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INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC RELATIONS - A FIATA GUIDE

Public relations is a key component of marketing communications and it subdivides into a number of categories.

Method

Benefit

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| • General press relations | Reinforces your position and reputation in the marketplace |
| • Crisis management | Minimises negative speculation and manages “problem” stories |
| • Issue management | Enhances your industry position and directs your activity |
| • Seminars | Selling opportunity in a receptive climate |
| • Conference | Forum of mutual interest |
| • Exploiting sponsorships | Linking your name to a recognised authority and maximising Impact |

Press relations – benefits

There are many advantages to you in achieving successful press relations activity:

- Good coverage is very high profile
- Working successfully with the press communicates messages independently and authoritatively. It carries weight to message(s) through independent third party (editorial) endorsement
- It is believable
- It is economical and cost effective
- There is a wide choice of readily available media and the information therefore reaches a wider variety of audiences with in-depth information
- Effective as part of an integrated campaign with other forms of promotion. It supplements and expands on advertising messages.

Press relations – negatives

Almost nothing comes without disadvantages, however minor!

- Coverage has a limited life span. Just as with advertising, today’s news is tomorrow’s history.
- Your text is subject to editorial discretion and change

Plan your PR

As with any multi-faceted activity, press relations requires good planning to achieve good and consistent results. You need to implement:

Before starting:

- Identify key target audiences
- Identify key publications
- Identify and prioritise a range of important issues on a corporate/industry level, for example, legislative pressures, environmental issues, lack of skilled staff
- Identify a public relations contact within your organisation
- Arrange media training if appropriate for identified experts within the agency

While underway:

- Maintain regular journalist contact
- Identify press release opportunities
- Identify case histories
- Compile a forward features list, by requesting media packs from target publications
- Identify television and radio opportunities

In the background

- Track conferences, exhibitions, seminars and industry functions
- Monitor press cuttings and assess the effectiveness of activity
- Monitor important publications and government legislation

The types of coverage available

We all like to see good editorial coverage, the most obvious result of a press relations programme. Good editorial is valuable and this section considers the types of coverage available to us. The editorial pages of our target publications offer us a number of different opportunities for coverage, ranging from a major feature with a front cover through to small one-liners in the appointments page.

Editorial coverage generally falls into one of six areas:

1. Feature articles

Most valuable in terms of the strength of the message is a feature article in the main publication. In exceptional circumstances this can also include an editorial front cover. These can include interviews with key members of staff. Feature articles involve a vast amount of preparation to ensure that the result is as good as it can be.

Before calling a journalist prepare your sales pitch. Consider what story you wish to sell into the publication, why the journalist should buy it and what benefits you hope to derive from it. If the journalist “bites” prepare background briefing notes and, if it involves an interview, discuss the proposed interview with the interviewee. Then write to the journalist, confirm the date and time of the interview and outline the subjects you understand will be covered. Provide further details on the project, or if it is to be a personality interview, send brief biographical notes on the interviewee.

Be aware that it is very unlikely that you will have the opportunity to view the copy prior to publication. During the interview ensure all points are made clearly. Ask the journalist to explain his understanding of what has been said.

2. News coverage

News items often provide the most topical opportunity for positive coverage. They are usually written after the rest of the publication and are often read first by your target audiences. They often cover topical views on issues such as government legislation, and can present a useful unscheduled opportunity for coverage if you can act quickly enough.

News-worthy subjects could include:

- Forthcoming cargoes
- Quirky cargoes
- Acquisitions and market expansions
- Large projects for high-profile clients
- Major new appointment
- Industry and environmental awards
- Sponsorships
- Charity link-ups
- Innovations
- Public appointments for you or colleagues

3. Picture captions

Trade publications are crying out for good pictures. Good captioned colour photographs or illustrations such as sectional drawings add immeasurably to the chances of a news release being published. They are also a good way to bolster coverage for a project with the minimum of effort by issuing new pictures with a one or two paragraph caption stuck to the back of the photograph. In this way the story does not have to be new, as coverage depends upon the strength of the picture.

