

- » Defining public relations
- » Discovering who needs PR
- » Exploring what a PR professional does
- » Examining the differences between PR and advertising

Chapter 1

Understanding the Power of PR

When I was a young man of 24 and almost a complete beginner at public relations, I got my photo on the front page of *USA Today* with a feature story about the 1985 baseball strike. That piece put my then-fledgling PR firm on the map, so to speak, and helped advance my career in PR.

At the time, no one had heard of my agency or me, and I had no press contacts with *USA Today* — or any other major media. That lack of contacts could easily have become a major stumbling block for my PR firm: The agency did good work, but larger corporate prospects would naturally — and in my opinion, naively — ask, “Who are your media contacts?” When I confessed that I didn’t personally know the editor in chief of the *New York Times* and wasn’t invited to Oprah’s dinner parties, potential clients could have easily lost interest and chosen other firms. This problem was one I wanted to solve as quickly as possible.

So how did I get *USA Today* to put my picture on the front page? At the time, an MLB strike was the news of the day. My partner and I issued a press release and called the media to announce that we had formed a new organization, called Strike Back, to protest the baseball strike. The premise was simple: After the strike, we’d boycott a day of games for every day the league failed to negotiate a deal.

Did I do this for the love of the game? Yes — partially. But it certainly wasn't lost on me that turning ourselves into a national news story would (1) demonstrate the type of PR we practice, (2) showcase our ability to get media exposure, and (3) attract new business. *USA Today* was the first big media placement for my agency, and it got potential clients to pay attention to the new kids on the PR block.

This anecdote illustrates four basic PR principles that form the core of my agency's philosophy and the how-to PR techniques in this book:

- » **You have to be different.** The media and the public are drowning in information but starved for amusement. Conventional publicity strategies get lost in the noise. You have to find a creative way to stand out from the crowd and get noticed: Strike Back is just one of dozens of examples of this in practice illustrated throughout this book.
- » **You have to be authentic.** You can't simply be different for the sake of being different. You have to pin down who you are, what you believe in, and what makes your company or client unique. That's how you define a brand and find your spark. Then own it and stay true to it.
- » **Getting publicity is great, but it's a waste of time and money if it doesn't help you achieve your business objectives.** If getting on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* doesn't help you make more money or increase your company's market share, is it really worth the trouble? In the case of Strike Back, the campaign did achieve a specific objective: getting corporate PR clients to take my PR firm seriously and hire us, despite the fact that we had fewer clients, fewer years of experience, and a fraction of the media contacts of the big PR firms.
- » **You don't have to have media contacts to get big-time publicity.** Strike Back perfectly demonstrates this principle — and it helped my firm convince potential clients that contacts weren't nearly as important as ideas. A creative idea, a clear marketing goal, and effective implementation are what count. You don't have to know the hosts of *Good Morning America* to get on the show; you just have to come up with an idea that will interest the show's producers.

This chapter serves as the jumping-off point to the world of public relations and how you can get all the publicity you need to achieve your business objectives — without making public relations your full-time job (though maybe you'll want to after you finish this book).

Recognizing Who Needs PR

If you have all the business you'll ever want, are rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and don't care what others think of you, you may not need public relations.

A crisis is an obvious exception. A lot of my work as a PR professional is in response to clients who have an immediate PR crisis to solve, like a negative customer experience that goes viral or a toy posing an unexpected safety risk to children because of a product defect. And the thing about crisis planning is that it's something you need to do before you have a crisis. So in many cases, even if your sales are skyrocketing and you don't need to promote yourself, you may want to engage in PR activities to prevent negative publicity or correct any bad press that comes your way. (See Chapter 21 on crisis management.) Other broad reasons a business or person may want to use PR include

- » To grow the business
- » To win over investors
- » To increase sales

Doctors, lawyers, creators, artists, restaurant owners, real estate agents, and practically every other type of professional can use public relations to promote their businesses. PR is effective in virtually every category, from construction to technology to fitness, wellness, and beauty to retail, healthcare, insurance, tourism, real estate, and investments. Every type of business stands to benefit enormously from the power of PR.

Here are a few benefits to using PR:

- » **Its ability to further a business's long-term goals:** PR can help take a business from where they are now to where they want to be six months, a year, or a decade from now. Good PR can turn marginal businesses into profitable ones and ordinary folks into millionaires.
- » **Its efficient use of resources:** PR is *earned* media and can therefore get your business in a publication at a fraction of the price it would cost for ad space. If a business has an unlimited advertising budget and it won't miss the money spent, it can probably get its message across without relying on the subtler medium of PR. That doesn't mean it *shouldn't* use PR as part of its marketing mix, however: Many clients find that a relatively modest investment in PR greatly extends the reach of their total promotional program.
- » **Its incredible ability to meaningfully connect with audiences, sway minds, and influence public perception:** In this regard, PR is far more effective than paid media.



