

Public Relations in the Education market

The essence of PR is a clash of wants and desires.

PR involves telling journalists, producers and editors about your product or service in a way that results in something good being written in a magazine, newspaper, website or blog. Alternatively the story might be broadcast on radio or TV.

The problem with PR is that what these media want is news – while in effect what you want to place is an advertisement for your product.

Now you might think that the fact that you have just launched a new website or just produced a new range of maths books is news – but the editor or journalist looking at such a piece of information will look and think, “so what?” Why would anyone want to read that story?

Finding the answer to that conundrum is what PR is about.

1. Turning the advertisement into news

If telling the media that you have just produced a new laptop computer or a new line in children’s toys is not going to get you coverage in the media, you have to turn it into news. Now you might claim that you have the fastest laptop ever or that it has more gizmos than any other laptop – and maybe someone will review it – but really you are not speaking a very exciting language. (If, however, you told them that the laptop had a direct interface to the brain, that might well be news).

If you can find a news item that genuinely relates to your product, you will be home and dry. But it has to be real news – news as exciting as the fact that a school with 120 school leavers a year is producing on average 3 Premier League footballers a year. Or as interesting as the fact that 50% of children aged 10 say they feel stressed and can’t sleep because of the pressure they are put under at school. Or the fact that a school that had 10% of its GCSE pupils getting 6 or more A* to C two years ago, now has 80% getting those grades. Or that a giant Swedish corporation has just done a deal with the government and will open 30 Academies run along Swedish lines in the next five years. Or that 70% of school chairs break within one year of purchase and have to be thrown away.

Those are stories, and they make the news. They might not make national TV, but they’ll make the news somewhere, and you never know – someone in the national media might find a link for you.

As you can see, a story that says you have just launched a new website, a new catalogue, or a new range of equipment, is not in the same league as many of the ideas above.

2. What to do

It is important to get a story out each month – even if you are not producing big news stories – because that is the only way that you will gradually build a relationship with the journalists and magazines that might publish your story. Whether you are using a PR agency or doing it yourself, that relationship with the journalist is important and it is through running smaller scale news stories that the chances build up that a bigger story can emerge.

But, you might ask, isn't this a waste of time – sending out press releases that are not going to work? The answer is no, because what happens is that apart from helping develop the link with journalists in specialist fields, some of them will be run and that will help everyone get a feel for what the news world is looking for. Now you might well have to pay to have these stories run, but even so, placing them can be worthwhile.

A number of magazines in the education sector have gone across to the system of charging to place stories. This can be interesting because the cost will normally be considerably less than advertising rates, and the story appears as a story, not as an advert. National and regional daily papers don't charge – but most educational magazines do. It is a fact of life.

3. But what about TV and the big coverage?

To get this you need an angle – an angle that really makes everyone sit up and take notice. Below is a set of angles that we have worked – obviously they need amending for each product – but they can work. But here's the warning: these operations take time. Press releases need to be researched and considered over a matter of two or three days – sometimes longer. These projects that get the bigger coverage take a bit of time – don't rush or think you can do it in your spare time.

a) The local story

Local daily newspapers love local stories. The great benefit with them is that they will run a positive local school story as just that (whereas a national daily can take a story that you spin out as a positive and turn it into a negative).

Let's imagine that you sell a piece of equipment that helps develop children's handwriting, and that you have just sold it for the first time to a school in Dorset. The school in Dorset is pro-publicity, and so you write a piece for the paper, give details of the school, and the paper then follows it up, interviews the teachers, takes a couple of pictures, and everyone is happy.

The great news for you is that everyone in the area sees the story, and you can be sure that the governor of a neighbouring school will send a note to his/her head saying, "are we doing this – why aren't we in the paper?"

You then follow this up with a mailshot to the schools in Dorset, and your sales benefit as a result because people will have become aware of your product through the news story.

It is hard work, but you can run a local story month by month across the country - and indeed some companies use PR in this way, always seeking a local story. It doesn't work with every product (you can't make much out of the fact that you have just sold 3 laptops to the local school) but it is an option for many companies.

Sometimes a local story can be a national story. One of our clients told us about a special needs school that was using their software and generating the most amazing exam results for teenagers, young people who had never taken an exam in their lives before. We interviewed the teacher concerned over the phone, wrote up the story and it ran as a two page spread in the leading special needs magazine, and from there went back to the local paper (who had, incidentally, shown no interest in it before!)

b) The annual event

We used this approach with our client that has an on-line maths program. They pointed us to "Dyscalculia Day". It turned out to be a fairly small item which had turned up on a newsgroup involving a few teachers trying to raise the profile of dyscalculia – the inability to do maths at the level that one might expect.

We took up the theme and sent out press releases focussing on the day and our client's product, and then spoke to interested journalists about the problem and the way that an alternative method of teaching could help people of all ages who had such problems.