4. Supplements

Supplements and forward features, either loose or bound-in to the main publication, offer useful opportunities for the publication of less time-sensitive information and are likely to cover subjects in more detail and depth in both feature articles and new items. Forward features lists are available from key journals together with relevant copy dates. Make sure that if you are planning to submit copy for a feature that you have made contact with the editorial department or specialist writer involved to establish general interest and a copy deadline before you prepare copy, organise photography, plan a site visit, or arrange one-to-one interviews as appropriate.

5. Diary

Diary pages in trade publications also tend to be read quickly. They cover industry snippets, gossip and speculation but can offer the appropriate medium if you have the right story!

6. Appointments

Appointments pages in trade publications offer the opportunity to “drip-in” coverage in a low-key but regular way. They will often print staff photographs but can often amaze you by appearing in print months after they have been submitted.

What do the press need from us?

This section could be titled; “Press relations – a two way relationship”, because successful press relations is achieved when we meet the requirements of the press and vice-versa. There is no doubt that a notable proportion of the trade coverage is sourced from and written by public relations people. They need us just as we need them. So what do the press actually need?

- The need information of interest to their readers, which may not be precisely what we want to say. Stories must be properly targeted. Remember, for radio the story will need to be audibly interesting, and of course for television, visually interesting.
- They need up-to-date accurate information, which is appropriate to their publishing schedule. There is no point expecting a weekly to publish information which is a month old in their new pages.
- They need information by their deadline, which is likely to be a specific time as well as a date. If the process is delayed and the deadline is missed, then the work is wasted.
- A contact who is available to answer questions and perhaps give a quote is important to cope with any last minute clarifications which may be required.
- A contact who understands the editorial process might be able to suggest to an editor various ways of overcoming administrative problems such as lost pictures or too much copy, which if not resolved could cause the final coverage to suffer.

Guarding against misfires

There are various precautions which can be taken to guard against press relations activity misfiring, although there is never any guarantee. Editors are proud of their independence and occasionally feel the need to prove it. Take the following precautions while planning an editor visit, a site visit, a media interview, or any sustained activity which will expose you or your client to media scrutiny:

- Is the timing right?
- Is the publication right? - Does the editorial style of the publication treatment of the subject as you would like?
- Do you know the journalist? - Has he or she got a good record for responsible reporting? Have you dealt with them before?
- How knowledgeable are they? - Do they have a good industry record, or do you have to educate them a little more about the industry before you let them loose?
- Have you produced a fact sheet in advance? - Quick and easy, this allows the journalist to have all the relevant facts to hand and avoids them being buried in hastily taken notes or forgotten all together.
- Are they interested in the project/person? - A genuine interest is more likely to yield a well-written informative article.
- Have they been properly briefed? - Do they know what they are going to see or have they got enough information about their interview subject beforehand?

- Has the interviewee/sales staff been briefed? - Does everyone know what is going on and what to say if asked? Are there any important industry issues that relate to the project/subject?

How to minimise bad press

Unfortunately all companies get some bad press at some time. The job of PR is to minimise both the amount and the ferocity of that which we do get. There is a great deal of potential out there for bad press. It is the job of the press to find out about any problems and if they are of interest to the industry, to report them accurately.

If they do find out about them, they will try to find out as much information as possible; if you can manage successfully how they get that information and help them at the same time, then you will build a relationship with the journalist which will stand you in good stead next time.