REMEMBER

Cost is one of the great appeals of PR to both small businesses and large corporations alike. Small businesses with limited budgets simply can't come close to matching the ad budgets of larger competitors. PR can help them level the playing field and get the same or better promotional bang for a lot fewer bucks.

As for the big companies, if you work for one, you know that getting more money in the marketing budget can be an uphill battle. With PR, you can achieve the objectives senior managers want even if they don't give you the money you think you need to do it.

Beyond Stunts: Identifying the Real Value of PR

Publicity stunts can be a lot of fun. They're exciting, flashy, and full of spectacle. But in reality, they're just a small part of what PR entails. PR does, of course, include headline-grabbing stunts and star-studded events. (See Chapter 19 for more on staging publicity events.) But the real meat and potatoes of PR isn't about celebrities and big budget extravaganzas.

In fact, that's the easy part of public relations. The true value of PR is its ability to solve real-world marketing problems for any product, service, organization, brand, or public figure. For instance, if your sales are inconsistent — with big jumps during marketing pushes followed by prolonged slumps — you need to find a way to increase the frequency of marketing efforts without having to spend a whole lot more money. PR is perhaps the best means of getting your message out on a continual basis and eliminating periodic sales slumps, and you can do it without having to significantly increase your marketing budget.



REMEMBER

With enough creativity, PR can work for any and every industry, from florists to funeral directors, software to soft serve. Any organization or individual with a message to deliver or a goal to achieve can benefit from PR. Indeed, the real magic of PR is in its practical applications for everyday businesspeople. You don't even need a communications degree or special certification to practice PR.



WIN/WIN

You don't need a flashy or unusual product to gain publicity; you just need a creative idea that meets two criteria:

- » It's newsworthy.
- » It communicates the marketing message.

Creative PR, with proper execution, can work wonders for manufacturers, creators, distributors, retailers, tradespeople, service companies, and professional practices in any industry. The chapters in Part 2 delve deeper into creative thinking, but here's a quick example.

For example, British Knights wanted a way to sell more of its sneakers to kids. As a seasonal promotion, the company sent out press releases announcing an unusual “Summer Exchange” program: Parents who were concerned that their kids were spending too much time indoors watching TV and playing video games, rather than playing outdoors, could mail British Knights their TV remote control and receive in return a brand-new pair of British Knight sneakers. (The remote control was mailed back to participants with the sneakers at the end of the summer.)

In another successful PR campaign, British Knights sponsored a World’s Smelliest Socks Contest. The top ten winners — individuals who sent in the stinkiest socks — won free British Knights sneakers for three years.

Joseph J. Kelley, a speechwriter for President Dwight Eisenhower, once said, “There is a kernel of interest in everything God created.” How true! Every product or service, no matter how mundane, contains a PR hook or angle if you think creatively. Even sneakers.

Addressing the Relationship between PR and the Media

PR is what’s known as *earned* media, whereas traditional advertising is *paid* media. Publicity isn’t simply free advertising though — it’s legitimate news. By alerting the media to newsworthy events, products, services, and people, you can prompt a journalist (a reporter, editor, producer) to cover everything from the opening of a new restaurant to the launch of a new product, from groundbreaking scientific discoveries to the makings of the latest trend.

In the early days of public relations, many PR practitioners held the belief that their job was to get the client’s name in the papers as prominently and frequently as they could. George M. Cohan, the famous composer, knew how PR worked. “I don’t care what they [the media] call me,” he said, “so long as they mention my name.” Actress Katharine Hepburn gave that idea a twist, remarking, “I don’t care what is written about me so long as it isn’t true.”

According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), *public relations* is “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” Yet another definition states, “Public relations is the business of creating public opinion for private advantage.” At my PR agency, Ericho Communications, we think of PR in more straightforward, practical terms: strategically using earned media to achieve a client’s marketing objective. By practicing what you find in this book, you can use PR to

communicate your message, build your brand, tell your story, influence public perception, motivate desired behavior, and generate greater revenues and profits.

Instead of paying for billboards, ad space, or airtime, PR practitioners persuade the media to cover stories that promote their clients' goals — whether it's to attract venture capital for a tech startup or help a pizza chain sell more pizzas. Those with a more cynical view of PR might say that PR practitioners exploit the media on their clients' behalf. But strictly speaking, that isn't true, because it's the media — not the publicist — who is the final judge of what makes the news.

