

Media Relations Strategies for Technology Companies



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Thought Leadership

The single most important criteria for a company that specializes exclusively in telecom, media, and telecommunications clients, is credibility. If you have a new technology, you need to prove that it is viable—in other words, that it works; and the most effective way of doing so is with a media relations campaign that provides you with a credible third party editorial endorsement—a third party that is able to vouch for the integrity of your product.

The choice of the medium that will be the focus of your media relations campaign is typically driven by the message that you are trying to get out. For example, if you are producing a TV-related technology, then TV is the best way to get your story out. If you are trying to reach influencers and adopters, then perhaps the blogosphere is a good way of getting your story out. If you are looking for wide exposure, a traditional, national newspaper such as the WST not only gets the word out in a printed format but also in an online format. Indeed, traditional mainstream media still tend to drive electronic, TV, and blogosphere coverage.

Media Relations and Integrated Marketing

The key for integrating media relations with a larger marketing program is to realize that within any sequence of marketing-related events, the media relations component should come first. For example, if you are making a product announcement that you want to get picked up by the media, your media relations effort has to come before any traditional advertising is done, because if you run an ad first and then go to the media and ask, “Have you heard about our service?” the reporter will reply, “Yes, I saw your ad,” which does not make for a groundbreaking story.

An effective media relations campaign will also typically help to soften up the audience in advance of any advertising. It is much like screening a

movie for the critics before it is released, who will then hopefully give it a “two-thumbs up.” In essence, promoting your product with free media should be the first step in a marketing program, and then paid media can reinforce that message.

Establishing Credibility

At the end of the day, it is important to tie the goals and objectives of your media relations program to your general business objectives, whatever they may be. Simply put, media relations is one way of achieving a business objective; and you want to make sure that the goal that you are trying to achieve through media relations is a legitimate goal. For example, your product may have a sales message which would typically get put in an ad; but if that sales message also contains a more subtle story that may be interesting to the press, you may be able to launch a media relations campaign around that story. In other words, your message must be more than simply “buy my product” in order to be the worthy subject of a media relations campaign—it has to be *newsworthy*; and you have to see what messages you can craft around your marketing program’s goals and objectives that reporters would want to pick up on.

Provided that strategy is well-executed, the biggest advantage of a media relations campaign is attaining third-party credibility. You can run an ad saying that your company is a great company; but if you read a newspaper article where an objective party says the same thing, that is far more valuable. If you want to see a movie, you will often read the latest reviews before making your viewing choice; indeed, people often look to the press whenever they want to subject one of their interests to a certain amount of scrutiny. Having that type of credibility is key to a sale’s success; and no other marketing channel can perform that function as effectively as the media.

In many ways, a media relations campaign is all about getting someone

else in a position of authority to endorse your product. Donald Trump once said that he does not spend a lot of money on creating elaborate brochures; he just tries to get the real estate section of the leading newspaper to give his latest project a good review, and he then hands out copies of that review to his business contacts, knowing that such an endorsement will do more to sell his real estate than any brochure he could produce on his own.

Effective Execution: The Reality of Control in Media Relations

Most technology companies realize that the media relations process is important; the big question is how the program is executed. Merely sending out press releases which are then picked up in that same form is not credible coverage. Indeed, the process of disseminating news is not what matters—it all depends on *how* it gets picked up by credible third party media outlets. If you have a message that media outlets ultimately consider to be credible, then it is likely to get picked up on a widespread basis; however, if a small company wants to get a write up in the WST without having much of a story, then the people who are buying that media relations plan are just kidding themselves. The media will amplify the reality of an existing product or service, but it will not create something out of nothing.

It is important to understand that creating true credibility in the media happens over time, and typically starts with pitching your story to smaller media outlets and then building up to the big ones. In the political process, the candidates will initially campaign around Iowa in order to build up a rapport with reporters; and it is much the same sort of thing in a media relations campaign—the media are constantly vetting stories to find those that are newsworthy.