There are a number of rules that we can follow to manage the information at their disposal:

- First of all, if you have a PR contact, let them handle it for you. They may know the journalist concerned, and can often act as a broker between you and the press, giving you more time to prepare the answers.
- Be honest and accurate; the truth is usually less awful than existing speculation, which may have been built up following conversations with unreliable informants.
- Always answer all press questions, even if the answer is, "I'm sorry, this is a contractual matter; you'll need to talk to the client," or "I'm sorry, I can't find out the answer to this at the moment, when do you need to know by?" In other words, if you can't say - say why.
- React fast and always meet deadlines. Even if you can't obtain the right answers, respond to the journalist immediately and say so. He may be waiting for your call and you need to prove that you are reliable.
- Don't waffle; all journalists are busy and don't like their time being wasted.
- If you don't know, say so and then go and find out.

Crisis management

There are occasions when more serious problems could involve a company in the freight industry. In this and in the event of any major unscheduled and unexpected problems; a "crisis"; it would be vital to introduce a crisis management procedure to ensure that the image and perception of the company is as positive as possible under the circumstances.

The crisis management procedure

Such a procedure ensures that:

- A crisis management team is immediately available. This would comprise representatives from the company, the client and any outside contractors involved.

- The crisis management team would be fully prepared to consider:
 - what information to make available and in what form
 - when to make it available
 - who would act as spokesperson
 - which senior staff should be available for comment
- All facts are made known to the crisis management team as they become available.
- The appropriate senior staff are contactable, briefed and can be made available to comment to the media if required throughout the crisis.
- Measures are being taken to rectify the situation if possible.
- The safety staff are concerned and involved if necessary.

Press release technique

Good quality press releases are a vital tool in a press relations programme. They are cost-effective, are valued by editors and get used. Quality press releases should be:

- News-worthy and topical. There is no point in dressing up old information. Do not try and write a press release with only some of the information to hand. Phone the other parties involved in the project (ie: client, freight forwarder, etc) to make sure you have the whole story and then consider what news angle should be taken. The real skill of writing press releases is recognising what the story is and therefore what is likely to interest other people.
- Targeted. Releases must be relevant and of interest to the readers of each publication they are sent to. Read your target media to see what kind of stories are published and to familiarise yourself with the style of each publication. Do not distribute the same version of a press release to a wide range of media, it is unlikely, for example, to be suitable for national newspapers, trade publications and local press without some alteration.
- Concise. The release must grab the editor's attention by saying it all in the first few lines. The first paragraph (no more than 50 words) should encapsulate the whole story. Subsequent paragraphs should, in descending order of importance, put meat on the bones of the opening paragraph.
- Factual. It must be true and contain all the information that the editor may wish to know. It must answer, in the first three paragraphs, the following classic questions:

WHO:	the company or individual
WHAT:	what have they done/claimed etc.
WHERE:	site location etc.
WHEN:	date work will commence/completion date
WHY:	what is the purpose of it/benefits etc.
HOW:	the explanation/how it came about
- Uninflated! It must be free of puffery, too many adjectives and unsubstantiated claims. It should also avoid the use of jargon. Do not use exaggerated terms such as: unique, unprecedented, incredible and magnificent, etc.

- Clear. Clarity is very important. Clear and accurate language will greatly improve your chances of publication. It must be written in good (*English*)*, avoiding grammatical errors and the use of non-sequiters. * *Appropriate language*
- Laid out predictably. It should be typed double-spaced to allow the editor to annotate between lines. It should also be left justified (evenly spaced) so that the editor can easily assess how many characters have been used. This is important if the release is to be used word-for-word.
- Well organised. Finally the release should be titled, dated and include a contact name and number in case more information is required; although, if you have one, your PR team will be able to do this for you.

These are the essential ingredients of a good news release. Before issuing the release consider whether it satisfies these criteria. A journalist will receive a post bag of releases every day, if yours is written in such a way that one has to search for the story, nine times out of ten the release will be binned and all your money and effort will be wasted.

PS

Don't forget captioned pictures to hammer home the story. Good quality photographs taken by a professional will help immeasurably to get your story published. It is pointless, however, to send poor photographs which will not reproduce in print. Issue quality glossy colour prints which are at least 7 x 5 inches in size. These days there is no longer a need to send transparencies.