More accurately, public relations is, at its best, a win-win partnership among publicists, the clients they promote, and journalists. Here's how that partnership works:

Journalists have too much to do and not enough time to do it. Every day, they must fill pages or airtime with stories that interest, entertain, and inform their readership, viewers, or listeners. The deadlines are too tight, and the editors and reporters are overworked.

Publicists step in and help by providing what journalists need — ideas, information, interviews, and even ready-made stories — in abundant supply and absolutely free. The media choose from among the press releases and pitches, use the most newsworthy and relevant to inform stories, and discard the rest — with no obligation to the publicists who supply the releases. The media can identify stories, access sources, meet deadlines, keep their audiences informed and entertained, and thereby deliver a large audience to their advertisers. (To find out how to write press releases and pitches that interest the media, see Chapters 8 and 9.)

Publicity Plus: Exploring the Many Components of PR

Public relations is more than just pitching stories to the media or sending out press releases. The PR umbrella covers a wide range of activities, all of which are concerned with communicating specific messages to specific target audiences. Broadly, the PR person (or team) is responsible for managing communications between their company or client and the public.

Public relations typically encompasses the following:

» **Research:** You have to thoroughly understand not only your company or clients, but also your industry, competition, customers and potential

customers, public opinion, and the media landscape. What do you offer that is unique or special? What are customers looking for? And how well do you fill those needs? Market research and an internal company audit are the starting points of successful PR programs. (For more on the research and audit processes, see Chapter 2.)

- » **Strategic planning:** Define each target audience, your marketing objectives for that group, and the messages you must communicate in support of those marketing objectives (see Chapter 2).
- » **Publicity:** For most small businesses, the central PR activity is publicity — getting visibility for your products, the company, and company leadership in print, digital, and broadcast media. I define *publicity* as proactive management and placement of information in the media used to protect and enhance a brand or reputation. Simply put, this means getting press. (See Chapters 13 through 16 for more specific details.)
- » **Community relations:** Recently, I saw a news report about local residents protesting a big retail chain that wanted to build a store in their town because it would destroy a popular wooded area with a pond. That chain has a community relations problem in that town, and the PR professional's job is to find a favorable solution that will get the store built while preserving the store's goodwill with its future neighbors and potential customers.
- » **Government relations:** Community relations can also involve relations with a local government. With that in mind, PR people are often called upon to help companies improve their relationships with local, state, federal, and even foreign governments.
- » **Internal relations:** Employees are a brand's internal audience. Good employees are hard to find, and high turnover is incredibly costly for a business. A good PR program can help improve employee loyalty, morale, engagement, and retention.
- » **Investor relations:** Emotion and public perception have the power to send stock prices soaring or plummeting. Investor relations is the aspect of PR that communicates the company story to stock analysts and other financial professionals.
- » **Stakeholder relations:** A *stakeholder* is anyone or any organization that holds a stake in how well your company performs. A key vendor is a stakeholder; rumors that you're financially shaky may cause them to restrict your credit terms. Other key stakeholders can include top consultants, board members, your bank, suppliers, sales representatives, distributors, and industry influencers.
- » **Social responsibility:** When a company promotes a cause or gives to charity, it wants to not only do good but also raise awareness and be recognized for

its contribution. PR specialists can help you promote a good cause and also get maximum publicity and goodwill from the time, effort, and funds a company uses to make a difference.

- » **Communications training:** In large corporations, PR specialists may spend a lot of time coaching senior executives in speaking with the media, appearing on TV, and other critical communications skills. The specialists may also advise the executives on strategy for day-to-day PR as well as PR crises.

Understanding What PR Isn't

Public relations is a business tool that often gets confused with marketing and advertising, two related but very distinct activities. In the following sections, I clear up the differences for you.

Examining the Four Ps of marketing

Marketing is typically defined by the Four Ps — product, price, place (channels of distribution), and promotion:

- » **Product** refers to the physical product and its packaging. With many products — fruit juice, for instance — the packaging is a key product differentiator: Juice boxes are a separate product category from frozen concentrate. Service can also be an integral part of a product. For example, L.L. Bean once gained widespread attention by publicizing its lifetime guarantee on everything it sold (a policy it discontinued several years ago to the dismay of many loyal customers).
- » **Price** is what you charge for the product.
- » **Place** refers to channels of distribution — in other words, where the product is sold. Do you sell at a brick-and-mortar retail store or online? Do customers buy the product directly from you or through a distributor or third-party retailer?
- » **Promotion** consists of advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, and, of course, public relations.

Public relations is a key part of promotion under the larger umbrella of marketing.