In the end, you do not control the message of a media campaign. If you approach a reporter about a product or service, that reporter might write a good or a bad story—or ignore it entirely. There is an improvisational

aspect to any media relations campaign, and you have to be comfortable with that reality. Traditional advertising can be compared to classical music, where everything is fully notated; in other words, you have total control over what the message is and when it runs. On a press platform, however, you do not have that same level of control; therefore, you have to have a realistic understanding of your product and some conception of the type of media that will pay attention to it. Most importantly, you must realize that you will not have total control over the process.

The flip side of the process is that you are surrendering control in order to gain credibility. Simply put, if your story is reported on in a positive way, the results are far more valuable than those that could be attained through traditional advertising. Success in media relations is typically measured by realizing that you are dealing with a qualitative platform, rather than a strictly quantifiable platform. There are some industry services that will assign a metric to the success of a media relations campaign; but I have found that trying to bring the same sort of quantitative approach to a media relations campaign as you would to an ad program does not work. For example, if you give a newspaper article to five different people, they will typically read it in five different ways.

You can always come up with all sorts of variables to measure the success of a media relations campaign—i.e., whether the article ran on the front or the back page; with a photo or without; or whether a story first ran on conventional TV and then bounced onto online video—and you can assign all the numbers you want to that process. In the end, however, you have to go with your gut feelings, understanding that you do not have total control over the process and it might not run exactly as you have planned. If you understand that reality, you will probably be well-equipped to operate within the media relations school of influence.

International Aspects of Media Relations

The challenges faced by international firms in a media relations

campaign typically depend on a number of variables. For example, an American company that is trying to enter the British marketplace has to keep in mind that they may speak English over there, but it is a different kind of English. The British also have a different definition of objectivity in terms of an “on the record, off the record” point of view.

In essence, you have to understand the language and the culture of the country that you are going into, and the dynamics of how its press operates, because it is likely that they do not play by the same rules as we do in the U.S. You must also consider whether your product will be of interest in that international constituency, in order to determine whether it is likely to be distributed there. Similar challenges await European companies that wish to enter the American marketplace; overseas companies may think that our press operates in the same way as it does in their countries, and that is not always the case.

Step by Step for Developing a Media Relations Strategy

Conveying the Message

The number of steps in a media relations campaign typically depends on the program; but first and foremost, you must always consider what you are trying to say—not from your point of view or the reporter’s point of view, but from the audience’s point of view. You must also keep in mind that just because you want a media outlet to cover what you are doing does not necessarily mean that they will do so.

A successful media pitch is all about ascertaining your prospect’s needs and conveying your message in a way that will resonate with them. Therefore, if you have a story that you think CNET.com will be interested in, you have to approach the story in a certain way. Peter Drucker once said that the real role of a media relations program is not so much to get a company’s message out to the world, but to get the world interested in the company. In other words, if a company is doing a

certain project, why would someone care about it; and what is the right media outlet for conveying that message?

Finding the Right Media Channel

Indeed, every message has to be looked at carefully in terms of what audience you are trying to reach; what is the best channel for conveying the message; and how to articulate the message in a way that will resonate with the audience of that media channel. If you approach this process incorrectly, you will get not attract press interest, because the reporter's job is not to promote your company, but to find news of interest to his or her reader, viewer or subscriber.

You may decide that your product launch could be a good story for the WST, but if something bigger happens in the technology world you may have to sit on your story for a day or two in order to have a better chance of attracting media interest. In some cases, you might go to a reporter who you think may be interested in your story, and find that your belief was unfounded. Therefore, this process is not like traditional advertising where you can say, "On Thursday, May 15th we will run this ad." All that you can basically do is fill out a framework for a media relations campaign, and hope things go as planned. Unfortunately, when people get too rigid in terms of creating media relations plans and goals without allowing for expansion or improvisation, they may find that they get locked into something that is not effective. If the news cycle changes and you do not have a fall back plan, you will be in trouble. Simply put, you must constantly look at shifting scenarios when putting together a media relations campaign—there is no simple checklist to follow.

Best Practices for the Media Relations Strategy

Establishing Media Relations Goals and Objectives

The process used to establish effective media relations goals and

objectives has to be done internally before a campaign is launched—in other words, you have to subject your company to the same legitimate standards that the press will subject it to. If you someone within your company says, “Let’s do a media relations campaign, won’t it be great?” and everyone simply agrees, “Yes, that’s a great story, everyone will want to pick up on it,” you are probably kidding yourselves.

