

Chapter 1

Why Public Relations
Campaigns Fail – and
How to Make Them
Succeed

Have you ever seen a hippopotamus? Quite often, you will find that they have a bird on their back. It's a friendship that benefits both sides. The hippo isn't able to reach to clean its back. Yet potentially harmful parasites embed themselves up there. So the hippo makes friends with certain types of bird, who get to feast on the parasites. Both sides benefit.

Good media relations is like that two-way friendship. The effective PR person is always thinking: what is in the interests of the journalist? The ineffective PR person only asks: what message does my employer want me to drum repeatedly?

Alas, the vast majority of PR pitches – even from some big PR agencies – fail to acknowledge the needs of journalists.

Ignorance isn't bliss

The simple and most effective investment you can make in your public relations is to buy and read the publications that you want to get coverage in. I know that sounds obvious – much of what you will read in this book is, on one level, common sense. Yet it is rarely followed. I often come across people who complain, for example, that they cannot get newspapers or magazines to cover

their material – but who do not have any copies of those publications in their offices. Of course, they may be accessing them on their tablets, but invariably they are not.

PR is like other forms of marketing: too many of the people doing it are clueless. According to Professors Morris and Goldsworthy, a survey they conducted with one of the largest PR firms “found that few if any employees recalled reading any books about PR”.¹² That is good – for you. It means that with the basics you will learn in this book, you can outperform many of your rivals. I frequently find even sizable companies – turning over more than £100m a year – who run appallingly unsuccessful PR campaigns, despite employing supposedly well-qualified in-house people to run them. Those staff just haven’t invested time to develop their skills.

The truth is that for all the PR industry’s claims of professionalism, too much of what gets done in its name is based on ignorance. Of the 60,000 people in full-time PR jobs in the United Kingdom, perhaps 15,000 are highly skilled. Only they do things like going on training courses and reading books to keep their skills sharp, and join the Public Relations Consultants Association and read *CorpComms* to keep up to date with best practice.

In the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that there are 212,510 public relations specialists,¹³ the vast majority of whom are not members of a professional body or trade

¹²Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy, *PR Today: The Authoritative Guide to Public Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 25.

¹³Bureau of Labor Statistics Economic News Release, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ocwage.t01.htm> (accessed February 25, 2013).

association. If there is a similar split between skilled and unskilled practitioners as in the UK, that would mean around 160,000 of American PR practitioners need to radically improve their skills.

This problem is not new. Edward Bernays, one of the founders of modern public relations, told *The New York Times* in 1991 that “Public relations today is horrible. Any dope, any nitwit, any idiot can call him or herself a public relations practitioner.” They give the industry a bad name.

That so much PR is bad means that there is no reason why even small companies – with decent PR – cannot propel themselves into the limelight. Indeed, many firms have been built from scratch using PR as the biggest tool in their marketing arsenals.

But no PR programme will be truly successful unless it is based on a genuine understanding of the worldview and the sort of articles publications prefer. Edward Bernays, writing in 1923, defined an important duty of the public relations practitioner:

The public relations counsel is first and foremost a student. His field of study is the public mind. His text books for this study are the facts of life; the articles printed in newspapers and magazines, the advertisements that are inserted in publications, the billboards that line the streets, the railroads and the highways, the speeches that are delivered in legislative chambers, the sermons issuing from pulpits, anecdotes related in smoking rooms, the gossip of Wall Street, the patter of the theatre and the conversation of the other men who, like them, are interpreters and must listen for the clear or obscure enunciations of the public.¹⁴

¹⁴Bernays, Edward L., *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: IG Publishing, 1923) p. 78.

The so-called “low information diet”, popularised by Tim Ferriss,¹⁵ who suggests that we should stop reading the news, isn’t an option for those wanting to do well in public relations. Practitioners who are not reading to develop their general knowledge just won’t prosper. Titles such as *The Economist*, *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, *Wired* and, of course, the newspapers are useful mind fodder.

How to get started

It doesn’t matter what sort of media outlet you’re interested in: you need to read the publication religiously. That might mean decamping to a major city library for a few days and reading the back issues. It certainly should mean getting a subscription, if it’s a print publication, or always picking up a copy from the newsstand. Only if you engross yourself in a publication will you truly understand what to pitch to its journalists.

Let’s say you are trying to get coverage for a startup business manufacturing camera bags, of various designs. The first thing to do is to walk into a big newsagent and buy all the titles about photography – there are lots of them.