Paying for advertising while PR must be earned

Several characteristics separate public relations from advertising, but the most fundamental difference is this: Advertising is *paid*, public relations is *earned*. When you run an advertisement for your company, you pay for the space; when your press release prompts a newspaper to write an article about your company, you don't pay for that coverage.

Of course, PR isn't absolutely free of cost. Your PR staff or your outside PR agency has to be paid for their work. But compared to the megadollars of advertising campaigns, PR is quite a bargain. Many small and medium-size businesses that can afford only limited advertising (with limited results) can do much more with PR — and get far better results — all on a fraction of the budget they'd spend on paid advertising.

Another important distinction between PR and advertising is credibility. Advertising is clearly identified in the media as a paid promotion — readers and viewers know that it's a promotional message paid for by a sponsor. Publicity, by comparison, isn't identified as a paid promotion. Even though a story about a product or organization may have resulted from a PR campaign, the article or report never acknowledges that fact. Because of this, earned media carries more weight and credibility with most audiences. (After all, which are you more likely to believe: an ad from a company saying their product is the best or an article written by a journalist comparing and ranking different products?)

THANKS FOR THE LOUSY PRESS COVERAGE!

Clergymen across the United States denounced legendary stage actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) as the “whore of Babylon,” which, much to their dismay, generated massive attendance at her performances. After a Chicago bishop delivered a particularly critical speech against Bernhardt, which was widely reported in the press, the actress sent him a \$200 check along with the following note, as recounted by Clifton Fadiman in *The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes*: “I am accustomed, when I bring an attraction to your town, to spend \$400 on advertising. As you have done half the advertising for me, I enclose \$200 for your parish.”

In addition to cost, some key differences between PR and advertising include

- » Control
- » Repetition
- » Credibility
- » Audience
- » Timeline

Sometimes these distinctions mean an advantage for PR, sometimes not. The following sections examine these differences in greater detail.

Control

When you advertise, you have almost total control over the content, format, timing, and size of your message. You specify how big your ad is and when it runs. You write the copy and design the layout, and your material appears exactly as you created it. With PR, on the other hand, you have almost no control over the content, format, timing, and size of your message as it appears in the media. You can write whatever you want in your press release, but you can't dictate to the journalist how it's published or used, nor can you review or approve any changes made. You provide the press with written materials that they use (or don't use) in any way they see fit. Your press release may appear verbatim in one magazine but may be rewritten almost beyond recognition in another. One industry trade journal may write a cover story based on your material; another may not publish it at all.

Repetition

Advertising is repeatable; PR isn't. The same advertisement can be repeated as many times as you want in a given publication; the same TV commercial can be broadcast night after night. With PR, a media source is going to run a given press release or cover a publicity event only *once*. To get covered again, you have to provide the media with a new story or at least come up with a different angle or new spin on the old topic.

Credibility

Consumers are, reasonably, skeptical of advertising. They tend not to believe claims made in advertising outright. Many people even think that if your service or product is as good as you say it is, you don't need to advertise. On the other hand, people tend to take at face value what they hear on radio, see on TV and online, or read in the news. Although trust in the media has steadily eroded over

the years, people do still perceive journalism as more impartial and credible than advertising. Many still believe that if something is published, it must be true. Because publicity is promotion in the guise of editorial, feature, or news, people don't identify it as promotion and therefore aren't skeptical of it; indeed, they believe it.

In many instances, media coverage of your business, product, event, or story can appear to the public to be akin to an endorsement of your organization or product — for example, a favorable story about your company on the evening news or a good review of your product on a consumer website can influence public perception far more than a commercial. What's more, claims that would sound pompous, self-serving, and not credible if you said them about yourself in an ad seem complimentary, convincing, and impressive when the media say them about you.

Audience

Publicity must have an *angle* — a hook or take that grabs the media's attention — in order for it to have a chance of breaking through the noise and making the news. Therefore, it must appeal to journalists and producers as well as consumers (your target audience and the people who read, listen, or watch the news). An ad, on the other hand, has to appeal to only one audience: your sales prospects.

Timeline

Advertising is generally more focused on immediate and short-term goals, whereas PR is a long-term, continual process that encompasses more forward-looking goals — like shaping a brand's image, establishing and maintaining a positive reputation, and tracking public perception to prevent and address potential crises.

Identifying Key Audiences That PR Can Reach

How far does PR reach? Incredibly. Public relations can connect you with anyone who reads a publication, listens to radio, watches TV, or uses social media — in short, anyone who is exposed to the media, which in the United States means just about everyone.

PR, therefore, has the broadest reach of perhaps any element of the marketing mix.