In essence, you must have your own mechanism or use an outside firm to help you consider the possibilities that are inherent in a media relations campaign for an upcoming product or service; and you need to consider how you would respond if a reporter said, in effect, “So what?” when you called to tell him or her about your product launch—because that does happen more often than you might think.

In many cases, companies are drinking their own Kool-Aid when it comes to launching a media relations campaign—in other words, they do not want to see the downside. Therefore, it is important to look internally and ask, “What we are doing that is interesting and newsworthy?” so that if a reporter says “So what?” to your product announcement, you will have a comeback. In addition, if there are any downsides to your product or service, it is important for them to be addressed.

It is also important to keep in mind that a successful media relations campaign is essentially a dialogue between the company, a reporter, a media channel, and the audience; and if you are not prepared to take a good, hard look at the back and forth, pluses and minuses of that conversation, then you will not be prepared to develop an effective media relations strategy.

Return on Investment: Trademarks of a Successful Campaign

Measuring the return on investment (ROI) of a media relations campaign goes back to idea that is it more of a qualitative than a quantitative process. You can assign metrics to anything, but at the end of the day,

the important thing is the result of the process—and if at the end of the day the company is merely talking to itself, that is not effective; your message has to be picked up externally, and there has to be consistent external coverage.

Indeed, the essence of a successful media relations campaign is to have stories about your company appear on a regular basis in a variety of media, because this is a big country with an increasingly fragmented media environment. Therefore, first and foremost, you need to get coverage; and if your story is picked up in a variety of media, then the results/impact of that coverage will be self-evident—you will get phone calls and web hits. If you want to assign metrics to that process, that is fine; but I have found that in any situation where coverage has appeared on a consistent basis, the buzz will ultimately come back to the client in some way.

Budgeting Issues in the Media Relations Process

The person who is primarily responsible for a media relations campaign typically depends on how it is set up—it could be done internally; through an outside company; or as a subset of a traditional marketing campaign. In some cases, a media relations campaign is closely tied to the CEO; although it sometimes goes through the marketing department in terms of establishing a budget with a dotted line to the CEO—it all depends on the culture of the company.

In terms of budgeting for a media relations campaign, there are often many variables. For example, there are local and national campaigns, and short- and long-term projects; and you must also consider what opinions you are trying to influence. For example, are you launching a six-month-long campaign in order to influence a piece of legislation? Are you trying to get people to buy your product in time for Christmas? Are you building products for a business-to-business launch?

In essence, budgeting for a media relations campaign typically depends on the timeframe and audience. Therefore, a typical campaign can run anywhere from a one-shot event to an ongoing campaign; and the costs can range from \$25,000 to \$1 million, depending on the goals you are trying to achieve.

Evaluating and Benchmarking Strategy

The benchmarks of a good media relations strategy go back to credibility—in other words, do you have a credible story, and is it something that the media will go after? Is your story newsworthy, because what you are doing is new and interesting? At the end of the day, a successful media launch depends on whether what you are doing is interesting, unique and different. It is like the old joke: a story about a dog biting a man isn't news, but a story about a man biting a dog is indeed news.

Effectively evaluating a media relations strategy typically depends on the company and its goals. If your goal is to drive traffic to a website that can be monitored on a daily or hourly basis, media relations should be part of your overall marketing program; and whatever point you may choose to ultimately evaluate the program in terms of sales and reach should tie back into the overall goals of your marketing program, in whatever intervals you have decided. For example, TV ratings on a weekly or monthly basis may be an effective form of benchmarking.

Mapping Technology to the Story

If you decide to launch a long-term campaign in order to get advance orders for a product that has not launched as of yet, the role technology will play in your media strategy is merely part and parcel of today's highly fragmented new media environment—keeping in mind that the chosen technology should always map to the story. For example, it is going to be difficult to get TV stations to cover a story if you do not have

any visuals; and it is going to be hard to get radio or podcast coverage if you do not have a message that sounds interesting.