You can find out which titles are the most important from looking at their audited circulation figures. The International Federation of Audit Bureaux of Circulations has member bureaux that create reliable figures for how many people read each major publication. These bureaux cover the circulations of titles in forty countries, although there are some agencies that are independent of the global federation. You can find out more at www.ifabc.org,

¹⁵Tim Ferriss, *The 4-Hour Work Week* (London: Vermilion, 2011), p. 10.

where you can click through to an agency in your country. Some of the major circulation bureaux are:

- United Kingdom and Ireland www.abc.org.uk
- United States www.auditedmedia.com
- Canada www.auditedmedia.ca
- Australia www.auditbureau.org.au
- New Zealand www.abc.org.nz
- The Netherlands www.hoi-online.nl
- Denmark www.do.dk
- Sweden www.ts.se

Given that your time is likely to be limited, it makes sense to concentrate on publications that (a) are instinctively most interested in your work and (b) have the highest circulations.

For an online publication, you can work out how popular it is using a website called alexa.com, which displays how well-read the site is relative to others. Many major news sites now have their online readers audited by the Audit Bureaux of Circulations.

Looking at the circulation figures can be eye-opening. In the UK, there are local papers that outsell national ones. As I type this, the circulation figures for the *Liverpool Echo* show that it outsells *The Independent* – just. And the *London Evening Standard*, despite being a local newspaper, is one of the most-read papers in the land. I am sure that a lot of PR campaigns ignore local papers as unimportant – but I say look at the circulation figures before making that sort of judgement. Similarly, there are blogs which have a bigger readership than mainstream publications. Is there anything more widely read in the Westminster political

world than the gossip-filled *Guido Fawkes Blog*? Everyone in UK politics seems to read the site, even if they hate it. Meanwhile, *The Daily Caller*, which was founded in 2010 and is only available online, breaks major stories and is one of Washington DC's most important news outlets.

As – in our example – you're making camera bags, let's say you are interested in *Amateur Photographer*, one of the most-read photography publications, which has been going since 1884. By reading the news pages over several issues, you discover that its news editor is interested in bossy police officers and security guards who pretend that they have legal powers to stop photographers taking photos in public places. You see, amateur photographers often set up tripods in public places to take chocolate-box images of famous buildings. And some security people think this is suspicious. ("Why is he taking photographs? He must be a terrorist!")

Armed with this knowledge, you produce a free booklet about the legal aspects of photography in public places. The idea is that photographers can store it in their camera bag and show it to the police, if challenged.

You contact the news editor of *Amateur Photographer* and tell him that you will post this free guide to anyone who requests it from your website. You get to build up a mailing list of keen photographers, the public gets a useful guide, and the magazine gets a news story.

However, this story would be completely irrelevant to *Outdoor Photography* magazine. Its readers are landscape photographers predominantly taking shots in the countryside, and therefore are unlikely to be stopped by the police.

The dreary product or personnel announcement

There is only one thing a journalist finds more boring than a press release announcing a new product. It is a press release announcing a personnel change. If that's what your firm is doing currently, I hope this book – especially the next chapter – will show you a better path.

Admittedly, the press releases just mentioned do sometimes work – and can actually be a mainstay of trade publications. The appointment of a new CEO at a major industry player will normally cause a story with a photograph to appear in a trade publication, while a more junior appointment might get an inch somewhere in an “in brief” column. However, they won't play so well, if at all, in consumer titles. Yes, when Apple launches a new product or changes its CEO, consumer news organisations are desperate to cover it. But most people doing PR aren't lucky enough to be representing Apple, and most such announcements aren't jumped upon by the press.

The reality is that the vast majority of press releases – perhaps 95 per cent – are ignored by the media. Yet, amazingly, even many big companies are still totally reliant on product and personnel press releases, which is why their media coverage is far less than their size of business deserves. There are PR teams – ones that don't read books like this – who are paid good money, but day-in, day-out issue press releases that are simple, boring announcements. They get some coverage – but not much.

If you want to generate sizeable coverage, your PR has to be at a higher level.

What higher-level PR looks like

Andrew Gadsden is an entrepreneur who blends tea in a factory in Portsmouth, near England's best-known naval port. Although he sells hundreds of teas, his main product is Portsmouth Tea, which is a better quality of tea than that sold in supermarkets, giving a fuller flavour. He has built up a strong reputation in the city and people have started to buy Portsmouth Tea, over the internet, from all over the country.

Instead of simply issuing press releases saying that he is selling tea, he does things that the media genuinely finds interesting. One endeavour was to beat a world record: he created the world's largest teabag and unveiled it on board the HMS *Warrior*, which is moored at Portsmouth.