REMEMBER

Almost everyone everywhere consumes media in some shape or form. That's why PR is effective at targeting both business and consumer audiences. Understanding how and where different audiences consume media allows you to strategically target the people you want to reach. For instance, for consumer messaging, focus on consumer media. Or when you want to reach the business world, target business outlets. If you want to speak to consumers with a specific interest, target publications that focus on that topic. And when you want to reach professionals in a particular industry, target the trade publications they read and websites they visit.

As I discuss in Chapter 11, pitch to a thorough mix of different publications, because you never know exactly what your prospect may be reading. Once, when I was with the CEO of a large corporation, I was surprised to see that when he had a copy of *USA Today*, he went to the Life section first and the Money section last — and often, he never got around to reading the Money section. A good PR program “surrounds” your target audience by being in all the media they're likely to see; that way, you have a better chance of getting your message across with greater frequency and repetition.

Employees, of course, are a well-defined and accessible audience. One of the best PR vehicles for employee communication, in addition to internal messaging channels, is a company magazine or newsletter. Some large corporations even have internal TV channels that broadcast the latest company news and information. They can also livestream internal events, workshops, trainings, town halls, and wellness programs.

Investors and members of the financial community are an important PR audience for publicly traded corporations, and press releases are the traditional way to reach them. “Once a relatively mundane communication device, a press release now has the might to dramatically drive the price of a stock,” according to *Bloomberg Businessweek*. (Underscoring the power of press releases, the Securities and Exchange Commission has even sued companies for issuing misleading press releases.)

Again, PR's high credibility takes the credit. The financial community and potential buyers are much more apt to believe and act upon a column in the *Wall Street Journal* than an advertisement. And a survey conducted by the PRSA shows that investors rate a story in a financial or business newspaper as second only to a company's own annual report (also a PR vehicle) when it comes to credibility.

Recognizing When PR Is the Missing (or Weak) Ingredient

What are the telltale signs that PR is the weak link in your company's marketing communications chain? Ask yourself the following questions, and if you answer yes to any of them, you need to strengthen your PR efforts (fortunately, you're in the right place):

- » **Do you feel like you have to constantly introduce and reintroduce yourself?** PR helps familiarize the public as well as potential clients, partners, and investors with your brand *before* you even walk into a room. If you're constantly having to explain who you are and what you do, PR can help.
- » **Do audiences have an inaccurate, unfavorable, or outdated perception of your brand?** Is your brand misunderstood or suffering from a poor reputation? Do people still see you as you used to be, rather than how you are today? PR can help to change your image and reshape public perception, so people see your brand exactly as you want them to. (Discover how to use different channels to shape public perception of your brand in Chapter 7.)
- » **Do your competitors seem to get all the exposure in the press? Are you consistently left out of industry roundups, product listings, and vendor resource guides?** Maybe the press omits you because they don't know about you. If so, it's time to let them know. (See Chapter 6 for ideas about which tactics to use to get the word out.)
- » **Are your other marketing efforts falling short?** PR works hand in hand with other kinds of promotions. The better your PR visibility, the more your other marketing communications efforts will generate responses. Low response rates may not be the result of a bad ad or social media campaign. It could be a sign of insufficient brand awareness and trust, and PR is the tool you need to create both of these. (See the overview of a PR plan in Chapter 2.)
- » **Do you find it difficult to open doors or seal deals? Are you hearing "I've never heard of your company" from prospects?** Good PR establishes your firm as a player in the prospect's mind before the salesperson calls. If you don't have good PR, your people may meet with increased resistance. (Placing feature articles is great for wide exposure. Find out how in Chapter 9.)
- » **Do vendors and partners never seem to mention you?** If so, they may not think your name is big enough to impress other potential customers. That's a sign you need to strengthen your brand in the marketplace. (Public speaking can help you do that. Check out Chapter 10.)

» **If you're a public company, do major brokerages overlook your stock?**

When you tell your company story to analysts, do they eagerly take notes or stare at you with blank looks? When Wall Street doesn't understand the value in your company, the investor relations side of PR can help fix the problem. (See Chapter 11 for more ideas about getting your message out.)

» **Are you failing to generate buzz, even when you make big moves or issue a newsworthy announcement?**

If your news is failing to start conversations, if people aren't talking about your brand or engaging with your content, you desperately need PR. (See Chapter 18 on how to generate buzz and get people talking.)

» **Are you struggling to connect with people?**

Are you missing the mark when it comes to communicating with the public? Do you feel like you can't say the right thing and don't really understand what consumers want, how they communicate, or where they're most likely to engage with your brand? If you want to successfully connect with audiences, PR is your answer. (See Chapter 16 for insights on how PR can help you meet your audience where they are, spark connection, and fuel engagement.)