The fact that you have all of these emerging media platforms can be highly beneficial to any marketing program. If you go back 35 years, there were only three main TV stations in many markets; today, you have over 300 cable networks and thousands of online outlets. However, the fact that you can use a new form of technology to disseminate your story is not always that key to the success of a media relations campaign, because at the end of the day the same rules that apply for what is newsworthy with respect to a traditional, established media outlet applies to new media as well. If something is a bad story for a TV or newspaper reporter to cover, it will probably be a bad story for a blogger. New technology merely offers you new ways to tell a story.

Importance of the Media Relations Strategy

PR Strategy Issues and Challenges

Many of the issues facing today's technology/media companies in terms of developing an effective media relations strategy are based on budgetary challenges, although media relations can work very well, even in a budget-challenging situation, if you have established a good creative process. This is especially the case when you are trying to hook your story onto a larger trend; that is when credibility with the media is especially important. However, everything depends on the strategy, objectives and goals of the specific company.

From our point of view, there is always a strategic component to a media relations program. It is like a football game; you diagram the play, go out on the field, and then pass the ball around. In a traditional ad campaign the ad agency typically spends a lot of time talking to the client and revising strategic power points; but that is not what you want to do in a media relations campaign—you want to launch an external effort/sales

operation. In much the same way as other units of your company are selling to different constituencies, your PR operation should be selling to new media, and generating media placements as a result. Simply put, the bulk of your time should be spent engaging the media to make sure that your company's message goes outward to various constituencies.

Pitfalls of Media Relations

The pitfalls of any media relations campaign is based on the fact that the process is essentially a two-sided coin. There are going to be times that your company has interesting, new, and positive stories that it wants to share, and will therefore actively solicit the media in order to get coverage. However, the day will also come when there is bad news—you may get bad product reviews, for example—and if a reporter calls and asks how your product is doing, you cannot simply say, “No comment.” In other words, you cannot expect the media to only cover the good news; and you should not lie to reporters.

Basically, you have to go into the media relations process armed with the knowledge that sometimes there will be good stories, and sometimes there will be bad stories; and you will have to develop an interactive relationship with the media, knowing that they are not going to cover only the good stories. In essence, you have to take your lumps; and the more comfortable you are in terms of dealing with negative stories, the better media coverage you will ultimately get, because reporters and media audiences will realize that your company has credibility. Simply put, the better able you are to balance negative and positive media coverage, the better it will reflect on your company.

Legal Issues

Legal concerns often become a tactical issue within the context of a media relations campaign. Some companies always strive to make sure that whatever press releases or information they are sending out to the

media are given a review by their legal department; and this can cause difficult situations, because having your legal department set your media strategy is like having your media department set your legal strategy—the two are diametrically opposed.

Indeed, in most legal situations, if certain pieces of information are held close to the vest, the more valuable they become, because typically, you do not want your adversary to know what is going on. However, in the media world a story can often be better controlled by disseminating information and divulging details. Therefore, it can be very difficult to get attorneys—who tend to keep things close to the vest—to understand that you actually control the story when you are the one who disseminates the information behind it.

Traditional versus New Media

Traditional and new media outlets are meshing together these days; for example, the *New York Times* is now online; there are bloggers who write newspaper columns; and there are TV shows that can be viewed online. Therefore, the standard silos do not exist; you have could have a news story that pops up on a blog in London, and then shows up on a TV news channel in San Francisco.

In essence, once a story goes out in one sector it might bleed over to another, and the extent of that coverage is predicated by the story. For example, a small company that gets acquired by Microsoft will get more coverage than a small company releasing a new product. Therefore, the essence of the story will ultimately determine how and where the story plays out, as opposed to trying to take a story and fit it into a specific media channel—because no matter how you direct it, more often than not the story will seek its own way; and hopefully, the consumer will then take to it positively.

At the end of the day, mass media, however it is defined, influences

consumer behavior; and if the media is hitting the right audience on a widespread basis, then consumer behavior will be positively impacted. Indeed, there are only two main ways that people typically learn what is going on in the business world—either they hear the news from someone they know, or they pick it up from the media.