This simple, relatively low-cost activity secured him an interview on the ITV local television news, a story on the BBC News website and lots of local coverage. I have linked to the coverage at www.alexsingleton.com/teabag.

As a result of the coverage, he's able to show current and prospective customers that his company has been featured on the biggest British TV networks, the BBC and ITV. Although the articles and news reports generated are not product reviews, the public still sees them as third-party endorsements. Or, to use the clichéd, but remarkably effective, phrase, his company, AllAboutTea.co.uk, is "as seen on TV". If the BBC and ITV think Portsmouth Tea is kosher enough to cover, it must be decent.

But it is hardly surprising that Andrew's company gets coverage. When I visited his factory, he picked up a newspaper – one

of those things rarely on display in bad PR agencies – and started explaining what he liked about it. If you know your publications, you'll do well.

How to capture the results of good PR

Some of the people who see your company's name in print or on the television will search for your website. However, they will not necessarily, at that very moment, be ready to buy from you. It is vital that you set up your website to capture their email addresses before they forget who you are.

Just as with journalists, you need to offer people something interesting in return. Andrew Gadsden, for example, offers a free tea course, in which people learn by email about the varied types of tea he sells. People will be far more likely to give you their email address if they think they will get something valuable in return, rather than just advertising emails.

For best results, avoid sending out emails that look like glossy leaflets, and instead focus on talking with your prospects as though you were sending an email just to them. Many people's email software is set to block images. And there are still people who will read them on some primitive BlackBerry phone. Drayton Bird, who has spent a lifetime measuring the responses to marketing and built the UK's largest direct marketing agency, says that: "E-mails that look like text almost always outperform ones with pretty pictures".¹⁶

¹⁶Drayton Bird, "31 Insiders' Direct Marketing Ploys", http://draytonbirdcommonsense.com/sites/default/files/e-books/DraytonBird_31Ploys_priceless.pdf (accessed February 23, 2013).

The best way to cope with people subscribing and unsubscribing is to use one of the popular services that automates the management of the list. Good tools to manage email lists leapfrog each other, but at the time of writing I like both Aweber and Get-Response. They are easy to use and free people up from the complexity of installing and then upgrading email list software on their own web servers. Usefully, both of these tools let you write pre-written emails that get sent to subscribers according to a pre-determined schedule. That means all new subscribers get, for example, a follow-up email exactly a week after subscribing.

I maintain a list of good mailing list tools at www.alexsingleton.com/emailers (which I update as the technology progresses).

The need to measure PR

Ninety years ago Claude Hopkins wrote *Scientific Advertising*. This showed that by measuring the sales resulting from particular advertisements, bad ads could be ditched and the best techniques learned.

PR practitioners, however, are only just catching up. In his American book on measurement,¹⁷ Mark Weiner says that the PR industry has lagged behind because of “loosely defined professional standards, generally inadequate levels of professional education and talent development, and the self-perpetuation of the myth that PR can’t be measured scientifically”. Ouch.

¹⁷ Mark Weiner, *Unleashing the Power of PR: A Contrarian’s Guide to Marketing and Communication* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 21.

Actually, there are many difficulties with measuring PR – just as in any social science. But none are sufficient to justify pursuing PR without modern evaluation.

When I was first a press officer in the 1990s, we measured in a simple way – we counted the number of press cuttings. Twice a week the International Press-Cutting Bureau would send us our clippings and we would glue them in a book. Measuring this way may have been basic, but it was a cheap and effective way of assessing our effectiveness. We would then analyse the coverage qualitatively.

Counting the cuttings is still an objective, basic method that startups and small businesses can use easily – though it does have a downside. Funders of PR campaigns just can't tell from a cuttings book if the coverage is genuinely achieving business goals, or merely acting as a vanity exercise. Yet it remains commonplace. A 2003 survey conducted in the United States by *PR News* found that 84 per cent of respondents used clip-counting as their primary measure of success.¹⁸

Until recently, a measurement called Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) was popular among those wanting a more sophisticated approach. Actually it still is commonplace, despite (justifiably) irritating the PR chatterati. The AVE calculates what the column inches would have cost to buy as advertising. It is a problematic method because an advert says exactly what you want it to say, whereas editorial does not. That doesn't stop users

¹⁸ "Exploring the Link Between Volume of Media Coverage and Business Outcomes", Institute for PR, 2006, http://www.instituteforpr.org/iprwp/wp-content/uploads/Media_Coverage_Business06.pdf (accessed February 24, 2013).

of AVEs then multiplying the figure by anything from two to ten times – but most commonly by three – on the grounds that editorial coverage is more convincing than advertising.