The topic was picked up by the Richard and Judy TV show and, soon after, BBC Breakfast TV. BBC Breakfast tipped off their colleagues on World Service who ran a long piece, and from there the story went to Radio 4. They made a half hour radio programme on the topic, about half of which came from the spokesperson we put up. The BBC edited out our attempts to talk about our client's website, but my colleague emailed the BBC to ensure that they had a relevant phone number for anyone enquiring subsequent to the programme. With the programme broadcast no less than three times, the phones continued to ring for several weeks – all with people who had picked up the number from one of the broadcasts. And in the midst of all that there were broadcasts galore on local radio.

Can anyone think up a special day for a topic and get publicity for it? In theory yes, but in practice it is harder. There are thousands of special days each year, and not all of them get the publicity that the originators desire. What made it work for us (and these factors apply to all broadcast activity) was that:

- There was a good press release at the start of the activity which went everywhere.
- We were available all the time, and responded to each enquiry immediately. (World Service phoned at 11pm on the night before the broadcast – and we were there to pick up the call and make the arrangements).
- We created the story for the media – the story that lots of people can't do maths but with a change of teaching method they can overcome their problems.
- We put up coherent talkers for the radio and TV – people who knew the subject and had stories to tell, but who did not appear too highbrow.
- We fitted in with the broadcasters' time scale, being where they wanted us, when they wanted us – no matter how inconvenient.
- When we were asked to help find a teenager who suffered from dyscalculia we found that boy and he appeared on TV with his father. His mother also appeared on one of the national radio programmes. (This was one of the major achievements of the project – there was precious little time to find the boy, and my colleagues just worked at it until we could meet the media's demand).
- In short, we did everything the media wanted, no matter what.

c) The facts and figures

Sometimes you can generate a story from research. If you undertake a survey and find out that 50% of the population don't know what 50%

means, that could be a good lead into a story. Or that 85% of schools have experienced a significant piece of equipment “going missing” in the past year, and never recovered it. Or that 60% of schools have cut the number of administrators in the past year....

Facts and figures go down well – and can be a great lead into a story. The problem is that most people don’t spend time doing research – and yet research is the essence of good PR. You have a product and people need the product for a reason. Behind that reason there can often be some interesting statistics.

Research is time-consuming but it does not have to be too expensive if you use a company that is well versed in undertaking research. If they already have the systems in place to do the research, the cost can be less than you imagine.

Incidentally the research needed here is not too dissimilar from the research into how teachers come to buy certain products, why they buy x rather than y, which of your competitors’ materials they are buying and why, whether they will be looking to buy next year or not, what factors primarily influence their decisions, who makes the final decision... The questions are not directly related to PR, but they are certainly related to the area of research, which is at the heart of PR.

d) The annual event

Aside from inventing or taking over a special Day, you can also attach your product to an annual event, such as A Level Results Day, the day on which the clocks go back in the autumn, the revision period before GCSE exams, or the start of the new term.

Which day is right for you obviously depends on your product – but you need to consider the issue a long way in advance and have your story ready in good time.

e) The special event

Imagine running a special event on one day. For example, you go to a school, get a number of pupils together, and spend the day writing and rehearsing a musical – or maybe writing a play, or creating a pop recording. Or maybe you get everyone together and design and make something... Whatever it is, it just needs to have some relationship to your product or service. It doesn’t have to be centrally about the product – just a link to your product. It obviously works well with anything creative – but if you sell computers you can relate the work to

a program that runs on your computers. Art, music, drama, English are all subjects that lend themselves to big occasions – although we have seen it done with maths as well.

4. So how to do it?

As noted before, most firms that do engage in PR themselves tend to do it erratically, rather than building up their relationships with journalists over time as they seek out the bigger opportunities and events that can be found around their products and services. If there is a simple message here it is that one must find the link between the product and the news. From this point the news expands – taking in research, a special day, a set of statistics or anything else.

It is not something that can just be done overnight – it needs a lot of work and it takes time. It doesn't happen in month one – but once you have got a project you can run it more than once. For example, the annual Day for a specific subject or topic will come round, well, annually. Research can be re-run a year later to show that the situation has got better, or worse. Each story just needs quite a bit of time to get it up and running. Not each one will be accepted by the media, but if you run enough, you'll get a winner in the end.

5. And who are we?

Hamilton House Agency is a PR agency that specialises in public relations for the education industry. The Agency is part of the Hamilton House group which includes marketing, direct mail, email, publishing and research divisions.

One of the unusual aspects of Hamilton House is that the group operates a number of news services of its own, and thus companies that are on the Agency roster are certain of getting good coverage in Hamilton House owned media.

There's more about Hamilton House Agency on www.voom.org.uk - or you can call the Agency team on 01536 399 000. (But if calling, please note that although we are always very polite to BBC World Service if they call us at 11pm, the same courtesy is not always extended elsewhere during the hours of darkness).