important that you know the reporter’s beat, what he or she has covered recently, even their editorial preferences (following a reporter on Twitter is a handy way of tracking this). It’s a pretty stiff challenge grabbing a busy editor’s attention when you have perhaps 35-50 words, tops, to do the job. Of course having established relationships and a reputation for reliable and interesting story pitches go a long way.

- **Community engagement:** According to Cision’s Global Social Journalism Study, 90% of journalists use social media in their work, including finding topics to cover. Knowing this, you should use social media as well as email to reach the journalists, bloggers, and reporters you’re targeting. Unlike a pitch, social involves two-way conversation. Tracking a reporter’s Twitter timeline is a good way to know what the reporter has recently written about and their main concerns/interests. Engaging via social media – Twitter in particular, as it’s where so many reporters “live” - is ongoing. Share or comment on their tweets and articles; make yourself a trusted, essential resource, and let them know when you have news that’s relevant to them.

A Note on Thought Leadership

While some dismiss the term as “business jargon,” there is great value in associating your company with an expert perspective or trend. Thought leadership can be achieved via any combination of white papers, bylined articles, speaking engagements, or podcasts, written by or featuring your company’s chief executive. It’s a powerful way of establishing your company’s bona fides and elevating its brand. It demonstrates your company’s forward-thinking, its insights into



What Now?

You've just broken through...three articles in rapid succession: a couple of paragraphs in a product round-up, a quote in a national newspaper, one of your customers is profiled in a prominent trade publication attesting to the value of your product/service. Great stuff. But you're just getting started.

In an ideal world, our target audience always subscribes to the publications in which we obtain coverage, reads our article, understands and accepts the key messages, and remembers them indefinitely. However, your target audience is bombarded with messages from a multitude of companies across multiple media outlets. They often skim and don't read, and quite often can't remember where they saw an advertisement or article.

Passive vs. Active PR

Passive PR views the fruits of your media work as the end point. You've secured a mention or several, and you sit back waiting for prospects to take action based on an article they've just read. While this does happen, taking an active approach dramatically amplifies and extends your initial exposure. You can achieve this by routinely following up:

- Excerpt the article or extract your quote, frame it in an e-mail and distribute it to your list of prospects and customers.
- Repurpose a published bylined article into a White Paper, allowing you to extract further value from the initial writing and placement.
- Distribute/amplify through social media - —once an article appears, get into the habit of “parceling” it out through Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. One feature article can be carved up into several day's worth of tweets, enabling you to reach more people and sustain the impact. Any feedback can, in turn, be retweeted and rebroadcast.
- Order reprints and include these in sales/media kits.
- Parlay the articles into speaking opportunities.

An active approach will extend your reach, maximize your impact, and more robustly support the sales process.

PR: the Key to Successful Content Marketing

Nine out of ten businesses are doing some type of content marketing, but their success rate is only about 30% (Content Marketing Institute). One reason is lack of strategy; another is poor reception, where brands largely use content the same way they use advertising, to convey, at best, thinly veiled product pitches.

Being discovered in today's competitive online marketplace is about making sure your content is timely, newsworthy and obtainable from multiple well-regarded sources – which is why media placement, particularly on “high authority” sites is intrinsic to successful content marketing initiatives.

Today, the top search engines use "site quality algorithms," which move well beyond "quantitative" analysis (i.e., keyword density) and into "qualitative" analysis, favoring content quality and relevance. This is why successful marketers are moving from SEO to content marketing, which rewards content that has reach and influence -- the articles, blog posts, tweets, white papers, and infographics you write, optimize and disseminate to “high authority” websites and across social media, and the degree to which they get read, retweeted, favorited and passed around. Content Marketing without a strong PR element is essentially yesterday's SEO.

Public relations and marketing have traditionally existed in separate camps. For decades, industry analysts and vendors have been predicting that PR and marketing would converge for decades, yet the two remain distinct. However, content marketers would be wise to use them together: PR can and does enhance marketing, as "earned media" imbues your marketing efforts/materials with critical third party validation.

Sponsored Media...Fake News or Savvy Marketing?

PR – or “earned media” — is about getting clients coverage in credible media outlets on the strength of your story. This is still the most persuasive type of “messaging.” Sponsored content has a place — but ultimately it works best when it's backed by the credibility and third party validation that comes with earned media.

Conclusion

Effective PR is based on your ability to create narratives that are compelling, credible and timely. It requires consistency and persistence, while being able to adapt your messaging to events as they unfold. Someone once said that PR agencies have intelligence in spades, what they lack is artistry. A strategic, “artful” PR program takes time to develop, and even the best laid plans will require tweaking if not wholesale change. But the business benefits of targeted, sustained PR that generates steady “news” and timely, expert content are clear:

- Heightened visibility among your target audiences.
- Third party validation of your market differentiators
- An “anchor” for content marketing initiatives; articles or mentions in “high authority” media cites improve search rankings
- New business opportunities

PR as Ultimate “Validator”

Doug Hirsch, CEO of GoodRx: “The moment he knew he became a true CEO was during an interview with ABC in 2013, when he realized his role was to articulate the direction of the company.”

(Business Insider)

About BackBone, Inc.

Since the company's founding in 1995, BackBone has helped some of the world's most innovative and dynamic IT, healthcare and HR technology vendors successfully position, pitch, and sell their solutions and services. BackBone provides “next-generation” public relations (combining traditional PR with social media initiatives), content marketing and business development services -- all geared to assisting emerging technology companies raise their profile, gain market-share, and fast-track profitability. BackBone is headquartered in Boca Raton, Florida, with offices in New York and Philadelphia. For additional information, visit www.backboneinc.com, or e-mail che@backboneinc.com.