Professor Tom Watson, in a paper presented to the International History of Public Relations conference in 2012, wrote about a study of 500 PR practitioners. It found that AVEs “were the third most popular measurement method for judgment of communication effectiveness, after clippings counts and internal reviews, and the first amongst methods of judging the value of public relations activity. AVE had risen from fifth place to third in the five years since the previous study.”¹⁹

However, PR practitioners are now being forced to improve. Various PR awards have banned the entry of work that is evaluated with AVEs. This is a good move. Like it or not, we live in a mathocracy. Business leaders require decent data which proves that expenditure is worthwhile. Weiner says that “audits” of the executives who fund PR activities find that what executives want is not coverage. Instead, they want to see results – easily measurable – such as how effective expenditure on PR has been at (a) raising awareness and (b) delivering key messages to the target audience.

Although measurement costs money, it does not have to be outrageously expensive. Lowish-cost tools for PR measurement include opinion polls of awareness and favourability towards the brand (taken before and after a campaign), microsites for particular PR campaigns and “How did you hear of us?” questioning

¹⁹Prof Tom Watson, “Advertising Value Equivalence – PR’s orphan metric”, <http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/20492/5/Tom%20Watson%20-%20Advertising%20Value%20Equivalence%20%20MS%2029%20R3.docx.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2013).

when people buy. There is a lot of good material on designing measurement plans in a book by Tom Watson and Paul Noble, called *Evaluating Public Relations*, and the Public Relations Consultants Association runs a useful workshop training people how to use each type of measurement.

There are now several good books on the subject and the so-called “Barcelona Principles”, set in 2010, have spurred on many at the elite end of the industry. Some of the biggest agencies and companies – such as AT&T and Procter & Gamble – have been able to deduce the return on investment that their PR campaigns produce. They’ve done this with marketing mix modelling, a useful tool for mid-sized and large companies.

The results from such modelling can be astounding. As Mark Weiner reports, the Miller Brewing Company, part of SABMiller, found that every additional \$1 spent on TV advertising brought a return of \$1.06, while PR delivered \$8. (The company has subsequently changed its advertising agency.) Ranjit Choudhary, the marketing mix modelling specialist for Miller, said in 2003: “We found that PR was much more efficient than other promotions for the brand.”²⁰

What I find most useful about decent measurement is that it can redirect what PR practitioners work on. This is because companies often guess about the sort of coverage that benefits them most. If they rely on this guesswork, without testing it, the PR activities may fail to deliver the best results.

²⁰ Mark Weiner, “PR and Meaningful Business Outcome”, http://www.prime-research.com/attachments/3301_Prove%20PR%20Value.Improve%20PR%20Performance.pdf (accessed February 23, 2013).

What is vital, whatever size of business you are, is to compare your media coverage with that of your competitors, and with your results in the previous year. It will encourage you to push ahead, and be a source of ideas.

So what is the best way of tracking your press coverage? These days PR practitioners tend to receive scanned press cuttings in their email inbox, provided by a media monitoring service. The most highly regarded provider in the UK is Precise, which will also provide recordings of radio and television mentions. There are similar suppliers around the world. For online cuttings, services such as Google News Alerts, which is free, will email you, more or less, whenever your company name, or a preferred phrase, is written on the web.

What to avoid

In the next chapter, we will start to look at how to create a compelling PR campaign. But let's first debunk some myths.

Critics of public relations describe its practitioners as “spin doctors” and believe that its role is pernicious. Spin is not good public relations. It is counterproductive idiocy. The term arose during the late 1990s, when political figures in the UK and America ditched authenticity and just put out what they thought was politically palatable. The result? Lots of news stories appeared discussing how the government was issuing fake data and announcing expenditure in a misleading way. The spin doctors themselves become the story, damaging the reputation of their masters.

Andrew Marr, a BBC news show host and former Editor of *The Independent*, explained the problem:²¹

Things got so bad that even when Blair [as British Prime Minister] was saying something obvious, he was disbelieved.

“Well, the spin is that . . .” began a thousand reports. Media cynicism curdled further. The spinning became angrier still.

Ivy Lee, the inventor of the press release and a pioneer in crisis communications, had a better approach. He traded under the slogan “Accuracy, Authenticity, and Interest”. These three terms were not a sign of uncommercial naivety. The man was extremely well paid and was retained by the Rockefellers and the steel magnate Charles M. Schwab. Instead, his ethical position ensured that his messages were convincing.

