

Repetition, consistency keys to a successful PR campaign

"Public relations" is one of those terms for which everyone seems to have his/her own definition.

The general idea is that we relate our clients' activities or products to whichever public has been targeted. What that comes down to is this: We really spend most of our time and efforts managing the relationships between our manufacturing or service provider clients, and the media that is read or seen by the consumers they are trying to influence or inform.

Some well-established manufacturers have told me they already know all the marine journalists and editors personally, so they just send them a brochure and figure the friendship will get them published. In my experience, this generally results in no more than "15 minutes of fame," at the very best and will be forgotten quickly.

A well-executed PR program requires consistency. A one-shot press release, done when you think about it or finally get it off the back burner, will have little or no effect on the long-term overall profile of your company. An ongoing, consistent message is what reinforces your brand in the consumer's mind.

Therefore, the vast amount of time and effort put into administering a PR campaign comes in the account exec trying to coax (drag) interesting information out of clients, requesting (training) them to provide a decent photo that will result in a vast amount of ink, and reminding (badgering) them to please, please, please approve that copy we sent twice a week for the last three weeks, so we can get the release out into the pipeline for them.

We don't ask, "What's going on?" just to break the ice. We are looking for newsworthy events — things that occur every day in business that our clients don't always recognize as PR opportunities. We are listening with one ear, while keeping our antennae tuned for info that could be interesting to any of this particular client's publics.

The real goal of a great PR plan is to get noticed. The first target is the writers and editors who put together the editorial side of our publications. If they find the copy interesting enough, they inform their readers — those people you'd like to become your customers. If these readers see enough news items containing good, solid info about your firm or products in enough magazine columns, pretty soon your company and its brand is on top of your customers' minds.

A constant flow of news is what's required. (And notice, I said news, not fluff. Nothing will kill a press release with an editor faster than using the sales copy from the brochure, verbatim.) Just as any agent knows the three golden words in real estate are "location, location, location," in communications, it's "repetition, repetition, repetition." Five reasons repetition is the key element of successful public relations programs are:

1. We need to overcome cultural noise. It bombards us all, demanding our attention and acting as a speed bump for your message. Without repetition your message may be heard only in part, if at all. Sharing the message once doesn't cut it.

2. Building a relationship starts with a period of trust-building in which a series of interactions establishes that it's OK to continue the interest. This is impossible with an occasional one-message blast or fancy press conference.

3. For a company and its products a reputation is established over time, not in a week or month. Regular trade PR activities, such as new personnel announcements, plant expansions, community activities or

product success stories, help educate audiences about a company's values and personality, as well as the benefits of its products or services.

4. Our skeptical, yet over-informed, culture seeks respected opinion leaders. Not only do we receive an overload of messages, but the traditional methods of determining their importance have been turned upside down. An aggressive PR program can provide a credible guide to help determine which information is important to us, and which to ignore.

5. Audiences seek compelling evidence. Competition for attention in our cluttered

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culture is complicated further by a skepticism and distrust of the incoming info. We intuitively seek confirmation from multiple sources. A series of press releases with the (repetitive) message of environmental concern — including the winning of an award, the positive profile of the company in an environmental journal, detailing the improved environmental qualities of a new product — is much more likely to be believed than a simple statement by the CEO in an ad.

The happiest clients we have are those with whom we have established a relationship of mutual trust and respect. They understand the importance of the idea of repetition. And they understand that we cannot invent information from thin air. What makes a perfect PR client? Answer: The most important characteristic is the simple desire to be actively involved in communicating with us, so we can wring out the greatest possible media coverage for them.

And on an entirely different subject, my general marketing approach is: "We're All in This Together."

The reps who sell our boating products, from completed boats to the widgets that go into them, are a terrific source of market info. Tap into it and you'll be surprised by the wealth of detailed information available to you. For OEM manufacturers, your reps are a direct link; this goes both ways, to and from your customer base. They know what boats are selling where and, probably, why. They have a very unique perspective on trends that may be developing in the field. They can be a front-line research team, glean feedback on a new product, or hearing of a need that could be satisfied by a certain new product.

One of our clients is a manufacturer of components for smaller boats, who sells 99 percent to boatbuilders, with virtually no aftermarket. They hold an annual meeting of their reps at the Miami show. The point is not so much to sell them the latest and greatest new models, but to listen to

them talk about what's going on in their parts of the country and industry.

Manufacturers are stepping up to invest in the future of boating, in several ways. Personally, after 25 years in this industry and considerable blood, sweat and tears in what became a very personal crusade, I'm overjoyed to see the Discover Boating campaign finally kick into gear. And we, as an industry, must look at the final retail buyer as our collective customer. This is essential to providing that customer with the best possible overall experience.

Marine dealers continue to professionalize, invest in training their people and achieve certification to provide a comfortable sales environment, to cement long and trusting relationships with their customers, ultimately culminating in top sales achievements and, perhaps, finally basking in the long-overdue spotlight of the Top 100.

These dealers are our front-line marine industry warriors, standing face-to-face with the people who buy our lifestyle and products.

Marine distributors have become so efficient in warehousing and delivering just-in-time products. They continue to help reduce component costs and lead time, while moving all the puzzle pieces that comprise the raw materials of our industry in the right order to the right place at the right time.

Publications continue to tempt new participants, while entertaining and educating those of us "already in the choir." Luckily for my line of work, most pubs recognize how gadget-driven boating is and cover product information thoroughly.

Promotional firms, although a small segment of the industry, often have the best view of "the big picture." We have known the inside scoop on hundreds, if not thousands, of companies over the years. We often are the first to know of exciting new developments, products and directions.

Lastly, our customers. Let's not forget the real point here. We all need to remember that nobody needs a boat. We need to be cool enough and have cool enough products to captivate our customers with our kind of fun.