

Think You Know PR? Think Again
By Kelly Moore

Sometimes the best way to define something is to explain what it's not – especially when that something you're aiming to define is so misunderstood. Such is the case with the marketing discipline of public relations, or as it's more commonly known, PR.

Simply put, PR is not advertising.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people call PR "free advertising." Not only is this just flat wrong, it's extremely misleading. And here's why.

Whom do you trust?

The most important difference between advertising and PR comes to credibility. Think about how you watch TV news. Who do you believe more – the anchor who says a local corporation is planning to lay off 200 people next week or an actor the company has hired to talk about its dedication to employee satisfaction during a 30-second commercial? The anchor, right?

That's why PR focuses on placing your messages into the editorial space (news articles or news programming) vs. the advertising space (print ads or broadcast commercials) of the news media.

Investing in the expertise of a PR representative who knows how to deal professionally with the news media is the best way you can have an impact on how the media covers your company.

Who has the control?

When you create an advertisement, whether you're doing it yourself or with the help of a design expert, you have the control. Now, if you've ever worked with a wildly creative advertising agency, you may disagree. But even in that case, you, as the client, have the ultimate say in how that advertisement will look, what it will say and where it will appear.

PR, on the other hand, relies on its knowledge and expertise of the news media to influence, rather than control, how your messages are disseminated to your target audience.

The best known facet of PR is media relations, wherein PR practitioners encourage the news media to cover an organization's newsworthy events or participation in national or global trends.

The goal of media relations is actually two-fold: to develop mutually beneficial relationships with the news media and to generate awareness of and interest in your business. Because the later of these two goals is shared by advertising, it's not too difficult to see why people can confuse the two marketing disciplines.

However, that's where the similarities between advertising and PR stop. And if PR practitioners, experts and DIY-ers alike do not understand the difference, they are setting themselves up not only for failure, but for embarrassment.

An advertiser has the control in the advertiser-media relationship. Because advertisers are paying for space in the publication or on the airwaves, they define the parameters of their advertisement. Not only do they get to design the ad and write the copy, they get to choose (with their checkbook) where that advertisement will appear, and to a certain extent, who will see it.

Conversely, a PR representative who has successfully pitched a story idea to an editor or reporter has no control over how that story will be written or where it will appear. The only way a company can influence (a term not to be confused with "control") the editorial process, as it's known, is to learn how to successfully pitch a story idea to the news media or participate in an interview with a reporter. Believe it or not, there is such a thing as media relations etiquette. And PR aims to teach you the rules of interviewer-interviewee communications.

For instance, it's not only uncouth to ask a reporter to review his article before it's published, it's a PR no-no. Not only does requesting this review imply that you don't trust the reporter who interviewed you, it indicates that you don't trust your own answers to the reporter's questions. There are certain publications that will allow you to review an article before it is published, but this is a rarity, and not something you should feel entitled to.

You may be thinking, "So what if I offend the reporter by requesting a review; I need to make sure that article is accurate before it reaches the customer." But here's the problem: many reporters will pass you up next time they are writing on your subject in favor of a source who does not insist on a review. And there goes any chance of future editorial coverage of your company.

Keep in mind that the news media is not obligated to write a story about your company. In addition to being good writers, journalists are charged with finding and reporting the news. And if they don't consider your story idea newsworthy, they don't have to and shouldn't report it.

Good PR representatives will challenge their clients' story ideas. You should not be turned off by this, but rather embrace it. These folks are hired to help you gain publicity, and if they are forced to pitch poor story ideas to reporters, they'll quickly develop "no news" reputations with the news media. And a PR rep with a bad reputation is the last person you want representing you.

So, what stories make the news?

Any journalism school graduate will tell you that news is made up of ten elements. Every time you have an idea for a story that you'd like to bring to the media's attention, run it

through the following bullet points first. If your idea meets at least three of these elements, you've got the basis of a good story, and a reporter will likely be interested.

- Conflict – Two or more people or groups disagree.
- Consequence – There is a consequence for the reader.
- Drama – Excitement and thrill abound.
- Emotion – Readers will feel.
- Human Interest – People can relate.
- Oddity – Anything strange or unusual is news.
- Progress – New products, new processes being introduced or discovered.
- Prominence – Famous people are involved.
- Proximity – The news is close to the reader.
- Timeliness – It's happening now or will happen soon.

What else can PR do for me?

PR is much more than media relations, and a good PR representative will offer your company a wide range of services. These include, but are not limited to, research, strategic planning, public speaking, tradeshow and special event planning and investor relations.

An important rule of PR that all construction marketers should be aware of is that successful advertising comes from a solid PR plan that has already begun to work. The reason for this is simple. PR aims to educate, to influence and to inform. Potential customers who have read about you in a trade magazine, heard about you from a friend or attended one of your special events, are more likely to recognize and pay attention to your advertisements.

In that respect, PR and advertising, while not the same thing, do complement one another. The best marketers around the globe know to put the two to work together – PR to build the brand, advertising to support it.

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