Hypothetical Situation Case Study

Media Relations in the Electronics Industry

One of our clients, a consumer electronics company, was recently involved in a head-to-head competition with another company that had produced a similar product. One of the things that we did in developing a media relations program for this client was to monitor their competition in terms of any product-related announcements; and in that process we discovered that there had been a recall of their product that they were handling in a very low key manner. We knew that this information would be very useful to our client—it was simply a matter of making certain reporters who were specialists in the electronics area aware of the recall, giving them the opportunity to question the competitor about the situation. The competitor basically denied the story because their PR and customer service departments were not communicating effectively.

At that point, the reporters realized that they had an interesting story to cover, because our client's competitor had announced the recall on its website, while its PR department was simultaneously denying the problem. In the process of covering the story, the reporters decided to look at other products in the marketplace, which gave them the opportunity to quote our client about its own product. Since their competitor had refused to talk to the press about their product recall, all of the coverage on the faulty product ultimately morphed into a story about the positive attributes of our client's product.

Therefore, an effective media relations campaign should always monitor

the activities of your client as well as its competitors; and in some cases, it is a good idea to be the first to come out with any negative news about your client—indeed, it is always better for you to come forward with a negative story than for someone else to go to the media with it first. Similarly, if any negative facts about your client's competitor should come to light, it is typically just a matter of bringing that story to the attention of the media; and if the competitor is not going to articulate the facts of the story, then hopefully the media will give you a chance to do so. You can then define your own story, as well as that of your competitor, and do so in such a way that you are not seen as attacking the competitor—you are just bringing a fact to light that the media will hopefully be interested in.

Looking to the Future

Media relations in this space are at an unusual point right now, because of the rapid growth in technology. The theory is that the pace of exponential change increases exponentially; therefore, as much as things are changing at the present time, the changes are going to get even bigger in the future. The fragmentation of the market is going to accelerate, and the audiences are going to get smaller. The only constant in such a market is change; and the constant with respect to that change is accelerated change.

In addition, traditional advertising no longer works as a standalone vehicle. Years ago you took out some ads and that would do the trick in terms of marketing; but these days, consumers and businesses are using technology such as spam filters and TIVO to keep non-credible advertising messages away, and/or to bring useful content to them. In essence, technology is making content increasingly valuable now—and credible content is more valuable than ever. Therefore, media relations is going to be a very effective tool for companies that are trying to reach audiences that are using the latest technologies to block traditional advertising while accelerating content. The more you need to move your

company's messaging over to third party credibility, and the more anxious you are to get the media and other content producers talking about your company and its products, the more likely it is that you will need an effective media relations campaign to get your message through, because today's audience is interested in the substance of your message, and is pushing away traditional advertising.

About the Seminar Leader

Prior to establishing Trylon SMR (www.trylonSMR.com) in 1990, president & CEO Lloyd P. Trufelman, APR held executive public relations positions at such communications companies as MTV Networks, the Cabletelevision Advertising Bureau, WNYC, Howard J. Rubenstein Associates and CBS Masterworks. In addition he has directed press relations for political candidates on the national, state and municipal levels. An accredited member of the Public Relations Society of America and a member of its Counselors Academy, Trufelman has served as a board member of Promotion & Marketing Executives in Electronic Media (PROMAX), and is a member of the Partnership for New York City. He has been a speaker at meetings of the International Radio & Television Society, New York Software Industry Association, Public Relations Society of America, Cable Television Public Affairs Association, Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing, National Broadcasting Society and Columbia University's Strategic Communications Program, among others.

Trufelman's writings have been published in The Washington Post, Public Relations Journal, Multichannel News, Time, USA Today, PRSA Tactics, Broadcasting & Cable, Video, Optimize, American Journalism Review and Public Telecommunications Review. He has contributed chapters to Media Technology & the Vote (Northwestern University/Annenberg Communications Policy Studies Program), Strategies in Broadcast & Cable Promotion (Wadsworth) and The New PR Tool Kit (FT Prentice Hall), in addition to serving as a member of the editorial advisory board of Webster's Dictionary of Media & Communications (Simon & Schuster).

Trufelman is a graduate of American University School of Communications and has undertaken postgraduate coursework at New York University, the University of North Carolina School of Business Administration at Chapel Hill and Columbia University's Graduate School of Business.



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