In the 1930s, A. H. Wiggin, Chairman of the Chase National Bank, ordered Lee to get a newspaper to kill a story. “I won’t do anything of the sort,” Lee replied. His advice, instead, was to issue a statement so that their side of the story would be aired.

Those three terms in Lee’s slogan, “Accuracy, Authenticity, and Interest”, remain today at the core of good public relations. Lee’s “Declaration of Principles”, issued to newspapers in 1906, are still – more than a century later – some of the best words ever written on the duty of public relations practitioners. He declared:

This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency; if you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business [advertising] office, do not use it. Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any

²¹ Andrew Marr, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6638231.stm (accessed February 23, 2013).

editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact. Upon inquiry, full information will be given to any editor concerning those on whose behalf an article is sent out. In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about. Corporations and public institutions give out much information in which the news point is lost to view. Nevertheless, it is quite as important to the public to have this news as it is to the establishments themselves to give it currency. I send out only matter every detail of which I am willing to assist any editor in verifying for himself. I am always at your service for the purpose of enabling you to obtain more complete information concerning any of the subjects brought forward in my copy.

Fraser Seitel, a heavyweight of the American PR industry, who, like Lee before him, has represented the Rockefeller family, says: “Ivy Lee really, really preached that the public has to be informed, and if your policies are not good and not in the public interest, you have to change the policy. And I think that this is what a lot of people don’t recognise about the practice of public relations, if you believe it as I do, that it starts with policy, it starts with performance, it starts with action . . . You can’t pour perfume on a skunk.”²²

When PR won’t work

In the mid-1990s, I was a columnist for IDG, the world’s largest publisher of IT magazines. When writing a particular comparative

²² <http://www.alexsingleton.com/real-crisis-communications-never-defends-the-indefensible/> (accessed February 23, 2013).

review, I realised that one of the products was awful. It came from a micro-business and I thought that few people, realistically, were likely to ever buy it. While I wrote the odd negative review, on this occasion I did the company a favour and excluded mentioning their product in my article.

I later heard that the firm's proprietor had been moaning to a journalist on another magazine that he'd gone to great trouble, personally driving across London to put it through my letterbox – and I never bothered to mention it!

Here's the rub: PR only works properly if your product is good. Journalists aren't stupid – well, not for the most part – and they can smell if your product is second-rate. What determines if a product is good? Well, in the 1940s, Rosser Reeves, the American advertising guru, invented the concept of a "unique selling proposition". In his 1961 book *Reality in Advertising*, Reeves says that "the proposition must be one that the competition either cannot, or does not, offer".

Just as the "unique selling proposition" is vital for selling to consumers through advertising, it is vital when pitching to journalists. If you're manufacturing camera bags (to go back to my example) that fall to bits and have no obvious benefits, the media are going to be less keen on promoting you.

The miracle cure

Lots of companies will try to sell you the miracle cure to media relations. If only you throw money at a newswire service, or a social media planning tool or a special media database of over a million journalists, something great is supposed to happen.

Some of these can be of help, but only if you are doing all the other things right. In fact, many of the really useful tools are free, or not specifically aimed at media relations. I will recommend some in this book. But I find that just three tools are the ones I definitely need to get coverage: email, a telephone and a copy of the publication. All the others are optional.

One miracle cure that must, in all circumstances, be avoided is the so-called professional press release writer – someone who, for a very cheap price, will write you a release. People who use these services believe erroneously that the value in public relations is in the press release. This is mistaken. For a start, the value that a so-called press release writer will give you is likely to be small. One, I notice, is offering a “media friendly press release in two hours” that will “get you coverage in all the right places”.

But the vendor then goes on to say: “I would need a brief outline of what you want to achieve, the what, when, where, why and of [sic] the story. As well as a few short quotes and a high res image. I would also need your website information and contact details of your public relations person.”

Here, the customer is still doing almost all of the work – and the difficult part too. No wonder the seller wants just £15 for the service. Others are as cheap as £9.

Now it is certainly true that most press releases are badly written, poorly structured and fail to sell the story properly. But none of the people I’ve seen advertising this sort of service seem to reveal much about themselves or convincingly explain why they would produce something better than if you wrote it yourself.

Anyway, these sorts of services are beside the point, because the real problem businesses have is that the ideas *behind* their press releases are bad. A dirt cheap copywriter isn't going to solve that for you. What will are good, creative ideas, which we will be discussing in the next chapter.

